

Saniel reported to Ms. Trenchworth's biology lab.

"You wished to see me, Ms. Trenchworth?" Saniel asked the wolf.

"Yes, Saniel, please have a seat." Saniel sat on a sitting cushion near her desk. Once he was comfortable, she jumped right in. "We have what's left of Blossom's body in a portable stasis chamber. I know it was willed to our school for educational purposes, but I don't know what we can do with what's left. I'm turning to you as you knew her best. Would discussing this with you further be too much this soon? If it is, it can wait. As you know a stasis chamber will preserve a body for a year or more."

"No, go on, Ms. Trenchworth," Saniel replied and braced himself. "I can always see the counselor if necessary."

"Many of her organs were damaged when she was killed. Recipients were found for some of the others along with her right eye and tail as she indicated she was willing to be an organ donor."

"Her tail is gone?" Saniel replied in surprise.

Ms Trenchworth glanced at her flatpanel. "A cousin squirrel in Acadian Valley District had recently lost his tail to a predator but escaped from becoming that predator's meal. Thanks to the miracles of our health system, her tail has been grafted onto his tail stump. He'll be tended to at that hospital until spring. Only time will tell how well it will work for him."

Saniel closed his eyes briefly and shed a few tears. "That's wonderful. I hope it heals properly. I also hope things work for the recipients of the other organs that could be used. It was really important to the Ambassador and his mate."

The wolf nodded. "That said, her body isn't in the kind of shape needed to dissect it in class, which is what I suspect she was hoping for. So, what can we do with it?"

Saniel looked directly at the wolf. "Ms. Trenchworth, I suggest you have a conversation with her parents as you probably wouldn't believe me if I told you what to do."

While he sat there, she called Aldin and Pinecone. Half a click later, Ms. Trenchworth looked pale through her fur as she wrapped-up the call. She turned to Saniel. "I'll need to discuss this with the Schoolmaster."

"Let him know I'm willing to head this up."

A few days later, many of the students along with Saniel, Moselyn, Drexle, and Hersah gathered in the school's auditorium. Ms. Trenchworth, and Schoolmaster Pekan were with them. A counselor stood by.

Schoolmaster Pekan turned to the gathered students. “We have gathered today to pay our final respects to one of our own, our first smart squirrel student, Blossom Busheytail. At his request, Saniel will lead this remembrance.”

“Thank you for allowing me to head this up, Schoolmaster Pekan and Ms. Trenchworth,” Saniel stated bowing to them. He then looked at the other students gathered. “I literally knew Blossom for her entire life. Her parents granted me permission at my parents’ encouragement to watch her come into this world last winter. I helped to care for her and her siblings. I taught them Common as the Ambassador calls our language. In mid-summer she joined me in my drey asking me to be her boyfriend. She studied hard on her own to get into the school a semester early so as to remain with me.” Sanie sighed a moment. “And, knowing I’d outlive her, she worked on getting Moselyn to join our little group.” He hugged her briefly. “And I witnessed her death, though I hadn’t realized it at first, giving chase and killing her killer.” Tears rolled down his muzzle as he sniffled.

“They mature differently than we do. I believe their minds grow faster than their bodies, which is understandable as prey creatures. When did your parents first have ‘The Talk’ with you about sex? They do it at roughly a season in age, roughly two-and-half months or about when you and I would be about four. Can you imagine that? Also, they’re basically on their own at five months. Can you picture your parents kicking you out of your home at six or seven years of age?”

Saniel paused a moment. “When she asked to join me in my drey last summer, she told me about that. How her parents taught her about sex when she was just a season old. They also warned her at that same time how their kind are on the dinner menu for most cousin predators and how she must be cautious and wary at all times. It is rare after death for a body to remain among her species as most die by predation.” More tears trickled down his muzzle. “Sadly, that fate occurred way too soon for her. We usually cremate out dead. Her people’s customs are different from ours. On the rare occasion that a body remains after death, they lay their dead on the forest floor for scavengers. Elder Hope has already indicated we may lay her remains where her people lay theirs in Learn Forest as they now call the forest next to our school. This graveyard is not near any smart squirrel’s territory so as to not endanger the living by what may be attracted by the deceased. We will set-up cameras. So, per her wishes, we will use her body to learn from her remains. In this case, how scavengers, insects and worms help to decompose and dispose of a body.”

“However, Blossom’s mother altered that tradition when her first mate, Twig, died saving my life. His remains were consumed by a Citizen family in need.”

The stage curtain behind him opened showing some of the equipment from the home economics lab set-up including a stainless food prep counter, utensils, and a cooktop with a large frying pan. Saniel walked over to a hovering stasis container and typed the release button on the hover stasis container. It hissed and slowly opened revealing Blossom’s partial remains. Her abdomen was cut open. Her right eye socket was raw and empty. Her tail was missing. Some present gasped at what they saw. Saniel gently lifted her body out of the container and laid it on a large cutting board on the steel prep table. He nudged the container out of the way. “I think if Blossom could

see us from wherever her soul is now, she'd be honored to know her friends consumed her remains or at least part of them. I'm not going to force any of you to do this. And I hope no one puts others to shame one way or the other who chose to or chose not to do so..."

Stacker, the fox who had been Blossom's lab mate, cried out in horror interrupting him. "I helped her finish eating the small rodent we had dissected in class! She had fled from the lab because of the sound of the small rodents' bones cracking throughout the lab. She feared her classmates would eat her next." He looked about. "And now, you're suggesting we should do just that!" Tears ran down his muzzle. "I don't know if I can do it!"

Saniel went up to the fox and embraced him. "It's alright, Stacker. It's hard for all of us. As I said, no one is being forced to eat her and there is no shame to just sit back and watch. We don't need to consume all of her remains. We'll take what is left and lay in the forest per her people's older tradition."

He turned back to the other students. "Again, no one is forcing any of you to participate or not. There is no shame in it. No one will make fun of you for it. I'm sure some present would appreciate the moral support if you simply stood by and watched. We all knew Blossom."

Stacker nodded as Saniel turned back to Blossom's remains. "My parents taught me how to do this on some small rodents we trapped and killed that tried to move into our storage rooms. I hope it's easier to do on a larger body." He took a boning knife, stretched out Blossom's right arm and cut through the arm to the bone. He worked along the bone to the wrist without cutting all the way through the skin at the wrist. He flipped it over onto the cutting board and worked the knife between the muscle and skin. He lifted the chunk of muscle off, flipped the skin back over the bone and laid the muscle directly on the cutting board. He cut a portion of it into smaller pieces. He sprinkled oil into the frying pan and laid two of the pieces of meat in the oil. The meat sizzled. Other students followed his lead, tears in their eyes. Some chewed on small raw chunks. When the first two pieces were cooked, much to their shock and surprise, Saniel and Moselyn ate them.

"She was close to us. Now she will be a part of us for the rest of our lives," Saniel explained.

Tears freely flowed from both his and Moselyn's eyes as they stepped aside for the others to be able to do likewise. Even Drexle and Hersah participated. Then Ms. Trenchworth and Schoolmaster Pekan joined.

"Are you sure you wish to do this, Schoolmaster?" Several of the students asked him as he lifted a cooked piece towards his mouth. "You'll just provide truth to the rumors."

The fisher paused and sighed sadly. "I feel I must do so to honor her people's ways. And I never ask a student to do anything I wouldn't join in and do myself." He ate a piece like all the others.

All were crying in the end. They had barely consumed an arm and a portion of a leg. Saniel reminded them that they didn't need to eat all of her body as the remains would be placed in the smart squirrel graveyard.

The counselor was very busy the rest of the day. She sought counseling of her own the following day.