

Blossom nervously followed her father along the paved ground a block from where they left the hovercraft. The buildings were so much larger compared to those in the village. There were Biggens everywhere of all species and sizes. They all gave her and Aldin some room as they scampered down the walkway. She felt their eyes watching them as they passed. More than once she caught whispered questioning among them, 'Is that the Ambassador?' She didn't flee simply because she feared getting separated from her father. She wished there were enough trees here so they could just go from branch to branch instead. She felt very vulnerable there on the ground. She could see he must have been nervous too as he left damp paw prints as he went. He turned a corner and the buildings fell away to reveal a small park. She quickly climbed a tree and let the fear take over, screeching out a warning. Again, Aldin joined her soon afterward and calmly waited for her to recover. To her embarrassment, her cries had gathered a small crowd of onlookers. Aldin scampered back down. After a short conversation, the Biggens went on their way.

Once she had calmed down, she came back down and Aldin proceeded to lead her again among the buildings. He turned another corner and then paused a moment outside a building from which the scent of food cooking wafted out into the street.

"Are you hungry?" Aldin asked his daughter.

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once.

"Good, because this is where I need to conduct some of my personal business." He pointed up at a sign with his tail which read: JOCHEN'S.

He led her inside. The scent of cooked Biggen food nearly overwhelmed her. She had smelled similar scents before when Carulin cooked for her family, but much of this was different. She couldn't place what it was she was smelling.

"Ambassador?! Welcome!" a biggen squirrel with tasseled ears and a pelt that was a mix of tawny brown and peppery gray called out as he came out from behind the small counter. He embraced the smaller cousin squirrel, who returned the embrace.

"My plans changed, Jochen, which is why I'm here in the fur for our meeting." Aldin then turned to his daughter. "This is my daughter, Blossom. Blossom, this is Jochen, owner and operator of this restaurant and one of my business partners."

Jochen bowed to the younger squirrel and got down on all four paws. "You may sniff if you need to, Blossom," he spoke in broken chitterspeak.

She accepted the offer and sniffed him briefly. "Thank you, Mr. Jochen," she replied in Common.

Jochen smiled. "I'm glad to learn you can speak," he held up some claws like quotation marks, "'Biggenspeak'. I'm not that good at chitterspeak."

"I have my father to thank for that."

“You two must be hungry. Come.” Jochen led them to a table with cushions for seats. The table automatically adjusted to their height as they sat, catching Blossom off guard, causing her to wigwag her tail nervously. He presented them with flatpanel menus. “I’ll be back shortly with water for both of you.” He paused looking at Blossom, “unless the young lady would prefer herbal tea. I know your father prefers water.”

“Tea?” Blossom raised her tail in a curl briefly.

“Herbs seeped in hot water adding flavor to the water.” Jochen responded. “I’ll bring both tea and water for you.” The biggen squirrel passed through a door. As the door opened and closed, the scent of cooked food became stronger for a moment.

“My grandfather drank herbal tea on occasion back on Terra. What I have encountered here is similar. I never developed a taste for it there nor here.”

Blossom nodded as she stared at the menu and was thankful both that there were photos of the various items and that Saniel had demonstrated how they worked with her the previous day to help her prepare for this trip. As she scrolled through, she stared at the section marked Terran Pizza. She looked up again at her father. “Terran pizza?” Her tail briefly raised in a curl.

“As I said, Jochen is a business partner. I taught him some Terran ‘Biggen’ recipes and permitted him to use them. In return, I receive a small fee from him on his sales of Terran food. Pizza is one of the few cooked food items from Terra that I can actually stomach in small amounts. Based on the fees I’ve been receiving; it has become very popular here.”

Jochen returned with glasses of water, two mugs, and a small, covered teapot on a tray. An herbal scent wafted from the covered pot. He set the water down in front of Blossom and Aldin. He then proceeded to pour tea from the pot for Blossom and then for himself. He pulled up a cushion and sat down with them.

“Have you decided what you would like to eat?”

Blossom drooped her tail. “There’s so much to choose from.” She sniffed the tea and could tell it was too hot to try and taste. It did have a pleasant scent. She detected mint, though she was unsure what the various other scents were.

“You’ll want to let that cool some more first, Ms. Blossom,” Jochen warned her.

“I’d like a ten cemit¹ mushroom and pinenut pizza, butternut flour crust,” Aldin stated. The edge of the flatpanel flashed green a moment as it relayed his order to the kitchen. He set the flatpanel on the edge of the table.

Blossom continued to scroll through the menu until she found the salad section. That was something she had had before at Saniel’s as she wasn’t feeling brave enough to try anything else.

¹ Cemit-centimeter. 10 cemits is about 4 inches

“Tossed wild greens with chopped butternuts salad, please,” she ordered mimicking her father. The edge of her flatpanel flashed purple. She wigwagged her tail in concern. “What did I do wrong?”

‘Dressing?’ Flashed on her panel as Jochen pointed it out. “It needs to know what kind of dressing you want on your salad.”

“No dressing,” she replied. “I prefer mine plain.” The edges of her flatpanel flashed green. She set it on top of the other one.

Jochen gathered them up, brought them over to the counter with the now empty tray, and then rejoined them. He sipped some tea and then looked at Aldin. “Terran pizza has become our biggest seller, Ambassador.”

“I figured as I pay close attention to my bank account, Jochen. I am amazed at how well they’re selling. Per our agreement last year, I’m here to discuss the agreement and possibly renegotiate the terms. Are you happy with how things stand?” Aldin raised his tail in a curl briefly.

“Of course, I am. I also understand if you want a larger fee.”

“Why would I want more credits, Jochen? I’m fine with the current arrangement. Afterall, you’re doing all the work.”

“Only one percent, Ambassador? Other franchises charge more. You now got a family to care for.”

Aldin shrugged his shoulders like a biggen. “Maybe those other franchises are a bit greedy, Jochen. As for family, you have one too. Mine can easily live off the land, so to speak, though Blossom plans to go to college.”

“Really?” he gave her his attention.

“After senior school, which I start this fall, I plan to go to medical college.”

“Senior school already? I knew cousin squirrels grew-up quickly, but wow!” Jochen paused a moment slowly wigwagging his tail back and forth in thought. “That’s quite the career goal, Ms. Blossom.” He turned back to Aldin, “all the more reason I should be giving you a larger fee. Medical college isn’t cheap.”

Aldin shrugged again. “You’re not my only business partner, Jochen. And medical school here is nowhere as expensive as it was back on Terra. I’m quite happy with our terms as they are. And a renegotiation would involve our law counsels.”

Jochen could see he wasn’t going to be able to convince the Ambassador that he should be charging a larger fee. They had been through this the year before. Other franchisers charged up to ten times what Aldin was charging him to sell Terran pizza. He drooped his tail briefly “Very

well, Ambassador, I'll renew our partnership at one percent for another year." He pulled his flatpanel off his hip where it clung to his fur, called-up the contract, scrolled to the renewal line and applied his palm to the device. A light flashed as it scanned his palm. The panel flashed green. He turned it around for Aldin, who did likewise and the panel flashed green again.

As they completed the transaction, their food was brought to them along with another pizza for Jochen. His had disks of sausage made from a meat substitute. He sipped more of his tea. "Well, if I can't convince you to charge me a larger franchise fee at least allow me to give you this meal at no charge."

"That offer, I will accept, Jochen," Aldin replied. He glanced across at his daughter whose nose was twitching rapidly almost like a rabbit's. He gigglechittered. "You're welcome to try some if you want, hon. But it needs to cool a little first." He used the serving spatula to transfer a slice to a plate. The melted cheese formed strings between it and the rest of the pizza. Aldin broke them with the spatula and handed the plate over to her. Some of the purple tomato sauce seeped off the edge of the slice and onto the plate. Wisps of steam wafted up from the sauce.

Blossom gratefully accepted it and sniffed it. She felt her mouth water. She picked up the tea mug as she had seen Jochen do and carefully took a sip of the tea. Her face lit up at the flavor. It was so good! She drank more of it, spilling a little bit on her chestfur. Jochen refilled her mug.

"Apparently, your daughter likes herbal tea, Ambassador."

She watched both her father and Jochen pick up a slice of pizza and bite into it. She mimicked them and her eyes grew wide at the flavor combination. Like the tea, it was so good! She quickly worked her way through the slice. Without asking, Jochen gave her another slice, this time from his pizza, which she dug into, her salad all but forgotten.

"It's her first pizza, Jochen."

"Really? You've never made it for her back home?"

Aldin drooped his tail. "I'm away too much. Remember, Jochen, we are cousin squirrels. We literally live in the middle of a forest. We forage through that forest for our meals this time of year. I would need to borrow Carulin's and Jessophat's kitchen to make pizza."

Blossom nodded, pausing between bites. "You should have seen the cherries we harvested a little over two weeks ago, Mr. Jochen. So ripe, sweet, and yummy. As for Biggen food, I've watched and helped Ms. Carulin cook, but most of it wasn't something that appealed to me. This on the other paw, I love it!" She took another bite and chewed with delight. The sausage was a little spicy and she enjoyed the flavor. She sipped tea in between bites. After finishing the second slice, she dug into the salad, but was only able to eat half of it, much to her dismay. Cousin squirrels never wasted food if they could help it as they usually had to forage for it as her father had pointed out to Jochen. Aldin came to her 'rescue' and finished the salad for her.