

The trees in Blossom's new territory were not as large as those back home in The Refuge. On average about 2 mits in diameter, which was still respectable. There were a mix of tree species, butternut, oak, maple, several types of fir, a few cedars, and others. As she and her father explored the territory, there was one thing she wished she had thought to ask the Elder the previous day. If her territory was the edge of the forest within sight of the school, did that mean it varied with the seasons or was she to treat it as the distance one could see it through the canopy in the spring through fall?

The school building was incredibly long, a good 100 mits or so in length. It reminded Aldin of a wall between human properties back in Terra, but much taller. He didn't mention this to his daughter. About the half-way point, they came across two small fruit trees. The trunks were roughly their body-length in diameter. The fruit were ripe. Aldin stared at the fruit, not believing what he was seeing as his daughter asked him what they were. The reddish purple fruit were the size and close to the color of a Italian plum back on Terra, roughly half-again as large as a butternut in The Refuge. Except these 'plums' were fuzzy like peaches. He picked one and sniffed it over and couldn't believe what he smelled. He pierced the skin with a claw and sniffed some more, tentatively licking at the juice. His eyes widened in surprise.

"I don't believe it, Blossom. Back on Terra, these would be yellowish-orange instead of reddish-purple, just like the tomatoes on last night's pizza would be red back on Terra. And they're smaller than those on Terra. You have two," he switched to English for the next word, "peach trees in your territory. In chitterspeak, it's stonefruit." He drooped his tail. "I haven't learned what they're called in Common as I didn't know they existed here, hon." Aldin stuck his claws into the peach and pulled his paws away from each other. The juicy, ripe peach easily split in half. Aldin showed her the pit giving it its chitterspeak name before dropping it. He offered her half of the peach. He then dug into his half, as juice dribbled down his fur and on the branch. "Like cherries, they don't keep," he managed between mouthfuls. "When they're ripe, you need to simply enjoy them."

Blossom sniffed at and then licked the offered peach half. Her face lit up in delight. It was sweet like cherries, but with a totally different texture and flavor. She also recognized the scent from among the herbs in the tea she had at Jochen's. She quickly ate through her half. She looked about in the tree and harvested another one and dug in without hesitation. They spent half a klick quietly enjoying the soft fruit. The only noise they made was to harvest one after another and drop the pits.

nervouschitter "Truce?"

Both froze and looked over at the newcomer, a male squirrel. Somehow, he had snuck up on them. Blossom relaxed first. "Truce. Come, sniff, but you must no flee after you sniff. Plenty fruit. Come, eat."

The squirrel hesitated a moment. "I know you," he replied wigwagging his tail nervously. "You small Biggens. Invade my territory yesterday. I remember his," he pointed at Aldin with his tail, "notch tail."

“Yes, we small Biggens,” she scuffed a paw on the branch. “My sire,” she pointed to Aldin with her tail, “is small Biggen and Elder Voice for our people. My dame is smart squirrel. Makes me both small Biggen and smart squirrel. We speak your Elder yesterday. Elder give me permission claim forest in sight of Biggen place. This now my territory.”

The newcomer’s tail wigwagged faster. He looked like he was preparing to flee. Through this, Aldin simply watched and observed, choosing not to interfere unless he was needed. It was Blossom’s territory, after all, and not his. He continued to nibble on his peach, ready to intervene only if he needed to.

“You no flee,” Blossom stated in a firm commanding voice. “You ask truce. I grant truce. Come, eat. I can no eat all stonefruit. Is better someone eat it, else it rot. Why let good fruit rot?”

Again, the male wigwagged his tail nervously. “You no chase me away?”

Blossom gigglechittered. “Is only fair. We pass through your territory yesterday to speak to Elder. You request truce. I grant truce. I share stonefruit in my territory. Come, eat.”

The newcomer flicked his tail up and down once in agreement and nervously picked a peach and dug in. “I startled find you here. No one goes near Biggen place.”

“No one but you,” she replied and gigglechittered eyeing the newcomer, who was slightly smaller than her.

“I know stonefruit ripe now. No others dare come here near Biggen place.” He looked directly at her. “Why you and your sire here?”

She pointed to the school with her tail. “Biggen learning place. I come to learn Biggen things. Bring what I learn back to my people. I start at harvest time.”

“Biggen things?”

Blossom drooped her tail. “I can no speak to you what Biggen things I come learn. Your Elder forbid. Was condition to claim territory.” She pointed to her father and herself with her tail. “Our people live different from other smart squirrels. We welcome smart squirrels, small biggens, and biggens. Share territory. Always truce like in winter storm or when predator about. Again, your Elder forbid I speak more than that.”

The newcomer looked at her in puzzlement as he nibbled his peach. He drooped his tale. “Elder no like Biggens or Biggen things.” He drooped his tail and looked about a moment. He then lowered his voice fearful it would carry. “My territory nearest to Biggens before you come. I watch. I see Biggens not all bad as he speak.”

Blossom also lowered her voice in respect for his fear over what he stated as she flicked her tail up and down once in agreement. “No all Biggens bad. You still be careful near Biggens.”

He flicked his tail up and down once in agreement and harvested another peach. As he nibbled, he looked at her again and asked, "How many winters you see? I see two."

"This my first summer," she replied.

He nearly dropped the peach he was nibbling at the answer. He stared at her long and hard for a moment. "You lie. You bigger than me."

She gigglechittered. "Remember, I smart squirrel and small Biggen both. Look at my sire," she pointed to Aldin with her tail. "He small Biggen. He bigger than many smart squirrels our forest."

He looked between her and Aldin and nibbled some more before speaking again, drooping his tail. "You so young. I will no ask what I think."

She understood what he dared not speak. "I can no seek mate among those in this forest. Your Elder forbid. I already have potential mate among our people. He will be here with me at Biggen learning place at harvest time."

He drooped his tail. "Elder mean forbid you like that. We need more females. Forest needs more squirrels."

"All forests need more squirrels. You need speak that with your Elder. I obey what he speak to me." She nibbled on another peach. "Potential mate and I can no start family while learning. We must wait. Is hard to wait."

The male sighedchittered but didn't press it further as he nibbled on another peach while keeping a wary eye on both of them.

"Our winter nest is in Biggen place." She pointed to the school with her tail. "You would no like as we will nest with many other Biggens. The Biggen teaching elder is Biggen fisher"

This time, the male dropped his mostly eaten peach as his eyes shot wide as his tail wigwagged back and forth rapidly. He tried to fight back a scree of fear, but not quite successfully. "You the one. You scree out warning of fisher," he held-up two claws, "days ago."

Blossom drooped her tail briefly before flicking it up and down once. "Yes, I meet Biggen fisher teaching elder two" she held-up two claws, "days ago. I so scared at first I flee screeing a warning. After I calm down I go back to him. We hug."

The male let forth another short scree of terror as his tail wigwagged back and forth. "How you live? Fishers hunt/kill/eat smart squirrels."

"He no hunt me. Biggen Elders forbid hunting of smart squirrels. You have nothing to fear if you ever see him. He good Biggen." She paused a moment and shuddered herself. "He scary looking." Now Blossom's tail wigwagged nervously. "He so big. Could eat you whole." Her tail

wigwagged a bit more, but she forced it to slow down and took a few deep breaths to calm herself. “Even so, he good Biggen.”

The newcomer needed a little bit to calm down. He finally shook off the fear and harvested another peach.

“Blossom,” Aldin finally jumped in, “we need to finish exploring your new territory and head back soon.”

Blossom looked over at her father. “Yes, Sire.” She finished her peach.

“Blossom?” the male asked.

She flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, our people take names like Biggens do. Is easier that way as we share territory.” She pointed to herself with her tail. “My name is Blossom.” She pointed to Aldin, “Sire’s name is Friend. We must leave and return to our people. I will return at harvest time. You may tell others in territories near yours I grant truce for stonefruit trees. I would rather see them eaten then rot. Is bad let good food rot.”

The male flicked his tail up and down once in agreement. He then bowed in thanks, grabbed another peach, and holding it carefully in his jaws darted back into the forest.

“You handled that well, Blossom. Hopefully, if, or more likely when the Elder hears, he’ll approve.”

“If what he said about a lack of females is true, Father, that could be a problem for me come late winter.”

Aldin gigglechattered. “I highly doubt it. They’d have to successfully chase off Sanial and impress you in the process.” He paused a moment, “and face School Master Pekan in order to nest with you.”

She thought about that for a moment and gigglechattered before replying, “True.”

“Ready to go home? Or do you want to explore the rest of your territory first?”

“I think I’ve seen enough.” She replied pointing to his backpack with her tail, which he pulled off and gave to her without her needing to ask verbally. She filled it with peaches as he summoned a hovercraft. “There, now I can share some with my brothers and Sanial. I’m sure Sanial will have the name for these in Common. They’re very good.”

“That they are,” he agreed harvesting one more as the hovercraft arrived.

The male nibbled on his peach, watching the two small Biggens from a distance. He observed a biggen flyer-thing arrive, the two of them leap into it, and the flyer flew off. He sighed heavily as he made his way back to the stonefruit trees for another stonefruit. It was terrible that she was a small Biggen and so young. He still couldn't believe it. If only she was older, then he would take the risk of the Elder banishing him as what he spoke to them was true. Their forest didn't have enough females.