

THREE

Blossom hung her backpack on a branch in a butternut tree in her territory and got to work filling it with butternuts. She then strapped it on and hauled it quickly to the hollow in an oak tree that she and her father had found back in the summer. She paused a moment as she could smell another squirrel had been there. She cautiously poked her muzzle in the hollow to see that there were already more than two dozen or so assorted butternuts, acorns, and a few other nuts. Her tail twitched. She wiggled the backpack off, dropped it in the hollow and entered. She dumped out the contents and then thought she heard scrabbling outside. She quickly worked her way up the hollow above the entry hole and waited. Another squirrel poked its head in and released the acorn held in its jaw. It fell audibly onto the pile.

Blossom chattered at the other squirrel. “Why you in my territory!” She nipped at the back of its neck enough to pinch, but not enough to break the skin.

The other squirrel knocked its head on the top of the opening in startlement. It chittered in fear and scrambled up the tree. Blossom gave chase. She quickly caught up with the other. She nipped at it again. “Stop!” She cried out. To her surprise, the other skidded on the branch and she nearly piled into it.

The other squirrel was shaking. “Truce?” (pleadflick) He asked in an unsteady voice.

Blossom recognized the male she and her father had met back in summer. “You! Why you invade my territory?”

The other gripped his tail in his forepaws and looked at her with pleading in his eyes. “I no mean invade. Try and help. Hope you choose me if I help though you no see first winter.” The branch under them sagged a moment as he finished explaining. His eyes shot wide a moment as it sagged too much to be another smart squirrel like them. He chattered nervously as he slowly turned and faced the newcomer. He let go of his tail as it began to whip back and forth. “Biggen!” He cried out as he tried to retreat and bumped into Blossom. “Biggen! We must flee!”

“Potential mate, should I chase this squirrel off?” Saniel asked.

The male squirrel looked between the biggen squirrel and Blossom. Blossom moved around him giving him an opening to flee if he chose. She nuzzled the biggen squirrel.

“No, Energy,” she chittered. “Leave him be. He our,” she switched to Biggenspeak for the next word, which the male did not understand. “neighbor. He ask for truce. I give. He one I speak about when I share stonefruit with you. He hope I choose him as potential mate.” She looked directly at the male. “As I speak before, your Elder forbid me to choose from squirrels in this forest. And I can no speak about home forest to you.”

He looked between her and ‘Energy’. “You choose a Biggen?”

She gigglechittered as she nuzzled Saniel again. “Remember, I both smart squirrel and small Biggen.”

“You can no make pups with Biggen.”

Blossom drooped her tail. “No, we can try when time comes, but no pups will take. Can no have pups here at Biggen learn place. Is forbidden.”

The male tilted his head quizzically.

“I can no explain further. Your Elder forbid.”

Saniel jumped in. “Elder no forbid me speak.”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “That true.”

“Learning Biggen things take long time. Is like Elder teaching Elder things. No time to raise pups. Is why pups forbidden. You waste time energy try to win my potential mate. You risk anger of your Elder. He might chase you out of the forest. Harvest time bad time to be chased from forest. You freeze-starve.” Saniel drooped his tail.

“I risk chase out of forest to win Blossom,” his tail wigwagged nervously as he stood his full height on the branch. I would fight you, Biggen, for Blossom to win her.”

Saniel gigglechittered as he glanced between him and Blossom and back. “You very brave. I will no fight you unless you bite first. My Elders forbid fight between squirrels.” He narrowed his eyes. “You would lose. I no wish harm you.”

Blossom wigwagged her tail and warning chattered. “No fight. You fight, truce end. Energy right. You would lose. Energy hunt fox save my littermate. He hold fox neck in his jaw. If he bite down hard, fox die. I ask he let fox live when littermate safe up tree. He no kill fox. He let fox go.”

The male’s eyes grew wide for a moment and he looked again at Saniel. He was a Biggen, but he didn’t look large enough to hunt a fox.

Saniel moved over to trunk of the tree and stretched-up his full body-length. The male began to chitter fearfully as the Biggen seemed to nearly double in size as he stretched out his hind legs and stood there a moment just on those legs. He sat back down. The male fought the urge to flee. He refused to do that in front of Blossom. He really wanted to win her, though he could see it was hopeless. He bowed his head and closed his eyes and sighchittered. He was startled when he was nudged gently. To his shock, it was the biggen Blossom called Energy.

“Again, you very brave.” He glanced at Blossom and then back at him. “I know in most forests squirrels no take name.”

The male flicked his tail up and down once. He didn't feel brave. He was simply too afraid to flee. He knew he'd lost. How could he prove he was a better male against one who could hunt a fox?

"There are too many Biggens to just say this one or that one. Is why we take names." Energy looked at the male. "And we give names to others. I will call you, Brave."

"Brave," Blossom repeated. "I like that. It fits you."

The male looked about nervously. "No tell Elder I take name. I no that brave."

"You brave enough to say you fight me for Blossom," Energy replied. He glanced at Blossom who flicked her tail up and down once. "And you no flee when I show you how big I am. As Blossom speak, your Elder forbid she speak of our ways. That no apply to me. In our home forest is always truce. We share whole forest and help each other." Again, he glanced at Blossom who again flicked her tail up and down once. "We grant you complete truce. You visit our territory as you wish. We no chase you off." Energy glanced about. "Make sure Elder no watch when you come visit. We no want Elder grow angry. Go, is harvest time. You should prepare for long, cold winter."

Brave flicked his tail up and down once. "I leave now."

Blossom bounded up to Brave and hugged him briefly, catching him off guard. "Goodbye, Brave. We need work on winter nest in Biggen learning place."

Brave was beside himself as he scampered back towards his own territory. Maybe he hadn't completely lost yet.

After Brave departed, Saniel turned to Blossom. "Even after I stood my full height, he didn't flee. He really wants you." He gigglechittered briefly.

Blossom nodded as she scampered over next to him. "I think he's cute, Saniel, but I don't want to lead him on. It would be different if we were wrapping up our studies instead of just starting. Then, I wouldn't give two wigwags of my tail what the local Elder orders. We could just bring Brave to The Refuge. Males outnumber females in this forest if Brave it to be believed."

Saniel was caught off guard. "You'd choose him after such a brief encounter?"

Blossom took his hands in her forepaws and nuzzled him. "You're the one who told our parents you'd welcome another smart squirrel into our group so I could have pups. Obviously, I'd want your consensus before doing so as you would be first mate. Come, let me show you something." She led him to the hollow in an oak tree. "Look inside."

He did so. "You've been busy."

“No, Brave has been,” she retrieved her backpack. “As my mother taught us as pups, this is one of the ways a male will try to win a female in a neighboring territory or at least that was the way before The Refuge was formed. The male will gather food for the female they are trying to win to show they can provide for them and for pups” (drooptail) “Yes, Brave wants to win me badly.” She sighchittered before continuing. “And I can’t let him for now, even if you agreed and it’s way too soon for that. He needs to concentrate on harvesting for himself. I hope he does so from here on. I’m sure the winters are just as long and cold here in Rock City as back home.”

Saniel took the hint and spent the next klick helping her gather nuts. They filled a few different hollows and brought a few backpacks worth of nuts into her room. Moselyn wasn’t about. He then helped her work on her/their winter nest. It was just after midday when she suggested he take a break. She could finish the nest from there, thanking him with a little nuzzling.