

Aldin looked at Orlan and Aouphril. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about humans before. Part, 'cause I didn't have 'nuf words. Part, 'cause you behave something like them, but the good ones," he interjected before they could react. "You walk on two feet like them. Your hands are more like theirs than my forepaws," he held up his forepaws. "You even prepare your food by cooking like them. Some food colors different, but food so similar in smell and taste, except most of them eat meat at every meal." He passed a finger across his handheld flat panel and a sport game that looked something like hockey appeared on a section of the large wall panel. "I have no word yet," he thought a moment. "You may not like words I choose. Play war game. In English, humans call this 'sports.'"

He could tell by their looks he was right about them not liking the term he used.

"You have two groups here fighting over a game piece and you score point by moving it here or here," points on screen. "In war, you have two or more groups fighting each other over land, even though there may be plenty for all, or resources or over different belief. If you win you get land or resources for your group or force your belief on losers."

He shut the sports game off. "I wasn't sure if I had landed in a world of humans who look like animals or someplace not so bad. Seems like some place not so bad. I hope, an-e-wa. Hard to judge with what little I see and learn so far, just as it is hard for you to judge my world on only what I say. I'm almost surprised you don't wear," he paused again, "don't have word, fake fur," he pointed to Dr. Hanter, "like you had at clinn-ick."

"Clothes. In some areas of our world, some choose to wear clothes as a form of expression. Around here, we only wear clothes when necessary depending on your work. Easier to wash blood out of a lab coat than out of one's fur."

"Yes, exactly. But 'cause humans mostly furless, they wear clothes most of the time to keep warm." He looked about. "Aouphril, I was wearing a lab coat when I fell into your world. When you found me, did you find my coat? I not wear when wake up."

Mara answered, "Those who cleaned-up the site near Aouphril's home found a shredded white coat stuck on a branch. They have it stored with that piece of rock that came through from your world with you. It's nearby. I'm sending for it," she tapped her flat panel a few times.

"Thank you. If the pocket and what's in it survived, I can show you picture of human."

"I will need to report all you've said back to parliament, Aldin."

"I'm willing to say it myself if it helps."

"That should not be necessary as I am recording this. But, they will probably have questions after reviewing this interview."

“I unnerstand. I will answer what they ask best I can.”

“Thank you. My next question. How is it you can learn so quickly?”

“How much your people study wild cousins here?”

“Some, but not me in particular.”

Aldin nodded. “I don’t know if they same here as on Terra. As I said, devilbunnies made my people from wild cousins. Make smart. But we still have most wild cousin thoughts deep in head.” He tapped one of his footpaws on the floor and left a wet foot mark. “Like them we only have sweat glands in paw pads. Sweat when hot or scared.”

He lowered is voice. “And I very, very scared and have been since arrive here. I try hide it well. But if you studied wild cousins, you might not have been fooled. One reason I very scared is in my head, you are a Terra wild fox. A very BIG fox, more like another larger predator. I know you not. But it is too much for me now. Hard to sit here so close to you. I know you no threat to me. But wild cousin part say otherwise. I need break soon to regain control ‘cause wild cousin side scream in my head, ‘Terra fox, run, run!’ Why? ‘cause Terra fox predator, but not real dangerous one to squirrel. While Terra fox would eat me if could catch and real hungry, fox prefer smaller, easier prey.” He stopped as he saw a tear roll down Mara’s muzzle. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend.”

“No, you didn’t know. Bad memory. A month before I reached the age of majority, my father took me on a camping trip out into a field half-a-day hike from home. We didn’t bring any food. He said, I needed to learn to hunt like our wild cousins. He said it was an important skill to learn that might save my life someday. He told me that when he was young, his settlement was destroyed by a whirllywhirl.” Mara tapped a few icons on her flat panel and a satellite photo of a large ocean storm appeared on the screen.

Aldin recognized the storm for a hurricane. “We have those. Can pack winds two hun-red kemits or more, right?”

“Yes. Father said the one that hit his settlement had winds around three hundred kemits per klick. They had warning and had fled to their storm shelter on higher ground. The storm brought water inland all the way to the shelter. They didn’t drown, but the emergency food supplies were ruined. After the storm ended and the water subsided, they returned to find the settlement destroyed. It was a very bad storm. It took the government over two weeks to reach them with help. Father told me if my grandfather and some others in the village didn’t know how to hunt they would have starved. That is when father learned to hunt.

“He said, he was glad he hadn’t had to use those hunting skills since, but he still insisted it was a good skill to have. He showed me how to hunt wild cousin rodent. About this small,” she held her thumb and index finger apart indicating it was about the size of a small mouse. She sniffled. “He told me, when I catch one, I was not to kill it, but I was to swallow it alive. Alive!” She got up and paced around. “And, I found one at dusk by hearing it,” She got down on all four and turned her head at one angle and another to show what she meant. She now very much looked like a Terra fox, but as large as a Terra coywolf, and Aldin’s tail started to thrash.

“I leapt-up as he taught me,” She leaped, landing front paws and muzzle first on a pillow. “And I pounced on it down through the leaves on the ground where it was hiding. And I did as I was told. I swallowed it alive as it squeaked in terror squirming in my mouth.” The tears were streaming down her face. “All I tasted was dirt and wet fur. I felt it struggle and wiggle all the way down my throat and into my stomach. After half a ceklick, it stopped wiggling. I felt so sick with guilt. I wanted to throw-up, but I forced myself to keep it down ‘cause I had already killed it and if I didn’t keep it down, it would have died for nothing.” She fell silent a moment wiping the tears.

“Father said my lesson wasn’t done yet. The following day, after I left scat, he took a stick and broke it apart showing me the partially digested bones and a few tufts of fur of that poor rodent. Then he asked me how I felt. I told him how terrible it made me feel. He said, that’s the main difference between us and wild cousins. We know better, but we will if we must to survive and we understand the price that is paid. He then instructed me that if I must ever use this skill to survive, make their death quick. That’s when I noticed he had tears in his eyes too. I hope I never have to use that skill and should I have kits, I will convince my mate to teach them hunting skill.” She curled up and bawled her head off.

Aldin watched Mara a moment and slowly got off his cushion. He took a couple of tentative steps towards her. His tail thrashed about above his back and over his head. Deep down in his throat he made a low chirling sound which he did his best to suppress. Orlan and Aouphril backed away looking about at that sound. It was (chitter)speak for, “predator nearby.” Aldin shook his head and took a couple more steps towards Mara, leaving wet paw prints behind. Then a few more. And again and again, all the time, his tail lashing about, until he was next to Mara. He carefully nudged her with his nose. He slowly sat up and held his arms apart as she looked up at him. His eyes were so wide, she could see the white. His irises were brown.

“This very, very hard for me, Mara. Want to run away so bad and cry out, warn others of predator. But you not Terra predator. You friend. You need hug. I be brave for both of us.” He reached out offering, with his tail whipping about behind him. Mara gently accepted the embrace. She could feel how tense the little squirrel was. While they hugged he sniffed intently at her fur. It seemed odd to her, but she let him. She lightly kissed him on the forehead as she released him from the embrace and looked into his eyes.

“Thank you. Now, maybe you need to back-off before you give yourself a heart attack.”

Aldin surrendered to his wild side, darting to the far side of the room as quickly as he could with the awkward cast on his left arm. He let the deep chirling sound scream out, “CHIRL! CHIT! BARK! CHIRL! CHIT! BARK!” He yelled it out as loud as he could at intervals as he fled. Aouphril and Orlan looked about with fear in their eyes. Aldin scaled the 2 mit tall wall using his good arm and both legs in three quick, pulling/pushing leaps and perched on one of the light fixtures overhead, which wobbled back and forth from the force of his leap. He shook his head trying to fight it. “Sorry, (CHIRL!)” he muttered between barks. “I need time,” (CHIRL!) “to get this out” (CHIRL!) “of my system.”

“I think we all need a break,” Dr. Hanter said.