

Over the previous two days, the parliament had reviewed the video testimony at least three times. Some members insisted on watching Aldin's coin trick several times until they spotted how he had not truly tucked it into his lab coat, but slipped it under his foot. It had to be watched in slow-motion to catch how as he tapped his paw on the floor, he had used the move to slide the coin under the pillow. Mara, herself, answered what questions she could. Overall, the parliament's reaction hadn't been what Mara had expected. Then again, she hadn't known what to expect.

They were divided into multiple factions. One group didn't believe Aldin was more than a wild cousin who had learned a few tricks for the cameras, despite his ability to "mimic" their language. That camp's beliefs were solidified when Aldin fled up the wall chattering in panic. Not even the DNA tests that had come back convinced them, despite the tests showing he didn't quite match a wild cousin squirrel. Another group was in a similar camp. They, too, believed Aldin was a wild cousin. However, as Aldin could talk and was working hard to learn "Common" as he called it, then that meant that wild cousins were smarter than they thought. This would be an incredible research breakthrough. Was Aldin here to demand full rights for the cousins? What would that mean about those who hunted?

Yet, others believed his story that he was from another world. They split into further factions, some believing his whole tale, and others thinking he was a spy come to collect information to report back to his superiors before an invasion. After all, he had said his people were at war longer than he had been alive.

Some wanted him kept in quarantine longer fearing he might be a carrier for some disease they couldn't detect. What better way to strike a blow against them than to unleash a germ they had no defense against! There was even a suggestion to also lock-up Chancellor Mara as she had been exposed to the alien squirrel.

Mara read reports coming in that there was similar reaction to those among the population who were watching the proceedings. And the numbers of those watching were steadily increasing as she feared would happen. There were concerns the network might crash as more and more accessed the live feed. To prevent that, Mara turned to the entertainment channels for assistance. Instead of allowing people to tune directly into the camera feed in Parliament, bogging down and threatening to crash it, she ordered that feed to only go out to the entertainment networks under condition they broadcast it live without editing or interruption. The networks gladly accepted, airing ads along the top edges of the feed, skirting the rules, but Mara didn't mind that bit as it kept the feed from crashing.

And she suspected if she hadn't taken that measure the network would have crashed today. She had done as she had promised to the small squirrel and bought him a couple of days. It was nearing 9 clicks, the time, everyone had agreed to reassemble on this day to continue deliberations on Aldin. Right at 9 as the representatives took their seats and Mara gaveled them

to order, the doors to the assembly chamber opened. In walked Dr. Hanter, followed by Orlan and Aouphril. Right behind them was Aldin. The representatives fell silent for a moment.

Suddenly a martin leapt to his feet shouting, “Chancellor! What is the meaning of this? You’ve put us all into danger bring it here! We could have questioned it through video!” Several other representatives scattered around the room also leaped up expressing their dismay. Still others jumped up trying to shout the first group down, expressing their anger over the first group’s lack of protocol. Mara started banging her gavel. Aldin ignored all this as he made his way on all four paws, semi-hobbling due to the cast to a circle drawn in the center of the floor of the parliament assembly hall. He looked about the room, shook his head in disapproval, and let out an ear piercing whistle as he unslung the small flat panel he had carried across his back. The shouting match ceased as all stared down at the little squirrel.

“I am Aldin Busheytail, the younger,” he spoke. “The second with my name and a visitor from Terra. Per your parliament rules, Section 4, Subsection 7,” he paused a moment not looking at the flat panel in his paws, but staring blankly in thought, “Paragraph 9: ‘Any citizen or visitor may attend an assembly of Parliament, stand in the speaker’s circle and address Parliament. Parliament will show proper respect.’” He looked about and then towards Mara. “Madam Chancellor, have I quoted the rules properly?” He tapped his flat panel, and the rule popped-up on screens around the chamber.

Mara waited a moment as those who had been shouting stared at their screens. Sheepishly, one-by-one, they sat, the marten being the last to sit. She smiled just a little. This was almost fun. “The Chancellor recognizes Aldin Bush-E-tail the younger of Terra.”

Aldin bowed towards Mara. “Thank you, Madam Chancellor. I know all of you,” he gestured around, “have questions.” He carefully stood up on his hind paws and hobbled about in a slow circle within the speaker’s circle so that all would get a chance to see him face-to-face as he spoke. It was obvious moving about on two legs was a challenge for him. “So do I. So do those you represent. Please remember that. You represent others by being in this assembly hall of your Parliament. Make them proud of how you represent them. Show proper respect for the…”

Again, the martin jumped up, and charged down to the floor shouting over Aldin’s speech, “How dare you lecture us!”

Mara slammed her gavel. “The Representative of Alisferil Region is out-of-order!”

Aldin raised his good forepaw. “Thank you, Madam Chancellor. Obviously, Representative…”

“That’s Enhray to you, tree rodent.”

Orlan, Aouphril, and squirrel representatives around the chamber bristled. Aldin didn’t so much as twitch his tail. He nodded respectfully to the martin. “Obviously, you haven’t reviewed your

own rules which govern this body. I'm willing to wait while you review them." He tapped his flat panel and the rules scrolled back to the beginning on flat panels across the chamber. He sat back on his hind legs watching Enhray and slowly twitched his tail. "By all means, take all the time you need Representative On-ray-to-U-Tree-Ro-dent of Alisferil Region. That is quite the mouthful. I will shorten it or we be here all day resolving this. Would Representative Tree-Ro-dent be alright?" He waved his good arm towards him.

"I'll not be insulted by a talking meal!" Enhray snarled as leapt at Aldin.

Aldin relaxed as he let his scout combat training take over. As the martin leapt, Aldin fell back and kicked-up with his legs, knocking the wind out of Enhray. The kick's follow through combined with the martin's momentum sent him sailing through the air over Aldin, and crashing against Mara's podium. Mara jumped aside as the podium tipped over from the impact and Enhray tumbled over and beyond it. Enhray groaned as security guards raced down to the center of the chamber from their posts against the walls. Aldin rolled back on his hind paws, facing towards Mara and the prone martin, his tail thrashing back and forth a moment. He uttered a low (chittergrowl). Coming from a small squirrel, it didn't exactly sound threatening.

Dr. Hanter was at the martin's side first, checking him over. "He's got a nasty bump on the skull. Might have a concussion."

Aldin bowed. "My apologies, Madam Chancellor. As I said to you in our interview, I don't want to cause trouble. However, my people are at war and I am trained to defend myself as we talked about. I know all present saw that interview. I watched you debate it." He half-smiled as he flicked his tail back and forth a few more times. "So, Representative On-ray should have known also."

Mara looked to Aldin and the dazed martin at her feet. "Remove former Representative Enhray from the chamber. Take him to the hospital. As he has violated the rules of Parliament, he is no longer a representative for his district. Parliament will discuss an appropriate punishment for his violation later. Send for his replacement," she looked towards the small squirrel with even more respect than she had before as Enhray was taken out on a stretcher and her podium was righted. "Aldin BushEtail the younger of Terra still has the floor."

"No, I do not, Madam Chancellor," Aldin tapped an icon on his flat panel bringing up behavior protocol. "While former Representative Enhray vie-oh-lat'd the rules first and I am allowed to defend myself, I also violated them as I egged him on into attacking me. I was fully aware he was trying to insult me with the term 'tree ro-dent' or as we say in English, 'tree rat'. I knew he would leap for me if I tossed the insult back at him in the way I did, playing in-no-sent and assuming the insult was part of his name." He shook a few droplets of blood from the claws of his right forepaw. "And, unfortunately, I drew blood. You'll find a small nick just below his throat. He lives as I remember we not at war. And I don't think I could eat a whole chirlichit."

Orlan stepped forward. “Martin.”

Aldin nodded to Orlan. “Yes, iz squirrel predator on Terra. I don’t think I could eat a whole martin if I kill him. That iz rule back home. If not killing enemy in war, only kill to survive or provide for family. Must eat what you kill or face punishment. I surrender the circle and will return to my assigned chamber until Parliament decides my punishment or decides they wish to ask me questions rather than fight and then punish me for my vie-oh-lay-shun of Parliament rules. My fate is in your hands.”

Aldin slung the flat panel back on his back, turned and headed back towards the door. Two security guards fell in with him and Orlan followed. No sooner than the door closed behind the party, the chamber erupted in shouts as various representatives tried to get attention to speak next. Before Mara could pound her gavel to try and regain control, all fell silent looking at the speaker’s circle where Aouphril stood. She was visibly shaking and her tail twitched back and forth in agitation.

“I am Aouphril, formerly from the Cussack Mountain Region, now living in the Northeastern Hills Region and a full time student in my fourth year at Nadowahoc College.”

“The Chancellor recognizes Citizen Aouphril of Northeastern Hills Region, who has a right as all citizens to address Parliament by taking the speaker’s circle,” Mara formally acknowledged.

She looked briefly at Mara, “Thank you, Madam Chancellor.” She looked out at the assembled Parliament as she continued to shake. She turned in a slow circle as Aldin had done so as to be able to face all of them a few at a time, just as Aldin had instructed her if it came to this. “I don’t know how our visitor could do as he did and remain so calm. I am the one he first met and I tended to his injuries. I do believe his story. If some of you dismiss it because I’ve been too close to him, so be it.”

She gestured with one paw. “You should all be ashamed of yourselves. Why didn’t anyone try to stop Representative Ehnray from attacking Aldin BushEtail the younger of Terra? If Aldin was an official representative of Terra instead of an accidental visitor, we’d be at war with his people!” She stomped a foot to emphasize that as she looked around. “We’ve been so careful for the past 400 years to avoid that, partially thanks to those who serve in this chamber. Now,” she shook her head, “now due to some with a little too much pride, we could easily be plunged into interplanetary war! We are so fortunately, he didn’t come here by choice!

“Gentlefurs, I have spent the last two days learning more about Parliament’s rules and procedures than I ever thought I’d need to unless my name were to be drawn by the Lottery and I find myself serving as you are today. Right next to Aldin, I also watched everything that has transpired in this chamber over the past two days. Based on what we observed, Aldin predicted he would be attacked. Except,” she paused, wiping a tear from her left eye, “he figured he’d have to take a question from the wild-cousin faction first before one would attack him.”

“I didn’t want to believe him, but he was right.” She shook her head wiping more tears from her eyes. “He can’t read our language, Common, as he is calling it, yet. He used the blind reader program, listened to the rules and memorized them. He used random symbols to flag the passages he thought he’d need to point out.” She looked about again. “How many of you could recite the rules word for word this moment?” Several representatives avoided eye contact as she looked about.

“He is a gentle creature if you just give him a chance. He’s very scared as he’s admitted to us and if you know what clues to watch for as he pointed out in his interview with the Chancellor,” she pointed to the faint paw prints on the floor leading to the exit. “If you had been paying attention, you’d have known this also. I know some of you are just as frightened. But you need to give him a chance to speak. He will answer your questions as best he can, though he’s only had a little over two weeks to learn our language. Think about that.” She paused again. “Think long and hard on that. When I first met him, the only thing we had in common was wild cousin squirrel (chitter) and I never learned to properly speak it.” She drooped her tail and pointed again around the crowd. “Could any of you master enough of one of the dead languages in two weeks to be able to talk to someone else in it and understand? I know I couldn’t. He may look like a wild cousin, but he’s as smart as the rest of us, maybe smarter.”

Aouphril turned again and looked at Mara. “I suspect there are many in the Alisferil Region who can’t say what I can say at this moment. I am **proud** of who my representative is. Chancellor Mara didn’t need to give you the chance to question Aldin Bushetail the younger of Terra.” She tapped an icon on her flat panel calling up the Emergency Clause within the Parliamentary Rules, which Aldin had her flag. “As soon as you elected her Chancellor and declared this an emergency, you gave her near total power. She has the right to make the decision on her own without any input from anyone else. Not you, nor those you represent. Fortunately, my representative is wise enough to seek input from others. Thank you for listening. Madam Chancellor, I surrender the circle.”

Aouphril stepped out of the circle and headed straight for the exit without looking at anyone else within the chamber. After the doors closed, much to Mara’s surprise there was no yelling or screaming from anyone demanding attention. Just silence. She looked out on the assembly and pointed to a raccoon with his paw raised. “The Chancellor recognizes the honorable Representative of Low Island Forests District.”

The raccoon stepped down to the floor of the assembly. “Thank you, Madam Chancellor. It is obvious, we need a cooling off period and some of us do need to review our own rules, including me. It’s embarrassing to me that it took one of those we represent and a ‘visitor,’ if that is what he is, to point that out to us. Remember,” he paused as he looked about, “the eyes of the world are on us right now. As such, I, Tamiyoki, Representative of the Low Island Forests District formerly propose we take the rest of this day as a group and review our own rules and procedures

and ensure all understand so as to avoid further embarrassment in front of those we represent and other visitors.” The raccoon walked back to his seat.

Mara pointed to a white bear near the back of the assembly. “The Chancellor recognizes the honorable Representative of the Northern Arctic Region.”

“Thank you, Madam Chancellor,” the bear bellowed from where she sat not bothering to get up or walk to the floor. “I, Estelle, Northern Arctic Region Representative Second the proposal from Representative Tamiyoki. We may have been chosen by Lottery to serve and may not be happy about it. However, we are the Representatives of our respective Districts. We should make sure we conduct ourselves properly as is our civic duty.” The bear looked about from where she sat. “It could be a lot worse for those not happy being here. At least after you’ve served a term, you are exempt from future Lotteries.”

“Thank you, Representative Estelle. We have a proposal and a second. Any discussion?” She paused. “As there appears to be no interest in discussion, all in favor?”

“AYE!” echoed across the chamber.

“Opposed?”

“Nah,” a few shouted, but they vastly were outnumbered.

“The Ayes have it on voice vote.” Mara banged her gavel and set it aside. *Well played, little squirrel. You just bought yourself another day,* she thought to herself as she tapped her flat panel to call-up the rules. “Shall we begin?”