

Aldin was almost surprised when he was summoned back to the Parliament assembly hall the following day. He expected it would take another day or two. When he arrived, Mara pointed to a cushion near the speaker's circle and he sat down. "Aldin BushEtail the younger of Terra, after deliberation, no charges will be filed against you for defending yourself against the martin, Enhray. Like all proceedings that takes place in here, it was recorded. We watched the incident several times. We could see from his body language he was ready to leap at you before you used his insult against him." She smacked her gavel.

An otter raised its paw. Mara pointed. "The Chancellor recognizes the new Representative of Alisferil Region." The river otter descended towards the chamber floor. He was wearing some sort of harness over his chest with a blue zigzag pattern on it. There were two small gold rings in each ear that tinkled together as he descended the stairs. He paused for a moment, looking at a calico cat.

"That red satin bow looks stunning against your fur, madam Representative," he stated as he bowed to her. Everyone was looking at him. He looked about. "Well, it does. Oh! Sorry, of course." He continued to the floor and turned to Aldin. Seeing he was as small as a wild cousin, the otter scooted down on all four to be more at eye level rather than tower over the squirrel. Like the other higher animals of this world, the otter was at least half-again as large as his Terran counterpart. "Visitor All-dun, I am Tobias, the new Representative of Alisferil Region. I just arrived a couple clicks ago. My predecessor's behavior was inexcusable." He briefly held his right hand over his heart, "please accept my apologies on behalf of my Region."

Aldin nodded, reaching out with his right forepaw to touch Tobias' right hand. "Apology accepted though it was not your fault, Representative Toe-by-us. Thank you."

As the otter returned to his seat, Mara pointed to Aldin and indicated the speaker's circle. "The Chancellor, again, recognizes Aldin BushEtail the younger of Terra. You have the floor, visitor from Terra."

Aldin nodded. "Thank you, Madam Chancellor." He turned back to Parliament as if a full day hadn't passed, carefully standing up on his hind paws and slowly hobbling about within the circle as he spoke. "As I was saying, yesterday, remember you represent many. Make them proud of your representation. Yes, I've studied your rules. They aren't much different from our Council of Elders as we call our Parliament. My grandmother served as our version of your Chancellor for over ten years before stepping down."

There were a few gasps in the audience as Aldin continued his slow circling pace. "Remember, my people are at war and have been for over 30 years. Based on your rules, we have been in a constant state of emergency for that entire time. All must undergo combat training. Former Representative Enhray was the unfortunate recipient of some of that yesterday. Our Council rules are a little different, in that membership on the Council is suggested by others and then that squirrel is offered a chance to serve. You use a lottery system to serve 5 months, except in the

case of an emergency,” he paused, “like right now thanks to my unplanned visit. Among my people, if one accepts the invitation to serve, they serve as long as they feel comfortable doing so. Each has their positives and negatives.” He paused again.

“However, I’m not here to lecture you on the differences between our two governing bodies. As I started to say prior to being interrupted yesterday you and those you represent have questions. I’m sure you’ve been inundated with questions. Who am I really? What is my world like? Am I a threat to you? Am I a spy scouting out your world ahead of an invasion force? I caught those in your discussions prior to my first appearance before you as I, like many others of your world, watched you live, as they are watching us now. I will answer what I can the best I can. I am but one squirrel and I’m not all knowing. If I was, I would know how to get home and not be here addressing you. When I’m done answering what you ask, I hope you will answer a few questions from me. What will become of me? Will you welcome me among you?” He looked about. “I hope so, as there’s no way I know of for me to return to Terra. This Earth is my home now, like it or not.

“Please remember that I am still learning Common, as I call your language. I have only had a few weeks to work on it. Please forgive my accent. Please try to use simpler words or be prepared to have me question you back asking for,” he scrunched his eyes a moment, and shook his head in frustration. “Not sure word I need. Easier understand words. Orlan,” he nodded towards the squirrel, “has been kind enough to agree to translate to and from (chitter) as need.

“One of your questions has been, ‘Am I a wild cousin?’. Sort of, maybe, based on your definition. My people started as Terra wild cousins that were made smart. Devilbunnies altered the,” he paused again, “not sure of the word in Common, the directions in each cell that tell it what species you are, are you male or female, what color is your fur, so on. They altered that to make us smart.

“Dr. Hanter has conducted a very,” he paused again, “ther-row exam of me and you already have that data and should be able to call it up on your flat panels anytime to review at your lee-zur. It should be easy for you to compare it to your own wild cousin squirrels and make that dee-sish-on on own. I cannot make it for you. I guess you could call me a smart cousin.”

“The other question I’ll answer immediately is whether or not I am a spy scouting out for my people to invade you?” He gigglechittered. “If I was, whoever was in charge of opening the gate messed-up something awful and is getting his tail reamed out by the Council of Elders. I was fortunate I only broke my arm and not my neck in that fall. From what I was told, it was 12 mits. Surely, if we had the technology to send someone through intentionally, we’d make sure they could just step through safely, or at least provide them with a way to safely get to the ground.

“Furthermore, if we actually believed we didn’t have a big enough war problem on our hands back home and wanted to invade, we would borrow some lessons from our human allies.

They've been warring with themselves for thousands of years." He paused at the gasps around the chamber. "Over that time, they have developed some nasty and effective ways to invade. We wouldn't need to send someone through blindly. We'd send through some drones first to scout things out. Then whoever was sent through would pretend to be a wild cousin and watch you for a while and then report back. Or, if we really wanted to stoop to the level of humans, we'd simply send through a virus you have no immunity to. Let it do the work for us and then we could just come through and take over a ready-made world. On the continent I'm from on Terra, that is how the original humans of that continent were all but wiped-out by invaders from one of the other continents about 500 years ago. So, no, I'm not a spy nor are the Nahmakanta Free Squirrels planning an invasion of Earth."

The sitting pillow Aldin had used a moment before was brought down into the speaker's circle. He sat down. "With that, ask your questions."

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