

ONE

A 20-something male skunk watched two flat panel monitors. On one monitor the point of view of the camera was having trouble following what looked like a wild cousin gray squirrel as it scurried around the trunk of a large pine tree. On the other monitor, was that squirrel's point-of-view looking up, or down or sideways on said tree trunk. The skunk glanced over and up the large pine tree as the small squirrel (gigglechittered) as it continued to dart around the tree trunk. The squirrel could have easily been confused with a wild cousin except for the small camera mounted on its head.

The skunk sighed. He spoke into the microphone in his headset, "You need to slow it down a bit, Em-bass-ah-der. The drone can't keep up with you. We can't afford to have it crash into a branch. Dr. K wouldn't be happy."

The squirrel paused in its antics, dangling on a trunk of a tree by just his hind paws while nibbling a nut, posing cutely for the drone. It looked down at the skunk with a huge grin on its muzzle, and gave him a thumbs up, flicking its tail up and down once. After quickly finishing the nut, the squirrel continued climbing up/down and leaping from tree to tree at a slower pace the camera-equipped drone could safely keep pace with. This footage was going to be a huge help to Dr. Kaynobble's research.

"Better."

The skunk continued to watch the monitors for a while. After 50 ceklicks (30 minutes), he called up again, indicating that was enough filming for the day. The small squirrel quickly came down. He was assisted with removal of the tiny head-mounted camera by another, much larger squirrel.

"Are you happy with the footage, Karle?" the small, gray squirrel asked raising its tail briefly in a curly hook.

"Yes, Em-bass-ah-der..."

"Karle, I prefer, Aldin, if you please," he interrupted.

"Yes, Aldin. I think Dr. K will be delighted with this. There's no way we could get this kind of footage this quickly with a wild cousin."

Aldin (gigglechittered) and replied, "I could just imagine you trying to mount that camera on a wild cousin's head. And I am sure the drone would spook it. I am happy to help. Pardon my um," Aldin paused trying to come-up with the word he wanted in Common, "in-thoo-zE-asm?"

"Enthusiasm."

“Yes, thank you. Inthuzeasm. After I finally got the cast off last week, this has been one of my first chances to just climb. I really missed just being able to climb. Speaking of which, there’s the other piece of the project Dr. Kaynobble was interested in.” Aldin turned to the larger squirrel who had just assisted him. “Ready for a brief lesson...” he drooped his tail briefly. “Sorry, what was your name again?” Aldin held his tail briefly in a curly hook like before. (curiousflick)

“Giguere.” The larger squirrel replied. Giguere was tassel-eared and had reddish-brown fur and was half-again as tall as Aldin when sitting down. Like the other animals of this other Earth, he was semi-anthropomorphic. While he could sit comfortably on his haunches, he normally walked erect on his hind paws. His forepaws were more like human hands than paws. The skunk, Karle, was the same way. When standing both Giguere and Karl towered over Aldin.

Aldin nodded. “Jih-gair, I know you and the others in this project have started weight lifting as I suggested to build-up your upper body strength. What I am going to have you do today will not require much of that.” He glanced at the large pine tree he had just descended. Well, at least it looked and smelled like a white pine tree from back home, so that’s what he compared it to in his mind and assigned the translation of the Common word for it in his head. Even if he, Giguere and Karle reached around it together, they couldn’t encircle its girth. “It may be easier for me to show you what I’d like you to try then try to explain.” He paused while Karle redirected the drone, knowing he should document this.

With ease, Aldin climbed up the trunk of the tree a short distance, rotated around until he was facing downward with his rear legs spread apart and his feet forming an upside-down vee. He then reached-out with his arms, stretching, barely poking at the ground with his forepaw claw tips. While still in this position, he turned his head to look at Giguere. “I do not want you to climb any higher than necessary to be able to face downward and barely be able to touch the ground.”

“Seriously? This soon? And if I lose my grip?”

“That’s why I want you so close the ground. If you slip, you get to practice the roll-tumble technique I showed you.”

Giguere flicked his tail back and forth briefly. He walked up to the tree, pulling caps off his finger nails. He and the others in the study group had been required to allow their finger nails to grow. Normally, they kept their nails trimmed. As their nails grew, the nails curled narrowing into claws similar to those on their toes. They found they needed to wear little caps on them to use their flat panel handheld computers without scratching the surface. Giguere now tensed as he gripped the tree with his claws, basically hugging the tree.

“You need to relax, Jih-gair,” Aldin coaxed. “Else, you will be practicing that roll-tumble technique. Take a few deep breathes. Channel the buried instincts of your inner wild cousin. Your claws will find the proper places to grip.”

Giguere breathed in deeply a few times. He pulled himself up the tree a little way and then paused. He breathed in and out deeply a few more times and then carefully, slowly rotated around. “Wow,” he gasped under his breath with a bit of nervousness. He completed the rotation and was now facing downwards with his rear legs partially spread-out like Aldin. After half a ceclick, he relaxed a bit more and then slowly, gingerly let go of the trunk with his hands and cautiously stretched his arms downward until his fingers barely touched the ground as he dangled by his toe claws with his feet planted firmly against the bark of the trunk in an upside down vee. “Wow,” he again gasped.

“How do you feel?” Aldin asked the larger squirrel.

“Exhilarated.”

“Any pain or discomfort?”

Giguere paused for a moment, closing his eyes. He then opened them widely in realization. “No. None. I think I could hold this position all day long. I had feared the blood would all rush to my head. I don’t have that feeling at all.”

“Just as both I and Dr. Kaynobble suspected all along. Good. Time to get down,” Aldin stated, grabbing the trunk again with his forepaws and scampered down to the ground.

Giguere took it a bit more slowly. Once on the ground, he stood-up.

“That was impressive,” Karle stated as he powered down the drone while Giguere put the caps back on his fingernail/claws. He then assisted Karle with packing the monitors.

Aldin (gigglechittered) again. He began to nibble on another nut. He wasn’t sure what it was. Sort of a cross between a white oak acorn shape-wise and something else. Whatever it was, he liked the flavor. “I will have you and the others darting about the tree tops in no time, Jih-gair,” he said between nibbles and then to the skunk, “Even you, Karle, to a point if you want, but you’d need to let your fingernails grow like the others.”

“What?” Karle replied in startlement.

“If your wild cousins here are like those on my Terra, they climb trees to munch on the leaves. They do not leap from tree to tree as far as I know, but they can climb, though they do not or cannot face downward when climbing down.” He held up the half gnawed tree nut. “By the way, what do you call this kind of nut? I think it’s a couple of weeks under ripe, but I still like it.”

“That’s a yellow butternut,” Giguere replied.

Aldin nodded making note. Maybe he could convince them to come back in a few weeks and film him gathering some. He really found it quite tasty.