

TEN

Three days and several witnesses later, the ferret paced in front of Ehnray, who now stood in the witness circle. “Tell me, Ehnray, Have you ever eaten wild cousin squirrel before?”

Ehnray was briefly taken aback by the question and then answered. “Yes, once.”

“When?”

“I was eight. My father had taken me on a camping trip to teach me how to hunt. It was my first real kill.”

“How did it taste?”

Ehnray stared at his counsel a moment again surprised by the line of questioning. “It was delicious. Both raw and cooked it was the tastiest meat I’ve ever had. Not as gamey as some other wild cousins and with a hint of nuttiness to it...” He wiped his muzzle as he started to drool. “Pardon me. I liked it so much that if it were possible to domesticate and farm raise them, I’d have become a squirrel farmer. But I’ve never had it since.”

“Why?”

“It is rare to find a wild cousin squirrel around here today. I don’t know if their numbers have dwindled or if they’re just good at hiding when a citizen is seen.”

“If you had another chance to eat wild cousin squirrel, would you?”

“In the flick of your tail, yes. I would so love to enjoy that again.”

The ferret nodded. “Let’s go back to the day of the fight. What were you thinking when Mr. Bush-E-tail walked into the Parliament chamber?”

“I was outraged. For days we had been debating whether or not he was intelligent. Until that was settled, he had no right to be there, especially if it turned out he was just a trained wild cousin as I and several others believed. Even footage of him in quarantine showed that. He fled from the Chancellor crying an alarm like a wild cousin squirrel as he climbed up the wall and perched on a light fixture.” Ehnray paused a moment and then realizing why the ferret had asked the earlier line of questions, he added, “Much like that wild cousin squirrel I hunted and ate all those years ago.”

“Let me pause you there a moment,” the ferret interrupted as he turned to the jury while tapping a couple icons on his flat panel. “I present to the jury sworn testimony from twelve other members of the ‘wild cousin’ faction, who like my client believed at that point that Mr. Bush-E-

tail was just a trained wild cousin. All have agreed to testify in person if necessary, though it may take some a day or two to travel here or to make arrangements for holo-testimony at their nearest court house.” He turned back to Ehnray. “Please continue.”

Ehnray nodded. “If on the other paw, his story was real, he needed to stay in quarantine for another two weeks for everyone’s safety. Who knows what kind of diseases he carried here from his home world. We’d have no immunity to them. Look at our own ancient history as those on one continent first made contact with another. There was a lot of death and illness on both sides. The fact that the Chancellor had not only lifted that quarantine early but had visited with the squirrel beforehand was upsetting. She put us all at risk but not putting herself under quarantine at that point.”

“How did Mr. Bush-E-tail enter the chamber?”

“On all four paws just like a wild cousin. He stood-up on his hind paws only after entering the Visitor’s Circle and being recognized by the Chancellor.”

“You objected to his presence?”

“Yes, I and several others did. To not only cut quarantine short, but to invite him into the chamber like that when we could have questioned him via video, it was insulting and dangerous.”

“But you did drop your objection.”

“Briefly once it was pointed out that he was in the Visitor’s Circle and the Chancellor recognized him as such. But then he started lecturing us on our own protocols. I couldn’t take any more of it. Whoever had trained him wanted to make a mockery of Parliament. I charged down to the floor objecting to his presence.”

“Is that when you called him a tree rat?”

“Yes. He used only my title and I replied, ‘That’s Ehnray to you, tree rat.’”

“How did he react?”

“Like he didn’t understand. He repeated it back at me like it was part of my name and then asked if he could abbreviate it to ‘Representative Tree Rat’.”

“And that is when you leapt at him?”

“Yes.”

“At the time you jumped at him, did you consider him sentient.”

“No. At the time I believed he was just a trained, wild cousin tree rat.”

“At which point, you could claim the right to hunt him.”

“Yes,” Ehnray replied without hesitation, quickly realizing what his Counsel was aiming for.

The ferret was surprised the lemur didn’t object this time as he turned to the jury. “I’ll remind the jury again as I said on the first day of this trial, wild-cousin squirrels are currently legal to hunt.” He turned back to Ehnray. “Was that the only reason you leapt at him?”

“No. I was angry and saw him as a potential threat to those around me. I felt I had to act to protect my fellow Representatives.”

“A threat?”

“Yes. If he was a wild cousin trained to talk some words to us, he was making a mockery of us as people around the world watched. They could lose faith in our system. What quicker way to put an end to that mockery than to call it out for what it was. Either, I’d successfully hunt him, or he’d run screaming a warning again as he had done for the Chancellor.”

“What happened after you jumped?”

“I had the wind knocked out of me and I slammed my head into something and fell unconscious. I woke up some time later in the hospital with my head bandaged and a small wound on my neck. I would learn that he used my momentum against me and sent me flying into the Chancellor’s podium. He clawed my neck as I passed over him.”

The ferret nodded as he turned again to the jury. “You’ve seen the footage several times.” He turned back to Ehnray.

“In the footage you watched, what did the victim say after you were injured?”

“That I was fortunate he let me live.”

“Objection!”

The ferret pressed an icon on his flat panel and the footage played: Aldin 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.” The ferret ended the video.

“Overruled.”

“How long were you hospitalized?”

“I was unconscious for a day and then spent another eight days in the hospital.”

“From the hospital where did you go?”

“Straight to prison.”

“Why?”

“On my fifth day in the hospital, I was informed I would be charged with attempted murder, which carries a term of up to 20 years. However, if I agreed to plead guilty, I’d only receive 5 years.”

“And that is why you initially plead guilty?”

“Yes.”

The ferret again turned to the jury. “My client plead guilty to questionable charges while he was still suffering from a concussion and without being able to consult counsel.”

“Objection!”

“Overruled,” Judge Perraul responded.

The ferret bowed to the judge. “Thank you, your Honor.” He turned back to Ehnray. “What made you change your mind?”

“A week and a half ago, the Embassahder visited me to convince me to request the withdrawal of my guilty plea.”

The ferret nodded. “How did he convince you?”

“I ignored him at first. So, he entered my cell.”

There was murmuring in the visitors’ gallery which Judge Perraul quickly quieted with his gavel.

“How is that possible? Weren’t you locked in your cell? How could he enter it?”

“Yes, I was locked in it, but as he explained afterward, as he is an Embassahder, our laws don’t apply to him. He can pass through any electronically locked door he wishes.”

“Yes, that is true.” The ferret tapped an icon and the laws governing Foreign Representatives popped up on the flat panels throughout the room. “Foreign Representatives are only accountable to the laws of their home country.” He turned back to Enhray. “What happened after he entered your cell?”

“Again, he tried to get me to talk to him as I backed away. Then I noticed the guard with his weapon drawn. I raised my hands saying I didn’t want any trouble and that the Embassahder had lost his mind. The guard looked at his weapon, lowered it a moment in puzzlement, raised it again, lowered it and started smacking it with his other paw. He looked confused. That’s when the Embassahder explained to me what you just said, how our laws didn’t apply to him and as long as he was in the line of fire, the guard’s weapon wouldn’t work. The guard called for back-up and asked the Embassahder to move away from me.”

“Did he obey?”

“No. In fact he got closer to me saying he was safe in the cell with me. He trusted me.”

“Then what happened?”

Other guards arrived. They’d point their weapons at me and then drop and stare at them, then point them again, drop and stare, just like the initial guard. Again that guard asked the Embassahder to move away from me, this time in a pleading voice.”

“What did he do?”

“He doubled-down on his belief that he could trust me. He cornered me in the cell with his back turned to me. He was so close I couldn’t get around him without touching him. He said to the guards he was perfectly safe. Even if I grabbed him he was in no danger. At that point he asked me to pick him up by the scruff of the neck. I kept my hands in the air where the guards could see them. The Embassahder then said he wasn’t leaving until we talked or I removed him from the cell. I felt I had little choice at that point. So I picked him up by the scruff of the neck.”

“How did the guards react?”

“They went absolutely bonkers. If their weapons worked, we’d have both been fried. They kept crying out for me to put him down.”

“And how did the Embassahder react to being picked-up?”

“He was totally relaxed and showed no fear. He looked up at me and tempted me further. He offered to let me harm him. He reminded me of our last encounter and that he was now at my mercy. I could exact revenge right then and there if I chose to and there was nothing the guards

could do about it unless I killed him. He also reminded me if I did choose the course of revenge, I would probably not get out of prison anytime soon.”

“And yet, you didn’t harm him, did you?”

“No, though I, admit, I was tempted for a moment. He is the same size and weight as a wild cousin squirrel. He even smells like that wild cousin I hunted in my youth. And I suspect he’d be as tasty as that wild cousin I ate as a child. But no, I didn’t harm him. Instead, I carried him to the door of my cell, held him over the lock plate until it unlocked, opened the door enough to set him down and then locked myself back in.”

“Let me get this straight,” the ferret stated as he stopped his pacing, facing Enhray. “The Embassahder, who was responsible for you being in prison after intentionally picking a fight with you, walked into your cell. He offered himself up to you, giving you a chance to harm or kill him with the guards unable to stop you, and you didn’t take up that offer for sweet and legal revenge?”

“No,” he paused. “Wait? Legal?”

The ferret tapped an icon on his flat panel calling up the laws on assisted suicide. “The moment he gave you permission to harm him, you could have done so with no repercussions.”

Enhray stared at the ferret and then at the judge. “May I ask the victim a question in regards to this, your Honor?”

“That is not a normal request. What would you ask?”

“Did he know about this law at the time he tempted me in my cell?”

The judge looked to Aldin. “The victim may choose to refuse to answer that question unless called again to the witness circle.”

“I am willing to answer it, your Honor. If I must stand in the witness circle to do so, I will. Yes, I was aware of that law. After my conversation with his wife, I trusted Mr. Enhray would not harm me. I took the risk in order to get him to listen and talk to me.”

“The accused’s question has been answered. Counsel, continue your questioning.”

The ferret nodded and turned again to Enhray like no interruption had occurred. “You already had lost your job and were in the process of losing your family. You were already serving time for attempted murder. Why didn’t you take up his offer?”

“Counsel, I had sat in that cell for two months. I had plenty of time to watch the recorded happenings that took place in Parliament after my fight. I had come to the conclusion that my initial belief he was just a wild cousin was wrong. I felt shame and guilt over attacking him. I wasn’t going to make that mistake a second time.”

The ferret turned again to the jury. “The complete video footage of the victim’s visit with my client in prison is in the evidence files you have access to. No further questions, your Honor.”

Judge Perraul turned to the government counsel. “You may cross-examine.”

“I have no questions, your Honor,” the lemur responded.

“Does either party wish to call any other witnesses?” Both shook their heads in the negative.

“We’ll take a short 25 ceclick* break and then you may provide your closing statements.” Judge Perraul tapped his gavel.

*-15 minutes