

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.

TWO

It was close to a klick (hour) trip in the hovercraft from the forest reserve they had been filming in back to the campus of Nadowahoc College. However, the time seemed to pass quickly. The three of them studied the footage they had gotten. Aldin pointed out how Giguere's feet had positioned themselves just like Aldin's when they faced downward on the tree trunk, allowing their foot claws to hold each of them in place. Giguere noted he didn't have to think about it much, it just seemed to be the natural thing to do once he relaxed just as Aldin had suggested.

Once they arrived back, they parted ways. Aldin headed off campus to the home he currently shared with his friends, Aouphril and her mate, Orlan. It bothered him in some ways to share space with them. He knew he was welcome. Still, it felt like he was intruding on the young couple. He hated to freeload on them and had offered to help cover some of the expenses through the embassy account, but they refused, insisting he was their guest for as long as he wanted to stay with them.

This was also why he was offering his assistance to Dr. Kaynobble and his research. It was a barter/trade for services-in-kind. Aldin assisted Dr. Kaynobble and in return, Aldin got to work on improving his Common, both spoken and written at the college. As he had quickly discovered shortly after being appointed Ambassador for the Terran Nahmakanta Free Squirrels, he had no way to directly pay for the tutoring without running up a bill for Nahmakanta. The previous Parliament neglected one little thing when they designated him as Ambassador. While he had that "embassy spending account" that would eventually be billed to Nahmakanta should they ever make contact with this Earth, Parliament never settled on whether or not he, as a "visitor," could legally work as he wasn't an Earth citizen. As such, he had no personal account in Earth's computer network. No personal account meant no one could pay him for work he did. This annoyed Aldin as he didn't want to rely on the embassy spending account. He wanted to pay his own way in his new home. He didn't believe Nahmakanta would ever make contact with this Earth. As such, he was very careful about when he added to that bill. Thus, the exchange agreement with the college. As convenient as the virtual credit system of this Earth seemed to be, physical hard currency would have come in handy in a case like his. Maybe some future Parliament could be convinced to allow him to "officially" work.

After the short 15 ceklick walk, well, scamper on all four paws as that was more natural for him, Aldin arrived at his shared home. He walked when he had to, which he practiced a lot, but he preferred to be on all four whenever he could get away with it. At the entrance, he placed his forepaw on the lock pad, the light turned green, and allowed him to enter. Neither of his two hosts were home yet as both had late afternoon classes. Aldin got started on dinner. This was one

way he helped his hosts despite their refusal for him paying any sort of rent or assist with the household expenses. He did his share of household chores.

Aldin uncovered a bowl and punched down the dough within. He had set the bowl out that morning to let the dough rise. He ignored that for a little bit while working on a simple salad for himself. The salad had just a little bit of greens and a lot of raw vegetables, mushrooms, and nuts. He didn't add any dressing. He wasn't a fan of it anymore here than he had been when visiting the Fudd-humans back on his Earth or Terra as he called it here on this other Earth. Never mind his hosts liked a vinegar-based one. And here, the vinegar was a lot stronger/more pungent than what he ever encountered back on Terra.

Aldin turned back to the dough to create something a bit more complicated for his friends as the furry citizens of this world ate food similar to humans back on his Terra. He lightly greased a flat cooking sheet, and turned the dough on to it. He gently kneaded it outward thinning it out as it covered the sheet, bunching it on the edges. He then spread tomato sauce over the dough, shaking his head at the purple color. He just couldn't yet get over how some vegetables here were so different in color.

On top of this, he grated and sprinkled cheese. It had been a challenge to track some down at first, not knowing what it was called here, nor knowing whether or not they even made the stuff. Apparently, it was made in some regions. It didn't take him too long after that to find some that was similar to mozzarella back on Terra, but he never asked which domesticated wild cousin animal's milk was used in the process of making this version. He had bartered for the cheese providing a "meet-and-greet" open house session at the farm that made it. Said session involved a few more over-excited kids than he had planned on, all of whom wanted to hug and pet the "wild cousin" squirrel. The sacrifices he made for his friends.

On top of the cheese, he sprinkled some dried herbs. He then added some sliced mushrooms and sliced rolled, spiced tofu-product that looked sort of like Terran pepperoni, which he knew both his hosts liked in other meals. Done adding toppings, he slipped it into the convection oven for 15 ceklicks. This took a bit of effort as the pan was as large as he was. The smell of baking pizza filled the kitchen as Aldin nibbled on his salad. Just before the timer buzzed, Aouphril and Orlan arrived. Both of their noses twitched at the smell. They had never smelled anything quite like it before.

"Surprise," Aldin exclaimed as he checked the crust, shook his head, and slipped it back in. "Well, it needs a couple more ceklicks."

"What is it?"

"Something from Terra, or at least my attempt at it. It is very popular among the humans my people work with. It's called 'pizza', though you may want to come up with a different name for

it in Common. Of course, for all I know, pizza is already made somewhere on Earth already.” Aldin described the process. Both were intrigued.

The timer buzzed again. This time, Aldin was happy with the crust, but needed assistance pulling it out. He sliced it up and served them each a slice to start and a smaller one for himself. There wasn't much human-style food he liked, but he tolerated pizza in small portions. Aldin was pleased with how it came out as he nibbled on his slice. It was well received by his hosts as they made small talk about how their day had gone. There were no leftovers when they were done.

As Orlan did the few dishes, Aouphril noticed the flashing light on the side of the entertainment flat panel indicating a message had been left. This was unusual as all three of them had personal handheld flat panels through which someone could have contacted them. She tapped a passcode on her handheld that signaled through to the entertainment unit.

The screen lit showing the head and shoulders of a brown furred pine marten. It looked about and then directly at the camera. “I hope I have the right place,” she spoke. “I’m trying to contact the Em-bass-ah-der. Please have him return my call as soon as possible through the secured network.” The screen went dark.

Aouphril and Aldin looked at other with puzzlement on their muzzles. She replayed the message as Orlan joined them. She tapped a few icons on her handheld. The entertainment panel displayed:

Call ID: Private
Location: Forestdale, Alisferil Region
Return call?

“Scat,” Aldin mumbled, drooping his tail.

Both Aouphril and Orlan glanced at him and shook their heads, again, wondering why that was used as a cuss word on Terra.

THREE

Aldin's two hosts went for an evening walk to provide him with privacy. The entertainment flat panel indicated the call was going through. The pine marten appeared on screen. She looked about with her whiskers twitching slightly. She then looked directly at the screen.

“Hello? Your video feed is off.”

Aldin tapped an icon on his hand held flat panel turning on the camera feed on the larger screen which he had failed to turn on before.

“My apologies. This is Ambassador Aldin Busheytail returning your call...”

“Is the connection secure at your end?”

“Yes, of course, Mizz...”

“Phyllis.”

“Mizz Fill-is.” Aldin nodded his head. “Based on where the panel identified your call is from, I am going to assume you are related to On-ray, former representative for your district?”

Phyllis stiffened briefly. “Enhray is my husband.”

“I see.” Aldin said slowly as he drooped his tail. “When he leapt at me, I was not looking at what was behind me. I was simply demonstrating I am more than just a defenseless wild cousin.”

“‘Talking meal’ as he called you.” Phyllis responded with a little ire in her voice. “He can be stupid and an embarrassment sometimes, like at that moment, but I still love him.”

Aldin lowered his eyes a moment. “Yes,” he looked up again. “I hope he has recovered from his injuries. I wish no ill will against him, Mizz Fill-is.”

Phyllis’ body posture loosened a bit. “I was hoping that was the case, Em-bass-ah-der, for I need your help. Or I should say, my husband does whether he’ll admit to it or not.”

A klick later after the call ended, Aldin drooped his tail. He made some follow-up calls to rearrange his schedule with the college and booked a flitter flight to Forestdale.

FOUR

Aldin checked in at the flight center, ignoring a few points and stares and the occasional, “Is that him?” Being named Ambassador was worse in some ways than how he had been confused for his famous grandfather back home on Terra. But it was a good trade-off. Unlike Terra, he had the freedom to travel in the open here. He had already seen more of this Earth than he had ever seen of Terra. Though he had only been here a little over two months he had already made up his mind. If there was ever a way to return to Terra, he wouldn’t. He’d request to be allowed to stay here.

He proceeded where directed to the boarding gate and glanced out a window at the flitter as the flight craft was called. It looked like a cross between a human airplane and a quadcopter drone back on Terra. There was no other way to really describe it. This would be his fifth flight on one

since arriving on this Earth. It almost seemed normal to him to fly in one. He held up his flat panel as his combination ID and flight ticket for a steward at the boarding gate who ushered him through. Aldin found his seat and snuggled down for the long flight to the other side of the world.

“SQUIRRELY!” cried out a very excited, high-pitched youthful voice. “LOOK MARLE! A SQUIRRELY! CAN I PLAY WITH THE SQUIRRELY!?”

Aldin inwardly cringed as he opened an eye and quickly sat-up. He did his best to not let his tail whip about in warning as the young black Labrador-like dog a little bigger than him tugged at his mother’s paw as she tried to guide him down the aisle to their seats. Its tail was whipping back and forth excitedly. The mother glanced at him with a look of apology on her muzzle.

“Lokis, remember, inside voice. We’ve got a long flight ahead. And that’s not a wild cousin squirrel. That’s the Em-bass-ah-der. We need to leave him be. I’m sure he’s travelling on very important business.”

Lokis lowered his voice. “But I want to play with the squirrely,” he whined.

Aldin cleared his throat. “You need to ask me directly, young Low-kiss.”

Lokis squealed with delight. “Squirrely can talk!”

“Of course I can. My name is Aldin.” He glanced at Lokis’ mom. “And I am willing to go play with you, but only after the flitter takes off and we have permission to leave our seats.”

“YEAH!” Lokis bounced in place and then put his loose paw to his muzzle and continued in a near whisper, “Sorry, inside voice. Yeah.”

Lokis’ mom looked at Aldin. “Thank you, Em-bass-ah-der.”

Aldin nodded as the two made their way to their seats.

There were six young children on the flight. In addition to Lokis, there was a bobcat, a fox, two raccoons and an otter. There was a sniff and touch session, that Aldin only agreed to after making sure it was alright with the parents as he wasn’t quite sure what was and wasn’t completely acceptable. The farm meet-and-greet had turned into a hug and petting session and he wasn’t sure if this would be similar or not. All six wanted to pet the “wild cousin” squirrel. Despite giving his name several times, they all called him, “Squirrely”. They did ask with coaxing from their parents and only petted him after Aldin gave permission. Some were excited with how soft his fur was compared to some of theirs. They agreed the otter’s was the softest

with Aldin's a close second. After that, there was a rambunctious game of tag/chase. The pups/kits giggled and cheered at Aldin's acrobatic agility/antics in dodging the others. After a click or so of play, Aldin dragged a large pillow into the middle of the play area and curled up on top of it.

"What are you doing, Squirrely?"

"Squirrely is tired. I need a nap," Aldin replied and let out a big yawn, covering his mouth with his tail.

Suddenly, a nap seemed like a grand idea to the others. They brought more pillows over and snuggled up to/around Aldin and each other. Before long all six were fast asleep. Aldin carefully lifted his head up long enough to look at the watching parents who mouthed, "thank you" to him. He smiled and carefully gave them a thumbs up before laying his head back down into the fur pile and going to sleep himself.

FIVE

"Hey, 'Representative Tree-Rat'! You've got a visitor!" The raccoon guard called out as he led Aldin through a clear heavy polycarbonate plastic doorway.

Aldin's fur bristled as he glared at the guard. "I take offense to that term, officer, and will not tolerate such language from you. I hear it from you again, and I will file a complaint with your superior. You will address your prisoner by his real name."

The coon shrugged. "As you wish, Embassahder. But as you'll find he'll ignore us. Enhray! Visitor for you!" The coon set a pillow down outside a barred cell for Aldin and exited through the plastic door, which locked behind him. The coon sat beyond that door where he could watch both Aldin and the prisoner.

Aldin sat on the pillow and looked through the very human-like barred cell, except these bars were polycarbonate instead of steel. Inside a curled-up brown, furry form lay on the pallet. Aldin cleared his throat.

"Go away," mumbled the form.

"This is quite the," Aldin paused trying to come-up with the word in Common, "pickle, would be the Terran term, you've got yourself in On-ray."

This time Enhray poked his head up and stared at Aldin a moment. "You!?" He sighed and lowered his head again. "Go away, Tree Rat."

“That’s Ambassador ‘Tree Rat’ to you, On-ray, or simply Aldin, your pick.”

Enhray sighed as he curled up again. “I have no interest in talking to you.”

“Nor anyone else, apparently.”

“Go away,” Enhray mumbled again. “Leave me be.”

“Why? So you can throw your life away in self-pity?”

Enhray didn’t bother replying this time and simply ignored him.

“Your wife, Fill-is, called, On-ray. She was very plez-ant to talk to. She told me everything, On-ray.”

Enhray didn’t even twitch.

“Fill-is still loves you. That’s why she called me hoping I would help. She’d prefer to have you home rather than to divorce you. She’ll be forced to do so soon if you stay here. Your kids need their father at home, On-ray.”

Enhray continued to ignore him.

“I am not going to leave just because you’re ignoring me, On-ray.” Aldin quietly scampered over to the electronic lock on the cell. He held his paw over it a moment, and as he expected, the light on it changed from purple to green. Aldin entered the cell, closing the door behind him and the light on the lock changed back to purple. Aldin scampered over to Enhray’s curled-up form and lightly poked him on the shoulder. “In fact, I am not leaving without some answers, On-ray.”

As Aldin did this, the coon guard fumbled with the outer door as he called out, “What the?!” He scrambled into the inner chamber drawing his sidearm. “How did you do that?! Get out of there! He already tried to kill you once!” The coon aimed his weapon pass Aldin at Enhray and the ready light on it turned off. He stared at it in disbelief. He lowered it and the light came on. He pointed it pass Aldin at Enhray and it turned off again. He banged the side of it a few times with his other paw. Whenever he didn’t have it pointed at his intended target, the ready light came on, but it turned off as soon as he pointed it again at Aldin and Enhray. He pulled out his personal flat panel with his free hand, tapped an icon, and yelled into it. “I’ve got a situation down here in Heraldes Block. I need back-up, now!”

Meanwhile, Enhray had jumped back startled by being poked on the shoulder. Aldin simply sat on the edge of the pallet and patted the space next to him.

“Come on, let’s chat.”

Enhray cursed. Aldin twitched his ears. It drove him nuts. Regardless of how much he worked on learning Common, cuss words seemed to pass in one ear and out the other without registering. He heard them, but couldn't remember them. Maybe it was because he didn't know the context of the slang used.

"You're one crazy tree rat," Enhray paused and added afterward, "Aldin." He shot his hands in the air once he saw that the coon guard had a weapon pointed at him. "I don't want any trouble, officer!"

"Finally, we're getting somewhere." Aldin glanced over at the guard. "That's not necessary, officer. You can go back to sitting outside the other door."

Other guards rushed into the outer chamber. As each drew their weapon, the ready light shut-off whenever they pointed it at Enhray, who was partially blocked by where Aldin sat on the pallet. Like the coon, they each stared in disbelief as the light would turn on if they lowered their weapon or pointed it elsewhere, and turn off when pointed at Enhray.

"Embassahder, please exit the cell for your own safety," the coon pleaded.

"I am perfectly safe. You can put your weapons away. Mr. On-ray is no threat to me." Aldin got up off his end of the pallet and moved closer to Enhray. "I could turn my back to him and I'd be fine." He did so.

Again, Enhray cursed. "Keep away from me, tree rat! I'm already in here for five years. You're trying to get more time added to it, aren't you?" Enhray continued to hold his paws up where the guards could see them and backed as far into the corner as he could on the pallet and away from Aldin. "As I already said, I don't want any trouble, officers. The Em-bass-ah-der," Enhray struggled with the unfamiliar word, "has lost his mind. I don't know how he got in my cell."

"They cannot harm you with their weapons, On-ray. s long as I am in this cell and breathing as I am in the line of fire. As the appointed Ambassador of the Terran Nahmakanta Free Squirrels, I have, I am not sure of the word in Common. In English it is 'diplomatic immunity' to Earth laws. Basically, your laws do not apply to me. As most everything here seems to be tied together through the world computer network, including the lock to your cell and their 'smart' weapons," he pointed at the guards with his tail, "that makes it easy for me to," he paused thinking of the word he needed, "flaunt, I think is the word. I can flaunt that immunity if I choose to do so. They can point their weapons at us all day long, pull the trigger and nothing will happen." Aldin shrugged. "They're no concern or danger to you while I am in here. And I am not going to leave you alone until you agree to talk with me."

"Please, Embassahder, get away from him," the coon again pleaded. "You aren't safe in there."

“Office, I am in no real danger here just as I was in no real danger back on the floor of Parliament when he leapt at me. He could lift me by the scruff of the neck, and I would still not be in danger.” Aldin continued to keep his back to Enhray and got close enough to where the pine marten could easily grab him as described. He turned his head a bit sideways to be able to see the marten. “Go ahead and pick me up, On-ray. I trust you, though they do not.”

Again, Enhray cursed as he was cornered. He couldn’t back away any further and he couldn’t dart around Aldin.

“I am not leaving your cell, On-ray, unless you either talk to me or you remove me from it.” The defiant squirrel stomped a foot for emphasis.

Enhray looked at the squirrel and then the guards. One eye and ear twitched a moment. Finally, he lowered his right hand and grasping Aldin by the scruff of the neck, slowly and easily lifted him. The small squirrel neither resisted nor so much as flinch as he dangled in Enhray’s grasp.

The guards all repeatedly cried out at Enhray, “PUT THE EMBASSAHDER DOWN!” while pointing their weapons at him, clicking them uselessly.

SIX

“PUT THE EMBASSAHDER DOWN!”

“So, On-ray,” Aldin looked at him from where he dangled in the pine marten’s grasp, “last time we met, you tried to attack this ‘Talking meal,’ which did not turn out all that well, did it? You got five years in prison thanks to me. Here’s your chance for revenge if you prefer to stay in prison. And if you’re quick enough you might even gulp me down in four or five mouthfuls before they can do anything about it. At least then you’d have committed the crime for which you’re trying to serve the time. Of course, if you choose revenge, then you will not go home to your family anytime soon. Are you interested in freedom or staying here in prison?”

“PUT THE EMBASSAHDER DOWN!”

Enhray held Aldin there a moment in thought. Just one quick slash with his free hand just like the suicidal tree rat suggested. It was SO tempting. He then shook the thought from his head recalling how his last encounter with this small tree rat ended. And last time the tree rat had one arm in a cast. That wasn’t the case now. Enhray cursed again and then replied, “I’m not that stupid.” He turned to the guards. “I’ll bring the Em-bass-ah-der to you. Don’t fire. You might hit him!”

He carried the squirrel to the cell door. He dangled him near the lock until the light turned green. He opened it enough to set Aldin down and then locked himself back in the cell and held his

hands in the air again. He mumbled another cuss word under his breath, which like the others, Aldin couldn't quite catch. The guards rushed forward with their weapons drawn and put the Aldin behind them. Immediately, the indicator lights on their weapons turned green. No one noticed the wet paw prints Aldin left on the floor.

"Please do not shoot him," Aldin calmly requested. "As you can see, no harm came to me."

After some hesitation, the guards slowly lowered their weapons.

"Crazy tree rat," Enhray mumbled. "Not happy seeing me in prison, you're trying to get me killed!"

"Maybe I am crazy, but you are now talking more than just 'go away'." Aldin waved his arms at the guards. "Please put your weapons away. They are not needed. Now that I have gotten his attention, may I have some privacy with the prisoner so we can continue our conversation?"

All of security but the raccoon slowly filed back out after glancing at the coon, who nodded. Once alone, the coon thrashed his tail back and forth as he glared at Aldin, pointing a finger close to his chest. "I'm only allowing you to stay because you are the Embassahder. But I don't care what your title is. Even if you were suddenly made Chancellor. If you pull a stunt like that a second time you'll find your tail out that door," he pointed at the door behind him, "so fast the rest of you will have a hard time keeping up with it!"

Aldin nodded. "I understand, officer."

The raccoon stepped back out, except this time, he didn't secure the outer door.

Aldin made himself comfortable again on the sitting cushion. "Now where were we before that interruption?" He pondered a moment. "Oh, yes, I was asking you why you are in there and not home with your family where you belong."

Enhray sighed as he paced in the cell. "Obviously you won't leave me be until I answer your questions. I pled guilty to attempted murder."

"Now why would you do that?" Aldin briefly held his tail up in a curl. (curiousflick)

"BECAUSE I [PG-13] TRIED TO KILL YOU!" Enhray bellowed as he glared at Aldin through the bars. He threw his hands up in the air. "There, I've confessed to you now! Are you happy? Are you here to gloat at me, Em-bass-ah-der Tree Rat?" He added the title in a sarcastic tone.

"No, I am not happy," Aldin replied calmly. "Nor am I here to gloat at you. If all I was going to do was gloat, I would not have put my life in your paws just now. Instead, I'd have just sat here and taunted you until I got a reaction. However, that's not my way, On-ray."

“Uh huh, right. You’d have just let me rip your throat out. If so, you’re crazier than I thought.”

“Now, there, you’re correct. I’d have tried to stop you, but by holding me by the scruff of my neck, I’d have been hard pressed to avoid serious injury. A squirrel’s reflexes are quick, but that’s one position that is difficult to defend from. Our combat training does not cover it ‘cause the enemy we face back home is not large enough to lift us by our scruff.” Aldin flicked his tail back and forth slowly a couple times.

“Anyway, back to our first encounter where you believed you tried to kill me. Did you really try?” He looked down at himself brushing at his fur and felt behind at the scruff of his neck with a hind paw. “You did not do a very good job of it. I came out of it unscathed. And I just gave you another chance. You had me in your grasp at your mercy and you did not even pierce my skin. After talking to your wife, I knew you would not, On-ray. You are not that bad a person the way she told it. Or she is a really good actress, and you just blew your chance at a tree rat snack.” Aldin (gigglechittered) trying to lighten the mood up. Enhray simply stared at him.

“Look, On-ray, maybe all you really did was pick a fight, huh? And then some over-zealous judge or,” he used the English word for the next word, “lawyer, or whatever it is you have in your justice system decided to press bigger charges, because of who you fought with despite Parliament’s charge of fighting-only. That was the only charge they wanted pressed. And for some reason you chose to plead guilty to the larger charge anyway. Sounds like you did not have a lawyer to advise you.”

“I leapt at you with the intention of killing you.”

“And you think I was not expecting that nor prepared for it? Back home some wild cousin predators tend to make that mistake from time to time with my people. They do not tend to make it more than once.” Aldin started tapping away on his small flat panel. “According to Parliamentary Rules,” he held the flat panel where the marten could read the text if he chose and paused a moment and (gigglechittered). “Yes, the very rules I had offered to let you reread just before I tossed your insult back at you and you jumped at me. Anyway, according to those rules, the maximum punishment for fighting on the floor of Parliament is 2 months prison time. It’s been a little over 2 months now. You have more than served an ‘appropriate’ punishment for that crime. So, why not fight the new charge?”

“Is this a trick? I got off easy at five years by pleading guilty. If I go to trial, it could be twenty.”

Aldin tapped his flat panel again read something, put an earbud to his ear and listened to ensure he was reading it right and then tapped something else. “According to this,” he motioned at the text on his flat panel, “provided I am reading and hearing this right as my ability to read Common is not that great yet, but it improves every day. Anyway, as the ‘victim’ of this crime, if the per-pah-tray-ter is found guilty, and I am not satisfied with the punishment, I can request a

new trial, with the understanding that the...per-pah-tray-ter may get a reduced sentence or be found not guilty and set free.” He looked up at Enhray. “I suggest you withdraw your guilty plea and request a new trial. Otherwise, I will as I am not satisfied with the sentence you received.”

Enhray bristled. “This has to be a trick. You want to see me serve twenty years don’t you?”

“No, Eh-ray,” Aldin responded calmly, “I want to see you go home to your family, leave this behind you, and get on with your life. I hold no ill will towards you. Live and let live. If your wife had not called me, I would not have known you were still in prison. Someone neglected to notify the ‘victim’ of your court date where you plead guilty.” Aldin again pointed out this was not normal based on the laws he called up on his flat panel. “If I had known about it, I would have tried to stop you from doing so then and maybe you would already be home now.”

“My wife is better off divorcing me and finding a new mate,” Enhray added dejectedly. “I lost my job. I can’t support them. Who would hire me after everyone in the world saw that fight?”

“She loves you and is ready to take you back. Why else would she call me and ask for help? I also had a muzzle-to-muzzle talk with your employer just before coming to see you. He is willing to give you a second chance, but you’ll be on probation for 5 months. Yes, I have been a very busy squirrel these past few days.”

The pine marten stared at Aldin in disbelief. “Why would you do this?”

“Look, On-ray, what really happened that day is that you,” he pointed at the pine marten with his tail, “were the victim, not me,” Aldin pointed at himself with his tail. “It was my intention all along to pick a fight with the first representative to storm down on the floor in objection to my being there. And I planned on it with the understanding I would probably spend two months in prison. I figured it was worth it to quickly prove that I am more than just a wild cousin who learned to imitate a few words of Common and,” Aldin shrugged, “it would have given me a couple extra months to polish my Common before addressing Parliament. My accent, at least to me, is not as strong as it was two months back on the floor of Parliament.

“It takes two to fight. You just happened to ‘volunteer’ to be the other fighter. Of as some of our human-Fudd allies would say back home, you were ‘voluntold’.” Aldin trailed off as he looked over Enhray’s shoulder rather than directly at him a moment as his eyes seemed to briefly go out of focus. “You do not know how close you came to dying that day, On-ray. While I was ready to leap or dodge aside from whoever charged me, I had not anticipated someone leaping directly at me. I had all I could do to pull back on the killing blow. My people have been at war longer than I’ve been alive. The combat training I went through was intense. It is more or less ingrained into me. It has to be. The most common attack by the enemy is to leap at us with claws extended. When the enemy leaps at you, it’s kill or be killed. You hesitate, you die. It is fortunate for you I hesitated because you do not look like a devilbunny. In some ways, it is also fortunate that you

slammed into the podium and got a concussion. If you had landed in the clear, turned around and leapt at me again, I do not think I could have held back a second time.

“If anyone should be serving time for attempted murder over that fight, it should be me, not you. Parliament chose not to punish me. Instead only you got punished. And,” Aldin shook his head, “you received five years for being made a fool of in front of a watching world audience. Now that right there is not fair and I am sorry it has come to this. That is why I am here to do what I can. I want to set things right. I have already declared your family wards of Nahmakanta so they are covered financially while we fight this. Provided, you would like to go home to them rather than continue to sit here and feel sorry for yourself.”

Enhray stared at Aldin and was silent for a while. Finally, he asked, “If I request a new trial, what exactly would you do?”

Aldin explained what he planned to do step-by-step.

“And if all that fails and I am right back here, possibly for twenty years.”

Aldin sighed. “I doubt you will wind-up back here. However, if you do, I am going to walk into that cell again, but this time I will spend the entire sentence with you or however long it takes until the charges are dropped. You saw how the guards reacted just now. Imagine what they’d do then.”

“You’re truly serious, aren’t you? Creator as my witness, you are beyond crazy.”

“Yes, On-ray, I am serious,” Aldin replied. “Crazy or not, we got started on the wrong paw. I do not expect you to respect me anymore now than that first day on the floor of Parliament. If you still consider me some trained wild cousin who learned a few words in Common so be it. But that does not mean I hold a grudge against you or anyone in the ‘wild cousin’ faction of that Parliament. Nor do I want to see anyone punished for something they did not do. Do we have a deal? Will you withdraw your guilty plea and go to trial?” Aldin held out his forepaw through the bars. Enhray hesitated a moment and then accepted it, shaking it once.

“So be it, Em-bass-ah-der Tree Rat.”

“I would not tolerate that name from anyone else but you, On-ray. However, you may want to be more respectful in court.”

SEVEN

“Court is now in session. All rise for the honorable Justice Stepin Perraul.”

A black bear in black robes entered the court room and sat behind the judge's bench. Even sitting, he towered over all present. After he sat, everyone else sat. He looked at the dossier on his flat panel and then looked up. "Bring in the perpetrator."

Enhray was escorted in by two security guards. The bear looked down at the pine marten.

"You've submitted a request to change your plea to 'Not Guilty' and receive a trial by jury. Your request is denied. Once a perpetrator confesses guilt he cannot uncon..."

The bear stopped in mid-sentence as the doors to the viewing gallery opened and closed. He watched a small gray squirrel find a seat. The squirrel noticed the bear looking at him.

"My apologies, your Honor, for my lateness. I hope that is the correct term. Like Mr. On-ray's original trial date, I did not receive proper notification about this hearing."

Judge Perraul closed his eyes a moment, took deep slow breath that was almost a sigh, and then reopened them.

"Then you will be happy to know, Em-bass-ah-der, that I was in the process of denying the perpetrator's request for a retrial."

Aldin briefly drooped his tail. "Forgive me, your Honor, I have not had time to read-up on the proper procedure. However, if you deny his request, I will file whatever forms are necessary for a retrial as is my right as the victim."

There were hushed mumblings among the few in the courtroom as again, Judge Perraul closed his eyes and this time sighed. He looked up again. "Em-bass-ah-der, please approach the bench." He glanced at the ferret sitting next to Enhray and a lemur off to one side. "The perpetrator's and government's counsels will do likewise."

Aldin made his way down to the bench and stood next to the ferret and lemur. Both of them towered over Aldin. The judge towered far above all three of them. "You may come up here. This sidebar conversation is off the record for now." All three climbed up. Aldin had all he could do to suppress his wild cousin instincts telling him to flee from such a large predator. The judge was larger than any bear he had ever seen back home. The bear quietly spoke so only the three of them could hear him. "Em-bass-ah-der, the perpetrator has already confessed his guilt. He cannot request a new trial."

"My client plea bargained, your honor, while still recovering from a head injury," the ferret interjected.

Judge Perraul glared at the ferret. "You'll only address me when addressed. You and the government counsel are only up here to hear what I say to the victim." He turned back to Aldin. "This is not your Terra or whatever you call your home. Our laws are different here."

Aldin nodded. "Yes, I understand that, your Honor. I have also briefly read through your laws/rules regarding trials. If the victim is not satisfied with the sentence, the victim can request a new trial. If you will not grant the perpetrator his request to a new trial, then I will file for one on his behalf. I am not satisfied with the sentence. It is too harsh. Parliament charged him with fighting on the floor, not attempted murder."

All three stared at him. The ferret tried hard not to grin.

"The perpetrator or his family hasn't threatened you in any way have they?" Judge Perraul asked.

"No, your Honor. In fact, I gave the perpetrator a chance to rip me apart in his jail cell two days ago. He had me by the scruff of my neck, but he did no harm to me. He simply removed me from his cell. I would guess you can find a report on it in there." Aldin pointed to the judge's flat panel with his tail. "You will also find there is no way for him or his family to bribe me. Parliament has yet to decide if I am allowed to work or not, so I have no account in your world banking system. No account, no way to get paid. All I have is the embassy 'charge account', but I've already tried to receive payments for speaking engagements through that with no success.

"As I said, I will file for a retrial as I object to the length of the sentence. He should have served a maximum of two months per Parliament rules. I understand the rules are different here. It would be much easier back at Nahmakanta. Back home, all I would need to do is request the charges be dropped and that would be the end of it."

All three stared at him.

"Please repeat that," Judge Perraul requested.

"Among my people if the victim requests the charges be reduced or dropped against the perpetrator, they are dropped or reduced accordingly. Of course we do not jail those found guilty as we are at war and cannot spare any paws to watch someone in prison as our numbers are small. I do understand the prison thing as humans use it back home. Among my people, the punishment meets the crime. A fight like ours would have resulted in several clicks to several hundred clicks of community service. Attempted murder would mean banishment from the colony. I could go on, your Honor. However, I will do whatever it takes to get Enhray's attempted murder charge dropped. If simply requesting to do so does not work here, so be it. If that means I need to submit a request for a new trial, then that is what I will do."

Now the ferret was smiling.

Once again, Judge Perraul closed his eyes a moment in thought. “Please go back to your seats, I need to do some research.” He stood up.

“Due to who the victim is, I need to do some research in my chamber. Court will reconvene in one klick.”

“All rise!” a security guard cried out as Judge Perraul departed through a door behind the bench.

Immediately, the lemur went over to Aldin. “Have you lost your mind, Em-bass-ah-der? He tried to kill you and you’re trying to have him released?”

“Counsel, as I explained to Mr. On-ray in his jail cell, I started that fight intentionally. It would not have mattered who it was that charged down on the floor to challenge me, I would have picked a fight with them to prove the point I am not just some wild cousin who was trained to speak a few words. Any sentence longer than he has already served is unjust and I will do whatever it takes to get him released.”

“You are crazy!” the lemur threw up her paws and stormed back to her table knowing she was going to have a difficult trial ahead if the judge granted his request.

The ferret then approached him. “I must look out for my client’s interests, Em-bass-ah-der. Is what you said up there and to my client genuine?”

“Yes.”

The ferret’s grin was extra wide.

A klick later, the door to the far chamber opened again.

“All rise!” a security guard called out. All did so as Judge Perraul reentered the chamber and sat down. Everyone else did likewise.

“I did some research and found that long before we were a united world, when the various regions were independent countries, most sent official representatives, what we call ‘Foreign Representative’ or as among the Embassahder’s people ‘Embassahder’, to those countries they had friendly ties with. If that foreign representative became victim of a crime, they had the right to have the perpetrator extradited to their home country to face trial under their laws rather than in the country the crime originated in.

“Technically, at the time the crime was committed, Al-den Bush-E-tail of Terra was not yet appointed, Embassahder of the Terran Nah-mah-kant-ah Free Squirrels. However, I will ignore

that as he was appointed to that position soon after. Per our sidebar conversation, the Embassahder has made a request that the accused perpetrator be tried under the rules of his home country. Unfortunately, there is no way to extradite the accused perpetrator to Terra as we do not know where it is nor have any way of making contact with Terra at this time. Our laws do not allow a charge of this magnitude to simply be dropped as the Embassahder has indicated would be allowed in his country if the victim requests it. As a compromise, I shall allow the accused to withdraw his guilty plea and go to trial. That trial shall commence in one week. Counsels, prepare your arguments accordingly. The accused perpetrator is, hereby, transferred from the region prison to house arrest until said trial.” He then looked directly at Aldin. “There is to be no further contact between the victim and the accused until the trial. If contact is made between the two, this compromise is void, the guilty plea will be reinstated, and the perpetrator will return to prison to continue serving his five-year sentence.” Judge Perraul picked-up the gavel on his bench and hammered it once.

EIGHT

An otter stared into a camera drone. “This is Jerrico, WNN, reporting to you live from outside the Alisferil Region Court House in Forestdale, where the trial of former Alisferil Representative Enhray, accused of attempted murder of Al-den Bush-E-tail, Terran Embassahder of the Nah-mah-cant-ah Free Squirrels...” For those watching the otter on their flat panels, the scene switches from the otter to a replay of the fight on the Parliament floor and then back to the otter. “...will soon start. Here comes the Embassahder now.”

The otter and several other reporters rush towards Aldin. Several security guards block them. The reporters call out questions. Aldin motions them to quiet down.

“I am here for only one purpose, gentlefurs. That’s to see that justice is served, which has not been the case here.”

“Embassahder, you didn’t find five years was long enough?”

“Five years is too long. Parliament charged Mr. On-ray with fighting on the floor of Parliament, which is punishable by up to 2 months in prison. He’s served that. Any additional punishment is an injustice. It is my intention to see Mr. On-ray is set free as he’s already served 2 months. That is all I will say on this matter.”

Aldin proceeded into the court house ignoring follow-up questions shouted at him.

Later that day, Aldin stood in a circle in the center of the court chamber as the ferret serving as Enhray’s counsel paced in front of him.

“Embassahder, is it true that you told my client in his jail cell that it was your intention to pick a fight with whichever Representative charged to the floor in objection of you being there.”

“Yes.”

“So, you planned all along to instigate the fight.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“There was a faction of Representatives that believed I was nothing more than a trained wild cousin. At the time it was as much as a third of Parliament. I needed to set that straight immediately.”

The ferret nodded and looked to the jury. “By the Embassahder’s words, it seems the accused is really the victim here.”

“I object,” cried the lemur serving as government counsel.

Judge Perraul looked at the ferret. “Sustained. Counsel will not try to lead the jury in their decision through conjecture.”

The ferret bowed to the judge. “My error.” He turned back to Aldin. “Embassahder, you do realize that by planning to start a fight you could have spent time in prison.”

“Yes, I understood that at the time and still do.”

“Will you repeat to the jury what those rules are, please.”

“Per Parliamentary rules, punishment is up to two months prison time for fighting on the floor of Parliament. Appendix A, Section 2C.”

“And you chose to pick a fight knowing you would be punished?”

“Yes, I expected to be punished. If I had been punished, that prison time would have given me two more months to improve speaking your language, which is so different from my own.”

“So, you planned all along to pick a fight to not only prove you were more than a wild cousin, but because you wanted more time to learn our language?”

“That is correct, Counsel.”

“But they did not choose to charge you.”

“As the record shows, no, they did not.”

“Do you have any idea why you weren’t charged?”

“You would need to question members of that session of Parliament why they did not charge me for fighting. I can no more read minds than you can, Counsel.”

Some in the jury chuckled, but quickly quieted after Judge Perraul glared at them.

“Very well. Maybe we’ll do that before this is over. Why exactly did you fight with my client?”

“He was the first representative to charge down to the floor and object to my presence in the chamber.”

“How did the fight start?”

“He called me a ‘tree rodent,’ causing those squirrels present to bristle at the insult. I think his exact words were along the lines of ‘That’s On-ray to you, tree rodent.’ It was in response to me using just his title as I did not know his name yet. I was trying to remind him of the rules of Parliament and that I had the floor. At that point, I could have tried to diffuse the situation. But I chose not to. As I said before, I needed to prove to the ‘trained wild cousin’ faction that I was not just a wild cousin. So, I pretended to not quite understand what Mr. On-ray said and pretended to assume it was all part of his name, and said it back to him. ‘By all means, take all the time you need Representative On-ray-to-U-Tree-Rodent of Alisferil Region. That is quite the mouthful. I will shorten it or we may be here all day resolving this. Would Representative Tree Rodent be alright?’ At that point he leapt at me. I easily defended myself thanks to my combat training. I believe it got the point across to several in that faction that I am more than a trained wild cousin. Of course, this was all captured on video.”

The ferret nodded and tapped a couple icons on his flat panel. “Yes, that is true. The jury has access to the video footage, though most probably saw it as it happened.” He turned to the judge and jury. “Your honor, I submit to the jury both my client’s and the victim’s medical records. My client received a concussion in the fight. The victim was unharmed.” He turned back to Aldin.

“Embassahder, what was your legal status at the time of the fight?”

“I am sorry, I do not understand your question.”

“When you fought, were you an Earth citizen or visitor?”

“Ah. Thank you. Neither. My legal status was under debate by Parliament. The Chancellor did recognized me as a visitor.”

“But not all present viewed you as such.”

“No.

“Some didn’t believe your story that you’re from another world, correct?”

“Another world, another dimension, or possibly as one theorized, another time. Yes, that is correct.”

“Instead, they believed you were nothing more than a trained wild cousin squirrel.”

“Yes, that is the impression I had. In my head, I labeled them the ‘wild cousin faction.’”

“And I can see why,” the ferret responded, looking at the jury and pointing to Aldin. “Members of the jury, please take a good look at the Embassahder. I’ll leave it up to you to decide whether or not he looks just like a wild cousin squirrel.” He tapped an icon on his flat panel and photos of Earth wild cousin squirrels appeared on flat panels throughout the chamber with measurements next to them. Most looked a lot like Aldin, though many had different colored fur. Most were close to the same size as Aldin.

“Why were you visiting Parliament?”

“Members of Parliament wanted to question me to determine my legal status. It’s not every day that a talking ‘wild cousin’ falls out of the sky crashing at the feet of one of your citizens.” Aldin lazily flicked his tail back and forth in amusement.

Again, there were some chuckles from the jury, which quickly hushed at a glare from the bear judge.

“I remind the witness,” growled Judge Perraul, “to simply answer the questions and don’t add embellishments.”

“My apologies, your Honor,” Aldin responded drooping his tail.

“And my client was one of those who viewed you as a trained wild cousin.”

“You will have to ask your client that, Counsel. I cannot speak for your client. I can only speak for myself. I would assume so as he objected to my being on the floor of Parliament within the Visitor’s Circle,” Aldin looked down and gestured the circle he stood in with his tail. “In fact it’s about the same size as this witness circle.”

The ferret nodded. “Very well. So, he objected to your presence in the chamber, at which point, you fought with my client.”

“Yes.”

“And your legal status had not yet been determined at that point?”

“No it had not been determined yet. I had just arrived in the chamber and had started to address Parliament from within the Visitor’s Circle when Mr. On-ray interrupted.”

“So, technically, you could have been a wild cousin for all my client knew?”

“Yes, if your client believed so. Again, you need to ask him as I can only speak for myself.”

“We’ll ask him when it’s his turn to be questioned.” The ferret nodded and turned to the jury.

“As the victim’s legal status was not yet established, how is it that a charge of attempted murder can be brought against my client?” He tapped another icon bringing up the law in question. “For a charge of attempted murder there must be a victim with legal status. Mr. Bush-E-tail didn’t have legal status yet. At that time, if my client was actually trying to kill the victim as accused, and my client believed him to be just a wild cousin, my client would have had a legal right to hunt the victim.”

“Objection!”

The ferret clicked a couple icons on his flat panel and the local hunting laws for wild cousins appeared on flat panels throughout the chamber. Wild cousin squirrel was highlighted on the list of species that were legal to hunt.

“Objection overruled,” Judge Perraul responded.

“Thank you, your Honor,” the ferret replied. “Of course, that may soon change. Due to diminishing numbers, there is talk of removing wild cousin squirrel from the list. However, it is currently legal to hunt them.” He turned to Aldin again. “Embassahder, where were you one week ago?”

“I was in this chamber.”

“Why?”

“Mr. On-ray was requesting to change his verdict and request this trial. As the victim, I had a right to be present.”

“Did you object to his request?”

“No, I encouraged him to make the request.”

“Why?”

“Because Parliament charged him with fighting on the floor of Parliament, not attempted murder.”

“If it was up to you, would you charge him with attempted murder?”

“Objection!” the lemur yelled.

“Overruled. The victim may answer the question.”

“I temporarily withdraw the question, your Honor. I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Very well, proceed.”

“Embassahder, our laws are different than those among your people, correct?”

“Yes.”

“One week ago, you explained that to the judge, government counsel and I. Would you please explain that again so the jury may hear it?” He gestured to the jury.

“Among my people, if the victim requests a charge be dropped against a perpetrator, it is dropped.”

“So, if allowed you would request the charge of attempted murder be dropped against my client?”

“That is correct.”

“Why?”

“As far as I am concerned, all we did was fight.”

The ferret nodded again as he turned towards the jury. “Unfortunately, as you know our laws do not allow a serious charge like this to be dropped. But as you’ve heard from the victim, even he does not believe my client is guilty of this charge.”

He turned back to Aldin. “You are the Embassahder of the Terran Nah-mah-can-tah Free Squirrels?”

“Yes.”

“So, by our laws, that makes you a Foreign Representative.”

“Per what Judge Perraul found in his research last week and granting On-Ray’s request for a retrial, yes. What you call a For-en Representative, we call an Ambassador.”

“And by the laws that govern Foreign Representatives as our Judge has found,” the ferret tapped an icon, “when a Foreign Representative is the victim of a crime he or she may request that the perpetrator be extradited to the Representative’s home country for trial. Why haven’t you done this?”

“I do not know where home is in relation to Earth, Counsel. Otherwise, I would do it. Judge Perraul was kind enough to allow this retrial because I cannot contact my home.”

The ferret nodded. “If there was some way to send my client to your people what would happen?”

“He would be brought before the Council of Elders. That is our version of your Parliament. The charges would be read. The per-pah-trait-or would be questioned and so would the victim and any witnesses. Judgement is made and punishment is handed out. That is, unless the victim requests one or more of the charges to be dropped for whatever reason the victim choses. At that request, said charge is dropped.”

“So, if you could bring him before your Council of Elders, you would request that the charge of attempted murder would be dropped?”

“Correct.”

“What of the fighting charge?”

“I would not ask for that to be dropped as we both fought. I would estimate we would each be assigned 100 hours, I mean clicks of community service on top of our normal duties. They would also probably remove me from the Ambassadorship and assign someone else.”

“Do any of your punishments involve imprisonment?”

“No. Our numbers are small, we are at war. We cannot spare anyone to watch someone in a prison cell.”

The ferret stared at Aldin. “What about more serious crimes? Like attempted murder?”

“Permanent banishment from the colony. For some that would be a death sentence. For others, they might still find some place among our human Fudd allies, but they would never be welcomed at Nahmakanta again.”

“Which wouldn’t really work in the case of my client.”

“No. As On-ray is not a Nahmakanta squirrel, that punishment would not work. I do not know what the Council of Elders would come up with in its place. It is of no matter in this case as I would request the charge to be dropped as I previously stated.

The ferret nodded. “No further questions, your Honor.”

“Government counsel may cross examine.”

The lemur now paced in front of Aldin. “At the time the accused leapt at you, he called you something other than ‘tree rodent’. What was it he called you, Embassahder?”

“He called me a ‘talking meal’.”

“At which point he leapt at you.”

“Yes.”

“And tried to kill you.”

“I do not know.”

“What do you mean by that answer?”

“Was he trying to kill me?” Aldin shrugged and flicked his tail. “Maybe or maybe not. You’ll have to ask the accused that. As I pointed out to his counsel, I can no more read minds than him or you. Whether or not he was trying to kill me, he failed, obviously. The records show I was unharmed in the fight.”

The lemur sighed at a loss on how to proceed with a victim that was cooperating with the accused. She sighed. “No further questions, your Honor.”

NINE

“The Government’s next witness is unable to travel here, but is in a court room in her home region,” stated the lemur representing the Government’s case against Enhray. She tapped a button on her flat panel. A three-dimensional hologram materialized in the witness circle showing a good rendition of Aouphril. Aldin was fascinated with the technology as he looked on. The image of Aouphril looked about. She looked off slightly to one side and stifled a yawn.

“This appears to be working at my end, but the flat panel in this room is to one side. So, when asked a question, I’ll be looking to one side. I’ll do my best to remember to look at the camera when answering questions, Counsel,” Aouphril stated. “My apologies if I look sleepy. It is the middle of the night in my time zone.”

The lemur nodded. She then started. “Please state who you are, where you are from, and your occupation.”

“I am Aouphril, mate of Orlan. I live in the Northeast Hills Region. I am a student in my final year at Nadowahoc College.”

“How long have you known the victim, Ms. Aouphril.”

“Since his arrival in our world approximately three months ago. I was the first citizen he encountered.”

“According to the records you spent time in quarantine with him.”

“That is correct, Counsel. Orlan and I both spent time in quarantine with Aldin. So did the doctor who tended to his broken arm and two orderlies who came into contact with him that first evening at the clinic.”

“While in quarantine, you watched the proceedings of Parliament?”

“Yes. Aldin was preparing to be questioned by Parliament. So, we watched the proceedings in preparation.”

“What did he say to you about that upcoming meeting?”

“Seeing some of the factions in the chamber, he feared he would be attacked. He warned me when it happened to be brave and do what I felt was necessary. I didn’t believe it would come to that, but it did.”

“There is video documentation of the resulting encounter,” the lemur stated. “However, I want to know what was going through your mind when the accused charged down on the floor.”

Aouphril lashed her tail back and forth. The tip blinked in and out of existence as it lashed out past the hologram sensors. “When Representative Enhray charged down on the floor and called Aldin a ‘Tree Rodent’, I was highly insulted. I was raised to give proper respect to other species. If I had used a similar term for another species in the hearing of my mother, she’d have twerked my ear so hard it would be sore for a week.”

“How did the victim react?”

“He didn’t react, which surprised me, for I knew he knew what the two words by themselves were. Then he said it back to Representative Enhray as part of his name. Enhray snarled calling Aldin a ‘talking lunch’ and leapt at him. Aldin rolled backwards, kicked-upwards with his hind paws and Enhray crashed into the Chancellor’s podium. It happened so quickly that the fight was over as soon as it had begun. I was too shocked to react at that moment.”

“But you did react afterward, correct?”

“Yes. Aldin surrendered the visitor’s circle and was escorted out of the chamber. I immediately stepped into it recalling Aldin’s instructions to do what I felt needed to be done after the fight. Not if there was a fight in his words, but after the fight.”

“And what did you say to Parliament?”

“I called shame on them for their failure to stop Enhray. I told them how we’d now be at war with Aldin’s people if he had been an official representative sent by them to us.”

“Thank you. No further questions, your Honor.”

Judge Perraul looked to the ferret. “Your witness.”

The ferret did not pace in front of the hologram as he had done with face-to-face witnesses. “Ms. Aouphril, you’ve known the victim since his arrival on Earth, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And you assisted him in preparing to face Parliament?”

“Yes. I now know more about Parliamentary procedures than I’ll ever need to know unless my name comes up in the Lottery.”

“And he was one of the witnesses to your marriage to your mate...” the ferret glanced at his flatpanel a moment, “Orlan?”

“Yes.”

“And the victim has continued to live with you and your mate since that time until the present?”

“Yes.”

The ferret turned to the jury. “Please take note that this witness is very close to the victim and as such, her testimony may be influenced by that closeness.”

Aouphril’s fur bristled. The ferret raised his free hand briefly. “My apologies, Ms. Aouphril. I do not mean to insult you. But it is a fact you have been very close to the victim since his arrival and the jury needs to know that.” The ferret brushed a finger upward on the flat panel, looking for something a moment and then nodded. “While in quarantine, what exactly did the victim say to you in regards to a potential fight in the Parliament chamber?”

“That he expected there would be a fight.”

“Regardless of what he did?”

“Yes?”

“Did he make any indication that he might start said fight?”

Aouphril hesitated a moment and then answered softly, “yes.”

“A little louder please.”

“Yes. Aldin said he believed the only way to get the faction of Parliament that believed he was just a wild cousin who was taught a few tricks to see he was more than that would be if there was a fight. He believed one of them would attack him, but if necessary, he’d start a fight to prove his point.”

“Per your testimony to Government Counsel, the victim knew what the terms ‘Tree’ and ‘Rodent’ were. Yet, he didn’t seem to react to them as every other squirrel in the chamber did when they were said in combination.”

“That is correct.”

“Yet he did understand the term. Per his own testimony here and in the video documentation,” the ferret tapped an icon on his flat panel and Aldin appeared on screen:

“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.”

“Members of the jury, the victim started the fight per his own testimony and that of Ms. Aouphril. He wanted the accused to attack him.” He turned back to the holograph of Aouphril. “Thank you, Ms. Aouphril. I have no further questions.

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 Ehnray 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

ELEVEN

“Government Counsel shall go first.”

“Thank you, your Honor.” The lemur turned to the jury. “Ladies and gentlefurs, there is only one decision you can come to. The accused is guilty as charged. He confessed his guilt previously in a plea bargain. One only does so if one believes they are guilty and believe they’re getting a better deal by not going to trial. During his time in the Circle, he confessed that he had pled guilty. There is no question of his guilt, which I’m sure you will agree to after deliberation.” She pointed to Aldin. “The victim is a kind soul and has requested leniency. You can grant leniency by reducing the sentence, but don’t let the accused get away with attempted murder.” She sat down.

The ferret immediately got up and paced in front of the jury, all the while making eye contact with every member. “My client should never have been accused of attempted murder. Even the

‘victim’ has told you he is innocent of that charge and if it were possible to extradite the accused to the victim’s home world, he’s push to have the charges dropped against my client. Parliament charged him with fighting, nothing more. As you have listened to the testimony of my client, the ‘victim,’ and others, it is clear that my client is the actual victim here and not the perpetrator. He was baited into a fight by the ‘victim’ who intentionally broke the laws of Parliament and hospitalized my client in the process.” He pointed at Aldin. “The ‘victim’ admitted as such immediately after the fight and again here in testimony! If you find my client guilty, you are only adding to the injustices Mr. Enhray has endured.” The ferret sat down.

Judge Perraul turned to the jury and gave them final instructions. They exited the courtroom.

The news otter stared into a camera drone. “This is Jerrico, WNN, once again reporting to you live from outside the Alisferil Region Court House in Forestdale, where we are now on day three of the jury’s deliberations in the trial of former Alisferil Representative Enhray, accused of attempted murder of Al-den Bush-E-tail, Terran Embassahder of the Nah-mah-cant-ah Free Squirrels...” he trailed off as he listened to something in his earpiece. “It appears the jury has made a decision. We take you now inside the court room.”

“All rise!” All did so as Judge Perraul entered and sat. Everyone else then sat.

“The jury may enter.” The jury did so and took their seats. Judge Perraul turned to the chosen spokesperson for the jury who remained standing. “Enhray, the accused, is charged with attempted murder of Embassahder Al-den Bush-E-tail. Have you have come to a unanimous decision?

“Yes, your honor. On the charge of attempted murder,” he paused,” we find Mr. Ehnray is guilty as charged.” The visitors’ gallery was filled with gasps of disbelief as security guards stepped forward to restrain Ehnray. “And.”

Judge Perraul looked at the spokesperson. “And?”

“While most present know our justice system, the victim, may not. So I will explain and then move forward with the ‘and’. While the jury is responsible for determining the guilt or innocence of a perpetrator on the charges presented to them, they may also determine other charges the perpetrator is guilty of based on the testimony presented in the case. As stated previously, Mr. Enhray has been found guilty of attempted murder. After long deliberations, we had no choice in that as he had already plead guilty to the charge previously. Even though it was allowed to be withdrawn, we could not ignore that. Per our laws a guilty plea cannot be withdrawn by the perpetrator.

“As for the ‘And’, though wild cousin squirrel is legal to hunt here in Alisferil Region, it is not legal to hunt it in the Capital District where the fight took place as the Capital District is a designated preserve zone. As part of his testimony, Mr. Ehnray has admitted to attempting to hunt the Embassahder whom he deemed a wild cousin at the time. So, in addition to attempted murder, we find him guilty of attempted poaching. The jury recommends a sentence on the lesser charge of three months prison time.”

Judge Perraul nodded. “And on the attempted murder charge?”

“Due to the status of the victim, Mr. Ehnray should get ten years.” He paused as Enhray’s wife started to weep. Enhray glared over at Aldin as the security guards held him in place.

“However, due to the request for leniency by the victim, we recommend the minimum sentence allowed, two years.”

“The jury has found that the perpetrator is guilty of two charges. The sentences shall be concurrent. The perpetrator shall serve two years in prison minus time already served,” Judge Perraul hammered his gavel once and then looked directly at Aldin. “Is the victim satisfied with the sentence?”

(chatterspit) “No, I am not satisfied, your Honor,” Aldin replied as his tail lashed out back and forth in agitation. “I am deeply disappointed. The humans of my world have a similar inefficient and sometimes unjust joo-dish-al system. I had hoped for a better outcome here.”

“Mr. Ehnray’s sentence has been reduced. However, if you are not satisfied, you may request a retrial as is your right.”

“No, your Honor. Based on what the jury’s speaker stated, I believe that would be a waste of everyone’s time at this point.”

The guards struggled in restraining Enhray. “We had a deal, tree rat!”

“Yes, Enhray, we did and that deal still stands. Please be patient. You’ll go home shortly. I promise,” Aldin replied as he pulled his personal flat panel off his back and started tapping.

“Embassahder, you don’t seem to understand,” Judge Perraul said. “The perpetrator will be escorted back to prison immediately as he’s been found guilty.”

“I understand, your Honor. However, he will not be returning to prison. I do not know if you have ever played games of chance involving,” he paused a moment and switched to English for the next word, “cards. I am not even sure if you have ‘cards’ here as I have not yet seen anything like it here. So, I do not know if the phrase I am about to utter will make any sense. I promised

Enhray I have ‘an ace up my sleeve’ should things go wrong at trial. I just need a moment, please.”

Aldin finished tapping a code on his flat panel. Against a wall near the judge a purple light came on one of the wall panels. Aldin went to it and held his paw where it could be scanned. Text appeared on screen requesting an eye scan. After the scan, Aldin blinked a few times from the bright light as the light on the panel turned green.

“Paw and retina prints confirmed,” uttered a female computer voice. “Please state the verbal password for voice print confirmation.”

Aldin uttered in English, “Found guilty, proceed.” He then switched to chitterspeak, “chitterchatterchitchit.”

“Voice print matches. Password accepted.”

A middle age vixen appeared on screen.

“You probably know who I am, but to make this official, I will identify myself. This is citizen Mara of the Northeastern Hills Region, a research chemist. I served as Chancellor of the 805th Session of the United Earth Parliament that ended just over 2 months ago.

“Embassahder Aldin Bush-E-tail has informed me that former Representative Enhray was sent to prison not for the two months he should have served for fighting on the floor of Parliament but for five years for attempted murder.”

“Parliament has its own sets of rules and laws that govern it outside of normal law. Those laws are in place to protect those who serve. For example, an employer cannot fire a citizen chosen to serve while they are away serving in Parliament.” Her eyes narrowed as she glared at the camera. “I am not pleased that someone overrode the recommendations of Parliament and I have filed a complaint with my current Representative. I promise you, this will be investigated as it is an attempt to undermine the powers granted to Parliament.”

“Though once again a private citizen, as I have served as Chancellor there is one power I retain for life. I can grant clemency to a perpetrator for crimes committed during the time period I served as Chancellor. The Embassaher has requested I use this power in this instance. I take that power seriously. As I informed the Embassahder. I have decided that I would only use it **IF** former Representative Enhray went through a jury trial and was still found guilty. Sadly, if you are watching this pre-recorded message than that has occurred.

“By the power invested in me, I, Mara, Chancellor of the 805th Session of the United Earth Parliament do hereby grant Enhray the Pine Marten of Alisferil Region clemency for any and all

crimes he has been found guilty of that occurred during the period of time I served as Chancellor. As this strikes all criminal charges from his record he is to immediately be set free.

“I need a minimum of three members of that Parliament to agree in order to make this grant of clemency official. It turns out I am not the only one to find this interference in matters of Parliament troubling. Following this message you will find twenty members concur with granting clemency to Mr. Ehnray. If I had had more time, I suspect I would have had more willing to concur.”

Mara’s image faded from the screen to be replaced by recorded messages from twenty members of Parliament, which appeared one after the other, all stating their name, what region they had represented during the 805th session, and that they concurred with the grant of clemency. The court room was silent as all watched. When the screen finally went blank, Judge Perraul stared at the blank screen and then looked down at Aldin.

“I have never heard of a Chancellor using that power before.”

“It was last used about seventy years ago to allow a dying perpetrator to die at home among their family. You may research it if you wish, your Honor, to make sure it is legal. You’ll find it in...”

“No need. I saw the steps you had to go through to initiate playback of the secure message. It is extremely rare to require more than two forms of verification.” Judge Perraul looked up and around the chamber. “As the charges in question occurred on the floor of the 805th Parliament and the Chancellor of that session of Parliament has granted clemency, let any records of the charges and punishment for Mr. Ehnray be struck from the records. He is free to go.” The bear hammered his gavel and the courtroom erupted in cheers from all except government counsel. She simply glared across the room at the small squirrel.

Phyllis and Enhray’s three children rushed down to the floor and enveloped Enhray in a group hug. When they broke up Aldin cautiously approached Enhray and offered a paw in handshake. Enhray refused the paw. Instead, he scooped the small squirrel up in a hug. Cameras flashed. “Thank you,” he whispered. “But please don’t ever come near me again, Embassahder. You smell too tasty. I don’t want to be tempted like that again.”

TWELVE-EPILOGUE

Aldin scampered about collecting butternuts as a camera drone recorded him. He buried some as a wild cousin would. Others he stashed in a small knapsack inside a hollow at the base of a tree, which put to bed any thoughts one might have watching the footage as to whether or not he was a wild cousin. When filled, he carried the knapsack to the hovercraft and emptied it into a larger sack. He then went back and gathered more. Karl the skunk watched footage of this on two different monitors. The leaves on the deciduous trees around them were starting to change color.

“I think that’s enough footage for today,” stated as he powered-down the drone and started to disassemble it in order to store it for the return trip.

Aldin paused, drooping his tail. “But I have not filled my sack yet. It’s only half-full. And these butternuts are wonderful.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Have you ever tried one?” Aldin quickly stripped the husk off one, leaving a little bit of yellowish stain on his paws and offered it up to the skunk. “Go ahead.”

Karl hesitated for a moment and then took the offered nut and bit into it and chewed slowly. It was softer than he expected and did have a buttery taste. He was impressed. “That is tasty.”

“Yes, and I think they will be even better after roasting.”

“You’re trying to turn me into a squirrel, aren’t you, Embassahder? First you talk about teaching me to climb trees. Now you’re getting me to nibble on raw tree nuts. Next, you’ll be getting me to gather some with you.”

Aldin scuffed a paw. “Well, I was not going to ask, but it would help me fill that sack quicker. But you have nothing to worry about. My father studied genetics, not me. I’m sure if he was here and you asked, he could transform you into a squirrel. Me, not likely.”

Karl stared at Aldin over the statement about what his father could do. Aldin simply shrugged, turned, and continued to gather butternuts. He called back over his shoulder, “And I have not forgotten that promise. I am serious if you want to learn to climb, I’ll teach you, but you will need to grow your nails out like the others.” His knapsack filled again, he quickly scurried to the hovercraft to empty it into the sack.

“I’m still thinking about that,” Karl replied as he packed away the monitors. “But we need to get back to campus.”

“Just two more trips to fill the sack.”

“Why?”

Aldin paused. “It is the wild cousin instincts in me. I need to gather food like this because,” he paused and said the next line in a very serious tone, “Winter is coming.”

Karl looked at him nonplussed. “So?”

Aldin shook his head. Of course Karl wouldn't get the reference. "A squirrel must always plan for the future. But I agree, we do need to get back, even if my sack is not full." (drooptail) "I will have to come back out later. In about a klick-and-a-half I have an appointment I need to keep with a law counselor."

"I thought you were finished with that trial a week ago."

"Yes, I am, but as I just said, a squirrel must always plan for the future. I need to get a will written."

"You have few possessions to worry about. What? Do you plan to leave these butternuts to your roommates?"

Aldin (gigglechittered) "I doubt they will last that long. Right now it is true that I have few possessions, but there is still something very important I need to make sure is taken care of."

"WNN. Our top headline this hour: Al-den Bush-E-tail has died. The small, wild cousin-like squirrel served in his role as Embassader of the Terran Nah-mah-cant-ah Free Squirrels for more than forty years. We'll have a remembrance after the rest of our headlines..."

Someone pressed the door buzzer interrupting the news. The pine marten got off his cushion to answer the door. Outside, stood a ferret dressed in a business suit and tie with a small hover cargo pod by his side.

"Can I help you?"

The ferret bowed. "I am Elizus with the Mustelid Law Firm in Forestal. Is Mr. Ehnray home?"

The pine marten wiped a tear from his eye. "Yes, my father is here. He is his death bed. The doctor gives him a day or two at most. He's currently resting asking us to leave him be for a little while."

The ferret frowned. "I see. My father represented him in court forty some odd years ago. After that case, he was hired on by the Nahmakanta Free Squirrel Embassy on retainer. I took that job over after his retirement ten years ago. Father passed away two year ago, so I know what you're going through. My condolences." The ferret briefly bowed again.

"It was just announced on WNN that the Embassahder died."

“Yes, he passed yesterday evening local time of natural causes. That is why I’m here. Your father is in the late Embassahder’s will. And should he pass, it goes to you and any of your surviving siblings. May I come in?”

The pine marten motioned him in. The cargo container followed a short distance behind the ferret.

“What is that?”

“The inheritance from the Embassahder. Is Mr. Ehnray lucid enough for a visitor?”

“We’ll see.” The pine marten led the ferret into a back room where Ehnray lay semi-curved up on a hammock bed breathing shallowly. His son went over to his side and touched his hand. “Father you have a visitor.”

Ehnray opened his eyes and focused on the ferret. “Do I know you?” he rasped.

“No, but you knew my father, Mr. Enhray. He represented you in court many years ago.”

Ehnray’s eyes widened a little. “Yes, I remember.” He breathed in and out a bit trying to build up a bit of strength. “You look just like your father and if I had known him while I was in the hospital, I would never have been found guilty. If I remember, after the trial, the Embassahder hired him. How is the Embassahder these days?”

“I’m sorry to say, Mr. Ehnray, he died last night. That is why I’m here.”

Ehnray blinked a couple times. “Really? I outlived him?”

“Yes. And he left you in his will. While, I find what he did highly unusual, I must respect my client’s wishes.” The ferret tapped an icon on his flatpanel. A quite young Aldin appeared on the entertainment panel on the wall.

“Hello Ehnray, or his survivors should I have outlived him.” Aldin’s tail flicked about briefly like he was waving it. “This part of my will I set in place about a week after you were granted clemency. If you are watching this, then I have passed onto whatever lays beyond this life. Among your people, cremation is the normal way your remains are disposed of. That is not the way of my people. We are not far removed from our wild cousin ancestors and remember our roots as a prey creature. Normally, we lay our dead in the open in the forest for predators and carrion eaters to consume.

“However, I recall in the trial how you said how much you enjoyed the taste of wild cousin squirrel. You asked that we never meet muzzle-to-muzzle again because I smelled like a tasty wild cousin squirrel to you, and you feared you would do me harm if we met again. And so I

offer you my body so you can enjoy the taste of wild cousin “tree rat” one more time. Well,” Aldin shrugged, “pretty close to it anyway. I would be honored if you were the predator to consume my remains. If you want nothing to do with this, I understand and hope I have not caused offense. In that case, my counsel will transport my remains to a forest preserve and lay them in the open.” The screen went dark.

Enhray started to laugh hard and uncontrollably, which turned into a coughing fit.

While Enhray coughed, his son declared, “That’s disgusting! Didn’t that tree rat cause enough harm to my father all those years ago! How dare he do this!”

“That little shit!” Enhray stammered between coughs and shook his head giggling some more.

“Excuse me, Father, what was that last word?”

“That was Ing-lish,” Elizus responded. “The late Embassahder’s native language. If I remember right, it is a slang term for scat.”

Enhray nodded at Elizus, looked at his son and rasped, “Alonzo, there is nothing disgusting about his request. His people are different than ours...” He closed his eyes a moment and caught his breath. “As I learned over time. A few months after the trial, he checked in on me via video. We talked regularly for over a year after that. He respected my request not to visit in person.” He paused catching his breath. “I learned a lot about him and his people. In the process of those video conversations, we taught each other a few cuss words and their context in each other’s languages. ‘Shit’ is a mild cuss word in his Ing-lish. I also learned a few things I would never dare utter for fear it would summon your mother’s spirit from the next life long enough to smack me.” He chuckled again and closed his eyes in thought.

“I will honor the Embassahder’s last request.” He paused a moment. “We’ll stew him. As old as he is, a slow cook method will ensure he is nice and tender when served. Alonzo, you and your siblings, mates, children and any grandkits on hand will join me. You haven’t lived until you’ve eaten wild cousin squirrel, even if it is just one small taste as there won’t be much meat on him, maybe a third of a kilo in total. The Embassahder may not have been a wild cousin, but he was awful close to being one. He smelled like one. I’ll bet he tastes like one.” Enhray drooled a little.

As instructed all of Enhray’s family present had some of the stew with their father that evening. He was more animated than he had been in some time as he ate the squirrel stew. They would agree that squirrel was delicious.

“WNN. Our top headline this hour, Enhray the Pine Marten, who once attempted to kill the late Embassahder Aldin Bush-E-tail, has died, just two days after the Embassahder. After the rest of

the headlines, we'll have a remembrance of this would-be assassin who was granted clemency for his crime..."

FIN

Author's notes:

No, that isn't the end of my story telling with Aldin. However, he insisted that you, the readers, know this part of his will. Considering my family history, timeline-wise, I guess he plans to outlive me (chuckle) as an addition 40-some-odd years would put me a good decade plus beyond the maximum age any male member of my family has lived to date.