

The Generous Gerbils and the Hungry Hamsters

by Adrian Farrel

There was once a family of gerbils so kind that they would happily interrupt their afternoon naps if someone passed by and asked for help. Thus, when two mice, fleeing their home for fear of a cat that threatened their lives came knocking one day, the gerbils welcomed them, took them in, and shared their food with them. Soon those mice had put their affairs in order and were working hard at scavenging and storing so that their contribution to the lives of the gerbils repaid by far the generous treatment they had received.

The gerbils were so warm-hearted that when they heard how a family of shrews had been washed out of their burrow by a flood, they immediately sent word to invite them all – parents and children – to share their shelter until the waters had subsided. So bedraggled and muddy were the shrews that it might have seemed unlikely that they could survive except by stealing from their hosts. But with a little love and care they pulled themselves together, cleaned themselves up, and asked the gerbils how they could best be of help. And since it turned out that the shrews were industrious and clever workers, in no time at all the gerbils were all furnished with new winter coats with warm linings and fine embroidery.

Once, a muskrat wrote to the gerbils from her home far away. Could she, she asked, come and stay with the gerbils, learn their ways, and study how they made their nests? She told them in her letter how she had heard of the great knowledge and skills among the gerbils and hoped to take this learning back to her people to improve their lives. Of course, the gerbils were delight to encourage this clever creature, and they taught her everything they knew. Before long, the muskrat was inventing new techniques developed from the gerbils' talents: new approaches to nest-building that made their homes more comfortable, more secure, and quicker to build. Before she left to return to her home, the muskrat was pleased to teach a new generation of gerbil engineers how to use her ideas to make better nests so that all gerbils could have happier lives.

The voles were always seen as a bit strange. They kept themselves to themselves, and spoke to each other in their own squeaky language that no one else understood. Only a few of them could communicate with the

gerbils, and even then there was often confusion, misunderstanding, and laughter. But every year, when the wild grasses ripened, a large troupe of voles would pitch up on the gerbils' doorstep to work long and hard collecting the grain sorting it and storing it. The gerbils were delighted to have this help because it ensured that they had enough put by for the winter. So they always welcomed the voles, finding places for them to sleep, making sure that they had plenty to eat, and sitting up late at night to watch the voles dancing their queer shuffling dances. And when the work was done for the year and first frosts threatened the lengthening nights, the voles would pack up their few possessions for the journey home to their families. The gerbils always sent them on their way with a generous share of the harvested seeds.

But living alongside and among the gerbils was a family of hamsters. They were honest and hard-working, but they were not happy. To their minds, life was just a bit too hard: if they could get something through work, it always seemed to them that they had to work harder than was reasonable, and certainly harder than others had to work. And it always seemed to the hamsters that the other animals might be having a better time or getting away with something. Why, they asked, are the gerbils so happy? Why are they so smug? How come the rules always work out so well for the gerbils, but the hamsters have to struggle? Why were the hamsters always hungry?

The Hamsters looked at the voles and they were resentful and afraid. "Who knows what they are saying to each other?" they asked. "They squeak and sniffle their meaningless gibberish: they could be laughing at us, or plotting and scheming. And they are eating seeds that could be ours, and carrying away grain that could be stored for us to eat in the long winter months. And those dances are just odd: no self-respecting hamster would dance like that."

It did not help when the gerbils pointed out how there was more grass than the hamsters and gerbils could gather on their own. It did not help to remind the hamsters how the seed heads used to rot in the rain and ice of winter, unharvested and wasted. The hamsters were hungry, and the voles had food.

The hamsters did not welcome the clever muskrat, either. For one thing, she was an intellectual and the hamsters could not be sure whether she looked down on them. But the hamsters were also reasonably sure that one of their own family could have benefitted from the education and assistance that she received. They suspected that she had stolen the secrets off how they nested and would take them away to benefit other muskrats with nothing coming to the hamsters in return.

The shrews, of course, were feckless, or so the hamsters thought. Obviously, when pressed, the hamsters had to admit that the shrews hadn't chosen to be born in a flood-prone land, but it was clear to the hamsters that no one with an ounce of integrity would choose to build their home in a place like that. The hamsters were certain that the shrews would be a drain on the resources of the community. "And just look at those filthy children. Keep your food well hidden," they advised each other, "or they'll take it from under your nose and we'll all go hungry."

Naturally, the hamsters were wary of the mice as well. The issue with the cat was, for them, a matter of a foreign conflict in which they should not get involved. "Perhaps," they argued, "the mice brought it on themselves. Maybe they should have followed the cat's rules and so avoided the death threats."

And the hamsters were also worried about the consequences. What if it turned out that the mice were disruptive discontents who fermented trouble wherever they went? What if there was actually no cat, or there was a cat but it had made no threat on the lives of the mice – perhaps the trembling and terror were faked just to take advantage of the generosity of the gerbils and the availability of the hamsters' food stores. And suppose that sheltering the mice only served to anger the cat, to draw its malign attention to the hamsters where they huddled in fear checking and rechecking their reserves of grass seed.

So the hamsters started a lobby group, a campaign, a movement. They called it "Grassland for the Grasslanders." "Keep the others out," they chorused. "We only have enough seeds for the hamsters and the gerbils. We must close our borders or we will all go hungry."

The gerbils were so shocked that they hardly knew what to say or do. "We are signatories to the Woodland Agreement," they reminded the hamsters. "We are committed to the terms of the Federation of Small Rodents. We have responsibilities."

But the hamsters would not give way. "We cannot be bound by agreements that others made in the past," they cried. "We must make our own rules and protect our own interests. We were never really part of the Woodland, anyway." And the environment became hostile: not only were the hamsters continually trying to exclude the incomers, but they bickered and fought with the gerbils who had previously thought them their friends. There were even suggestions that some small rodents were smaller than other small rodents and should, perhaps take themselves off to live elsewhere if they didn't like the way things were managed in the Grassland.

"This is no good," agreed the gerbils when they met in conclave. "If this goes on we will have a complete breakdown in our society. Let us put it to a vote: surely if we ask nicely everyone will agree that we should share the bounty of our Grassland, and that we should all benefit from the skills and cultures of the incomers."

So a great ballot was agreed. Each hamster and each gerbil would be issued with one sunflower seed, and they could decide as individuals whether to place their seed in the pile to "Keep Grassland Open" or add it to the pile to indicate "Withdrawal from the Woodland Agreement."

Then began a great debate. It was not a simple polarisation, for some gerbils were proud of their heritage and the long-standing partnership they had with their friends, the hamsters: they said they would vote to withdraw from the Woodland Agreement. And equally, there were hamsters who were more outward-looking: they saw advantages in cheap labour and the right to forage anywhere they wanted.

Sometimes the debate became hostile and heated because there were strong views earnestly and passionately held. Occasionally, to the shame of most respectable hamsters and gerbils, there were bad words and the threat of violence. Even, from time to time, one animal or another might have stretched the truth a little in attempting to win over the vote of the

opposition: maybe there would be an end to the fear of attack by ferrets; perhaps there would be more food available to make life easier for the old and sick; possibly the weather would be warmer once the gerbils and hamsters had control of their own destinies. Friendships were destroyed in the discussions as life-long relationships dissolved into acrimony.

At last the day of the great ballot arrived. Hamsters and gerbils lined up together to place their seeds in their chosen piles. A good number of creatures came to vote, although quite a few stayed home demoralised, disinterested, or having absentmindedly eaten their sunflower seeds.

When everyone who wanted to had set their seed into the pile they thought best, the counting began. Judging by the size of the piles it would be a close thing.

All through the night and most of the next day, teams of diligent and honest hamsters and gerbils worked at the count. Not even one seed was nibbled, and every one was counted. And at the end there was a result.

It was almost a draw, but by a narrow margin they had voted to close the Grassland to other animals, and to withdraw from the Woodland Agreement. The Grassland would no longer participate as a member of the Federation of Small Rodents.

Hamsters danced and cheered singing old songs and waving flags. But the gerbils went sorrowfully home despairing of the future. And the mice, and shrews, and voles, and muskrats began to sadly pack up their lives, preparing to go back to where they had come from.

And what happened to the folk of the Grassland after the vote? Well, the next winter was bitterly cold: cold enough to need a good coat. But where were the shrews to make and line those coats? Shivering in their burrows, the gerbils lamented their absent friends, while the hamsters cursed the meanness of strangers who refused out of spite to help them stay warm.

And then it was nesting season and no one could recall those clever tricks that the muskrat had taught. Rushing out into the world to ask for help, the hamsters and gerbils found they were not welcome where the

muskrats lived and they came home to make do and mend in their homes. The gerbils sighed for the lost knowledge and the hamsters decried the smugness of the elite muskrats.

Then the young were born and everyone was busy hunting for food. Every scrap was important with so many hungry mouths to feed. Mothers and fathers were worn out by the effort and wondered why it seemed so much more work than in previous years. The gerbils recalled their friends, the mice, and how much help they had been in the past. The hamsters grumbled and swore: they missed no opportunity to tell each other how cruel the mice had been to desert them, and how right the hamsters had been to not trust anyone from outside the Grassland.

But, at last, the seeds ripened on the stems and there was plenty for all. As they stuffed their cheeks with grain, the animals looked around for their helpers. Where were the voles? Had they been delayed? Surely they would be in time to aid with the harvest. But, no; the borders to the Grassland were closed and no one came. The gerbils and hamsters worked as hard as they could, but their stores were only half full when the rains and frosts came, ruining all that was still ungathered.

And so another winter was upon them. The coatless cold was compounded by empty larders. Everyone was miserable. Emissaries were sent out beyond the Grassland to trade and bring home what they could. But, to their surprise, they found that the most favourable deals were reserved for signatories to Woodland Agreement, while outsiders were subject to tariffs and taxes.

"But we are not outsiders," cried the hamsters. "You know us. We are the Grasslanders. We are great and proud." But to no avail. They found themselves subject to exactly the same terms of trade as the Riverfolk.

The gerbils sighed and tried hard not to mutter, "We told you so." The Hamsters railed against the injustices of the world and protested demanding an attack on their neighbours during which they would take what they needed. And everyone went hungry, everyone's life was a little greyer, and everyone reminisced about how fine things had once been.

These days the Grassland is a sad and divided place. There is hatred born of despair, anger stemming from hardship, and loathing of those who have been proven right or wrong.

The hamsters are angry but defiant. They don't admit they were wrong. They only find more evidence to support their decision. And they grow frustrated that the gerbils will not accept the result of the poll and the necessity of the way things are.

It is no comfort to the gerbils to see that their predictions have come true. They have lost their welfare, their community, their safety, and their friends. They are left wondering whether the Grassland can ever become a warm, hospitable, successful place again.

What will reconcile these factions? Is there a way forward? Or are the gerbils and hamsters to withdraw into separate groups, never trusting each other and never to be friends again. "If only they would just admit they were wrong," they all say.



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