

FIVE

As promised, Aldin translated the entire encounter as it played on screen. When he got near the end where she had held up her front paws, he paused a moment as he held up his own paws and wiggled his clawed fingers. It didn't take him long to figure out what she meant by holding up both paws.

"Your wild cousin squirrels are not as dumb as some may think. She may not have a lot of words, but she said a lot at the end with what little she has. Whoever gassed her and her brother, at least I think that's what she meant by male nestling...anyway, whoever gassed them didn't stick around until they were both recovered. As a result, her brother was killed by a passing predator. Seeing what happened, she said she fled for this many," again, he wiggled his ten fingers, "days before settling in the territory we were experimenting in. As you and Giguere confirmed, according to her chip, she was tagged 5 kamits from here. I guess an Earth wild cousin squirrel can cover that distance in about 10 days." Aldin paused for a moment. "I have got one question for you, Karle. You had a clear shot of her as she ran towards the tree. Why did you not spray her for biting me?"

Karle laughed as the small squirrel looked at him in puzzlement. "You don't know? I couldn't spray her if I wanted to. Unlike my wild cousins," and now Karle held his fingers up in quotes like Aldin had earlier, "'biggen' skunks don't have the required musk glands thanks to selective breeding over many generations a long time ago, which eliminated them."

"So, when she was concerned about you spraying her, you were bluffing in the hopes a bluff would be enough."

"Yes, Ambassador. Clearly she was afraid I would spray her, and clearly the bluff worked as she didn't bite me. From her body language she was fearful as she sniffed me. I'm sorry it didn't work that way for you."

Aldin shrugged it off. "Well, it is not like I had threatened her if she bit me."

They were all silent for a bit. Aldin started swishing his tail back and forth.

"You know, something about today's encounter just does not add up," he stated.

"What?" Giguere asked.

"Maybe it is my paranoid wild cousin side coming out. But there are a few too many coincidences here." He held up his left forepaw in a loosely closed fist, palm up, and using a clawed finger from his right forepaw, he uncurled one clawed finger on the left paw. "One, all the wild cousins in the study area are tagged and tracked. So, someone should have noticed this one relocated to its new territory prior to this past fall."

He uncurled a second clawed finger. “Two, we could have done today’s nut hunt earlier or later in the winter, but for some reason last fall, it was decided that today was designated as the date, half-way through winter, with the next couple of days as back-up in case of snowy weather. Back on Terra, that is mating season for wild cousins. Apparently, that is the same case here. I should have considered that when I was told when we would go hunt for the nuts. Then again, that would not have worried me much at first, as there was not supposed to be any wild cousins in the area we chose. But if I had paid better attention to the date, I would have never asked Giguere to leave me alone with that wild cousin.”

He uncurled a third clawed finger while looking directly at Karle. “Three, we got a surprise equipment upgrade today. Our camera drone was swapped out for this trip. We had a noisy older-style quadcopter this past fall and a newer, faster silent hover one this time. Last fall’s noisy one was perfect to keep that wild cousin from protesting and chasing me off during the fall harvest. And today...” he trailed off.

“Today, by having a silent one, you and she could be recorded without scaring her,” Karle finished. “And if you had less willpower, she might be bearing your pups now. I can see where you’re going with this, Ambassador. Too many coincidences, alright. Someone set us up.”

“Or set you up,” Giguere added. They all stared at one another in disbelief. “Surely, not Dr. Kaynobble?” Giguere said in doubt. “He’s been doing this research too long to risk jeopardizing it on something like this.”

“If not him, then someone pretty high up under him. Someone who either wanted to capture wild cousins mating badly enough to not care about getting me in trouble.”

“Or someone who simply wanted to get you in trouble,” Karle chimed in. “It’s not like it was a unanimous decision when Parliament appointed you Ambassador for your people.”

Again, they were silent a moment as these thoughts sunk in.

Aldin broke the silence. “I ask that neither of you bring up these suspicions with anyone unless I ask you to.”

“Why? This is serious,” Karle interjected.

“Yes it is. However, you both are to graduate this spring, and I don’t want either of you to jeopardize your degree over this.”

“And if someone asks how today went?” Karle asked.

“Act as you would have before I raised suspicions. Talk in disgust how months and months of work were ruined and then laugh it up about how the Ambassador is a lady’s man, if need be. Tell the truth. I could not keep her off me. Giguere had to gas us to separate her from me.”

“That could be difficult to do.”

“I take it neither of you have ever acted in a school play? It is all I can suggest at this time. When we arrive back on campus, I am having a meeting with Dr. Kaynobble. We will quickly find out if he is involved.”

“We’ll go with you.”

“No, I need to have this meeting alone. Besides, there is equipment to put away, image recordings to upload, and I am sure you will find other things to do that graduate assistants are expected to do after a trip. Again, you need to act ‘normal’. And who knows, maybe the guilty party will give themselves away. In the meantime, as soon as we are in transmission range, upload today’s video recording, but lock it so only Dr. Kaynobble, you two, and I can access it.”

With that settled, for the rest of the return trip the two graduate students did some studying on their flat panels. Meanwhile, Aldin called up map data on the tagged wild cousins and made some mental notes. Sure enough, the female was clearly identified as living in the zone they had been assigned to gather nuts. How come the three of them didn’t receive that information when they were assigned that territory?