

SIX

Aldin lightly scratched at the door as his claw scratching was louder than him knocking would be.

“Come-in, Ambassador. I wasn’t expecting you, but come-in.”

Aldin pushed the door open enough to scamper in, turned and shut it behind himself. He sat on a cushion and looked up at the raccoon behind the desk.

“Wonderful timing. I was about to open today’s video footage.”

“You may not like what you see, Dr. Kaynobble.” He sat quietly watching the raccoon’s body language as he watched what happened out in the forest preserve on his flatpanel. His tail thrashed back and forth in almost squirrel-like agitation. He had been studying wild cousin squirrels long enough that he didn’t need assistance understanding the rapid chitterspeak.

The raccoon finally looked up from his flatpanel and over at the small squirrel with disgust clearly written across his muzzle. He stood up and started to pace the room, suddenly stopped and stared at Aldin. “You weren’t even supposed to be out there today. I was expecting possible mating footage from a different group and not footage with you in it. At least you, somehow, resisted her.”

“Karle and Giguere kept level heads and were able to rescue me. I would not have been able to fight it much longer.”

“What were you doing out there today?”

Aldin tapped an icon on his flatpanel. “Exactly as I was instructed, Dr. Kaynobble”

Dr. Kaynobble looked at the instructions sent back to his flatpanel and scrolled back through them. “These aren’t right. Not at all. Here’s what I had assigned.” It was his turn to tap something on his flatpanel to send to Aldin’s. Aldin panned through them. The assigned territory was half a kamit further east and the follow-up date wasn’t for another two weeks. Aldin checked the time/date stamps between the two sets of assignments.

“Someone altered your instructions before they got to me. See here. 15 ceklicks different on the time/date stamp if I am reading this right.”

“That’s not a lot of time to perform this level of sabotage.”

“Unless someone planned it in advance.”

“Who would do that?”

“Obviously, someone who has access to your data. Have you made any enemies among your staff? Maybe upset a graduate student? Or perhaps someone does not like me.”

“And risk shutting down our project over it?! You have any idea what would have...”

“I quite clearly understand, Doctor,” Aldin cut-in. “Coupling with a wild animal is as much against the laws of my people as it is here, even when it is the wild animal that initiates the process. Even though I have got diplomatic immunity, an act like that and Parliament would quickly strip me of the job of Ambassador.” He used the English word for his title instead of the Common one. “Why do you think I fought against her attempts as best as I could?” Now Aldin started to pace back and forth. “You have any clue how hard it was for me? She **CHOSE** me! One does not easily say no when a female chooses you.”

“A little bit,” Dr. Kaynobble replied quietly. “Having studied wild cousin squirrels as long as I have, and thanks to your cooperation, I know you aren’t much different physically from them, just smarter with more mental capacity. You’re genetically compatible, amazingly, considering you’re from another world.”

Aldin paused at that. “Thank the Spirit, Giguere and Karle came to the rescue then.” He paused a moment trying to get back on his previous train of thought. “Obviously, I have most, if not all the same instincts. My kind have learned to suppress them to a point. But that only works for so long. I was drowning in her scent and attention. Instinct was about to win when I was gassed.” Aldin paused in his own pacing a moment, shuddered while flicking his tail back and forth.

“Not to change subjects, Doctor, but there is one thing that has puzzled me through all of this since I first agreed to assist you. Please do not take this the wrong way.” He looked up at Dr. Kaynobble, “Why would a raccoon be so interested in researching wild cousin squirrels?”

Dr. Kaynobble chuckled. “No offense taken, Ambassador. I’m surprised it took you this long to ask that question.” He paused and sagged his shoulders a little. “There are very, very few wild cousin raccoons left in the world. They will probably die out in the next fifteen to twenty years. There’s not enough genetic diversity left among them for a viable population unless we were to capture all of them, move them into one place and carefully breed them. Wild cousin raccoons tend to be solitary creatures, so that wouldn’t work out too well. No one knows why their numbers have dwindled. Now wild cousin squirrel numbers are on the decline. But it’s not too late yet for them. That’s one of the reasons I chose to study them. I may not be able to save my wild cousins, but maybe I can save the squirrels.”

He stepped closer to Aldin. “And deep down,” he continued in a near whisper and paused a moment looking towards the door and then back at Aldin. “Deep, deep down I feel like I should have been born a squirrel and not a raccoon.”

Quietly, Aldin asked, “And this is not widely known, is it?”

“No.”

“Yet, you trust me with this, I assume, secret.”

He did his best imitation of an (affirmativeflick) with his ringed tail.

“And that sort of thing is frowned upon here?”

“It can be to some...” Dr. Kaynobble trailed off as he reached the same conclusion. “Someone knows who doesn’t like it.”

“Possibly. What better way to discredit you, your work, and the work of your students. As to who, as I said to Giguere and Karle, maybe they will let slip who they are soon. In the meantime, I need to borrow a hovercraft and some field equipment.”

“Why?”

Aldin explained what he believed he needed to do.