

THREE

That was too fast, Lady Slipper thought two days after the incident as the Council of Elders reassembled. In addition to the Council, there were three other squirrels present, one with a white pelt, but he wasn't an albino as he had eyes as black as any other squirrel present. There were some tales about the heritage of his family, similar to Lady Slipper's, but they were not spoken of much out of politeness, just as no one talked about Lady Slipper's. This was Cloud(chitter), a mentat as they called their scientists. His specialty was genetics. All those present nodded to one another in greeting. Lady Slipper called the group to order as she turned first to Cloud(chitter).

"Mentat, can I assume you're here because your son was involved in this?"

(affirmativeflick) "From what we've been able to determine, he was the only squirrel involved." He thrashed his tail around in agitation.

"Do you know if he is alive or dead?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Councilor. I warned him on several occasions dabbling in that type of science was dangerous," he snapped before calming down a bit. "I'm sorry. I'm just upset. He's missing. We don't know if he's alive or dead."

"What do you mean?"

"Whatever he was dabbling in over at the old lab, he got in over his head," he paused, "WAY over his head." He waived to the other two squirrels. "Oakleaf and Nimblepaw can explain better."

Both nodded and Oakleaf began. "I'm on the emergency crew as you are probably aware. As soon as I could get over to the old lab after the quake, I put on my safety gear, but did not enter the lab in fear it was not safe. I sent a tethered drone in first. It looked safe, so I entered alone. Protocol usually requires two to go, but after that tremor, I didn't want any more lives on the line should the place collapse around me." He passed out some modified smartphones as the screens were squirrel-size. The others scrolled through the photos he and the drone had taken. "I believe an explosion is what triggered the earthquake and slide. An explosion that could trigger that magnitude should have caused the place to collapse on itself. Somehow, it didn't. The fluffers overbuilt it better than we previously believed." He shook his head and continued, "As you can see, the explosion wrecked most of the lab equipment and blew out the steel, reinforced door, yet the support columns somehow held. But this wasn't a normal explosion either."

"No, it isn't," Birch, a member of the council, chimed in. "You said it blew out the steel door, but in these photos, it's inside the lab. Did you misstate what happened? Wouldn't the force of

the explosion only send things outward? There's nothing it could have ricocheted against. You should have found it down the hallway and not in the lab."

"You are correct, Councilor," Oakleaf replied. "Some of the evidence left behind makes no sense. It wasn't the only thing odd. I also found a small section of the floor missing...fifth photo."

He paused as the others stared at the photo, which showed a small perfectly round-out indentation in the floor. The tip of a squirrel tail laid in the depression along with a few conifer branch tips.

"The only guess I can provide is that it was an explosion followed immediately by an implosion." He turned to Nimblepaw.

"Biolab ran DNA tests on the tail. It is Aldin the younger's. What was odd was the conifer branch tips. They look like, feel like, and faintly smell like white pine. But DNA analysis shows they aren't. You've got me as to what it is. Maybe a distant cousin to white pine?" He passed one of the branch tips around. "Whatever this is, what was it doing there? There shouldn't have been anything in there after that explosion/implosion/whatever it was that happened, except maybe some ash residue on the walls." He turned to Cloud(chitter), "Sorry for being so frank, Mentat. If Aldin survived whatever happened in there, my best guess is he," he paused, "well most of him, is wherever those branch tips came from."

"I...see," Lady Slipper replied. She felt a headache coming on. Maybe it was time to find someone to take her place on the council. "What exactly was Aldin studying over there?"

"Physics," Cloud(chitter) responded. "And not basic physics. Quantum mechanics, superconductors, or something like that." He threw his forepaws in the air. "Nothing I quite understand other than knowing him, he was probably fooling around with some leftover devilbunny tech." (chatterspit) "You know how dangerous that can be."

Yes, I need to retire, Lady Slipper thought to herself as she sighed. "Yes, Mentat, we are all aware how dangerous messing with devilbunny tech can be. I'm going to guess that you're going to tell me that no one else would be able to explain what it was he was up to, even if you could break the code to get into his notes."

This time Cloud(chitter) sighed as he drooped his tail. "You are partially correct, Councilor. While I'm confident someone here could hack his password and decipher his notes, if they are coded, we'd have to involve our Fudd friends to find an expert in physics, quantum mechanics or whatever it was Aldin was dabbling in to try and understand what happened."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Lady Slipper replied. She turned to the others who had kept silent through all of this. "We need to get to the bottom of what Aldin the younger was up to. If he's

still alive out there somewhere, we owe it to him to try and find him. If he's dead, provided we can determine that one way or the other, we still need to learn exactly what he did to prevent others from making the same mistake in the future. Any questions or concerns?" The others remained silent as Lady Slipper paused. "So, we're in agreement?"

The rest of the Council flicked their tails up and down once in agreement.

Lady Slipper turned back to Cloud(chitter), "Do what you need to do to get into his notes. If we do determine he didn't make it, on behalf of the Council, please accept our condolences for your loss. I will make a call to Colonel Pomerleau about seeking some expert help in the subject."