

People stared at him and his vehicle. Eugene Pomerleau didn't care. He loved his old car. The 1990 Chevy Caprice Estate station wagon chassis he was driving was Frankensteined onto a jacked-up pick-up truck undercarriage. On the front was the hydraulic lift system for a Fisher™ snowplow. Being July, the plow wasn't attached at the moment. It was sitting on blocks back at Maine Fudd headquarters. The magnetic sign on the door listed his consulting company, *Maine-ly Weathah*. His Maine vanity plates read, "DA BEAST". He had wanted "MOXIE" or some variation. Alas, there were many people in Maine who loved Moxie™ soft drink and all variations were taken. So, he settled for the nickname of his previous station wagon, though this one was more fitting of the name.

He followed the signs through Durham, New Hampshire to the University of New Hampshire campus. After getting directions from the security guard at the edge of campus, Eugene proceeded to the parking lot he had been directed to and displayed the permit on the dash as instructed. He walked through the parking lot and past three buildings looking for DeMeritt Hall. After finding it, he entered and looked for the physics department. He found the department office, introduced himself to the administrative assistant on duty who called the professor he was here to see.

"Eugene? Is it really you?" The speaker was a white male about forty. Skinny, but better dressed than one would expect from a science professor, especially in the summer season.

"Yes, Curtis. Long time, no see. It's been what? Twenty years?"

"Just about, since George's Eagle Scout ceremony in Connecticut. You drove to my house in Wentworth. We all piled in your old station wagon and carpooled down together and back. Mom put you up for the night."

"Back when I was a student at Plymouth State and an Assistant Scoutmaster in your troop, I promised all of you there, that if any of you made Eagle Scout, I would do my best to be present at your ceremony regardless of where I was in the country. And I kept my promise to the three of you in that group who did make it."

"I know, but you didn't keep in touch afterward," he replied with a bit of disappointment in his voice as he pointed to Eugene's graying temples. "Neither of us are getting any younger. It's because of you I stuck to the program, earned Eagle, and won an Eagle Scout four-year scholarship. If it weren't for you as a mentor, I wouldn't have been able to afford to pursue my first degree in physics, never mind go on to what I'm doing today."

Eugene sighed. "I know." He looked about. "But this isn't the place to explain that. Do you have some place either private or very noisy?"

"I haven't had lunch yet. I know just the place. It's within walking distance, just off campus."

Fifteen minutes later, they were at a table in a little hipster bar just off campus with an 80's-theme decor. As promised, it was noisy, even in July at lunch time. Between the lunch crowds conversing together and the 80's hairband music blaring on speakers, it was difficult to hear much of anything past the other side of the table. They placed their orders. After the waitress left, Curtis didn't waste time. "This is about the rabbits, isn't it?"

Eugene sighed. He never liked trying to bring others into the Secret War™. "What do you know about them, Curtis?"

"I was attacked by one while working on my Ph.D. at Tufts back in '99." He pointed to his left foot. "I lost the smallest toe. Fortunately, I was holding a can of Moxie at the time. It spoke and said something along the lines of I must die 'cause I knew you. It leaped and bit my toe. I dropped the Moxie and it splashed on it. It uttered a blood-curdling cry as it started smoking. I ran for it. The toe was badly mangled and had to be amputated. A few days later, a tall, slender man in a trench coat visited me in the hospital. He explained about the devilbunnies and the Army of Fudd. He asked if I'd like to join. I passed. He left it be at that, warning me that it may not be so easy for me to stay under the buns' 'radar' after my encounter. When I was discharged, I learned my medical bill was paid in full anonymously."

"He was supposed to watch you more closely than that. No bun should have gotten anywhere near you. I'm sorry, Curtis. That's why I've stayed away all this time. I'm near the top of their hit list. I need to stay away from you and the others for your own safety." Eugene paused as he saw the waitress approaching with their meals.

As soon as it was set before him, he bit into his Rueben sandwich. It was near perfect. He chewed for a moment waiting until the waitress left. "I first encountered them in grad school at Texas Tech. I had no choice but to join the Fudds. Otherwise, I wouldn't be alive today." He took another bite.

Curtis looked at him. "I have no more interest now in joining than back then. I pretend I know nothing and it's worked so far. I've got a wife and three kids."

"That's fine. It's not really why I'm here. I am looking to recruit you, but not for the Army of Fudd. One of our allies needs to hire a physics expert for a one-time consultation. Maybe a couple of days. They'll pay the standard consulting fees, all your travel and put you up at an old fashion Maine sportsman camp for a week."

"Who are they?"

"Squirrels," Eugene said like it was something normal to say and then bit into his sandwich again.

Curtis almost choked on his fish tacos. "You're pulling my leg."

“No. I’m seriously, Curtis. How much did the man in the trench coat tell you about the devilbunnies?”

“They’re intelligent. Evil. Want to rule the world. Fangs and claws like Monty Python’s Rabbit of Caerbannog. Technology a bit ahead of ours.”

“A bit?” Eugene stared across at Curtis. “They use nanites, Curtis.”

“Nanorobotics? The rabbits have nanorobotics?” Curtis set down his taco so as not to lose his grip on it.

“Yes. They used them to alter the genetics of some squirrels and then enslaved them as tunnel diggers and to do other menial labor. That was about thirty years ago.”

Now Curtis was thankful he had set down his taco. *THIRTY YEARS AGO?!* He thought in his head. *The recruiter had said the bunnies had advanced technology, but he never said how advanced.* He shuddered.

Eugene paused. “I’m sorry if I’m distressing you.”

“No, no, go on. I’m just trying to wrap my head around them having nanorobotics for thirty years.”

“Maybe longer. That’s just when we know they used them on squirrels. They did so because it’s easier to order a smart slave to do its work as opposed to a ‘dumb’ animal. Some of those squirrels successfully rebelled and escaped. Their descendants have settled at a former bunny lab facility in the Maine wilderness near this sporting camp.” Eugene slid a business card across the table to Curtis. There was a picture of a rainbow trout jumping out of a lake on it. It read:

Nahmakanta Sporting Camps
American Plan – Reasonable Rates
Open year round
207-555-7453

“They had some sort of physics-related accident at their facility. Problem is, their physics expert was the casualty. So, no one understands what happened. They want to know what happened, so they can prevent it from happening again. Basically, they need the squirrel-equivalent of an OSHA¹ investigation. They’ve gathered the evidence. But they don’t have the expertise to analyze it.”

“Do you know how absurd that sounds, Eugene? Intelligent squirrels practicing physics?”

“No more absurd than a talking bunny saying you must die because of who your assistant scoutmaster was, which then leaped at you, and bit off a toe, before uttering a death scream as he dissolved under the Moxie™ you spilled on him.” Eugene paused a moment. “Moxie™ burns’em like strong battery acid. Don’t ask me how, Curtis. It just does.”

“Touché. Alright, so these squirrels are your allies against the rabbits and they need help investigating an accident. Why me, Eugene?”

“You know about the War, like it or not, which makes my job helping my allies easier as I don’t first have to figure out whether or not I can trust the person I approach knowing about the War. You have a Ph. D. in Physics and Mechanical Engineering. And most importantly,” he looked at Curtis, eye-to-eye. “I know and trust you even though I have kept my distance. If I trust you, they can trust you.” He sipped his ice tea. Not his favorite, but it was what they had other than Pepsi™ products. “Look, just think about it. If you take the gig call the number and ask to book a cabin for the week on the Oakhurst Dairy account. You’ll need the password on the back, which will only be accepted once. Start and end dates of your visit don’t matter. The owner knows he has ‘escaped smart lab animals’ for neighbors and has a specific cabin, Maple Leaf, set aside for their visitors and that’s all he knows. If my allies don’t hear from you within the next two weeks, they’ll assume you passed on the offer and I’ll need to go look for someone else.”

Despite Curtis’ protests, Eugene paid for both of their lunches. They walked back to campus and to the parking lot. Curtis just shook his head at Eugene’s current vehicle.

Eugene turned back to Curtis one last time. “I may not see you again. It’s for your and your family’s safety that I keep my distance. If you choose not to assist my allies, I won’t be offended. I simply believed you were the best person to approach first.”

They shook hands, and Eugene drove off. Curtis stared after the jacked-up station wagon as it turned a corner and out of site. He then looked down at the business card in his hand.

1-OSHA: Occupational Hazard & Safety Administrative for any non-Americans reading.