

Two days later, Curtis was canoeing down the lake. He still thought he was crazy, but he was also curious. He hoped he didn't regret doing this. He beached the canoe where he had been instructed and by the time he had it up in the bushes and grabbed his daypack, there was a squirrel perched on a branch waiting for him. He stared for a moment. Was that a small crossbow across his back?

"I take it, you're my guide from here?"

It didn't speak to him. It simply indicated with its tail he was to follow, which he did. By his estimate they hiked inland away from the lake and a little uphill for a quarter mile. Curtis now noticed other squirrels in the trees about him. They were all watching him. It was unnerving. He and his guide came into a small clearing with a huge old white pine tree near the center. On some of the lower branches eight or ten squirrels sat watching him. He recognized Lady Slipper.

"Welcome to the real Nahmakanta, Dr. Curtis Devon. Thank you for accepting our request. If after reviewing the data we can provide, you chose to back-out, we won't be offended. We'd prefer to work with those who are comfortable working with us. What I said back at the cabin would still stand. You'd still be welcome to spend the rest of the week before leaving. We'd still cover the lodge bill. As you've come here today, regardless of your final decision, we'll still pay one day of your consulting fees. You'll also find your truck rental has been covered and your card has been reimbursed. We try to treat our business partners well."

Curtis raised one eyebrow. He was impressed. Deep down he was also a little nervous that they not only knew which rental company he used, but they were somehow able to switch payment on the rental.

A different squirrel to Lady Slipper's left spoke. "Can we drop the formalities now? Let's show our guest to the large conference room where we can discuss business further."

Lady Slipper glanced at the speaker and then the others who all nodded. "Curtis, I hope you're in good shape. The human entrance into the facility is another quarter mile up hill. Springtail, the scout who led you here, will show you the way. We'll see you inside."

Lady Slipper and the others darted off through the trees. Curtis stared after them. "Wow," he quipped.

"Chit, chit." Curtis looked up and saw the scout, Springtail, waiting for him on a tree branch at the far side of the clearing. Yes, that was a crossbow on his back. "Elders waiting. This way," it spoke rapidly and darted off uphill, tree by tree. Curtis followed as best he could. The squirrel was fast, of course. A quarter-mile uphill Springtail was sitting on a branch waiting. He pointed with his tail at a large, moss-covered granite boulder. "Lift."

Curtis shook his head in disbelief. The boulder was larger than him. There was no way he could lift that. Except as he got closer to it, he realized it didn't look quite right. He found a hand-size indentation near the base and lifted up the hollow plastic stone to reveal a set of stairs going down.

Springtail leapt down and started down the passageway. He turned back. "Follow. Be sure you close the door," he paused a moment, "please," and flicked his tail.

Curtis shook his head and did as he was told whistling the tune from *The Twilight Zone* under his breath. The passageway was well lit and just tall enough for him to walk through. After several turns and crossways, Springtail led him to a door marked "CR Almond". He suppressed a chuckle. Of course, they'd use trees or nuts for the room names. He turned to thank Springtail, but he was already gone. He opened the door and looked inside. All the squirrels who had been in the branches of the large white pine were sitting on the floor around a squirrel-height conference table (basically, a table top) and looked at him as he walked in. There was one human chair at his end of the room and a small human-height desk. There was a bottle of water, a notepad and pen on the desk. He would have laughed at the absurdity of it if it wasn't real.

"We try to accommodate our human guests the best we can," Lady Slipper said.

"Forgive me if I stare, this is too much like something out of *The Twilight Zone*."

"Old human science fiction television show, right?"

"Yes."

"I've heard of it, but never seen it. I tried watching some of your video entertainment once, but it didn't make a lot of sense to me."

Curtis thought about that for a moment. "I suppose that would be the case."

"We understand if you're a bit bewildered. We're meeting down here as it has better audio-visual equipment than anything portable we could bring up to our meeting tree. Do you want introductions of all present, or would you prefer to get down to business?"

"You're the client. I'll leave that up to you."

Lady Slipper glanced around at the others present. All swished their tails up and down once. "Alright, we'll skip introductions," Lady Slipper stated. "If someone speaks-up, introduce yourself then. Here is what we know about what happened two weeks ago." She pointed to another squirrel. "Oakleaf will start..."

There was a lot of information to be presented. It wasn't long before Curtis ate his pack lunch. His bottle of water was replaced a couple of times during the presentations. They even showed him to a human-sized restroom when he needed the facilities. When he next glanced at his watch, he saw it was already close to three. He then noticed they were all looking at him.

"I'm sorry. So far, from what you've provided, there's no reason there should have been an accident. This, his name was Aldin, right?" (nods) "What Aldin was studying is something we do in our own labs at UNH, semi-conductors that become superconductors when super-cooled. They don't just suddenly explode. It doesn't make any sense. What are we missing?"

"We have one more bit of data to provide. It's why we didn't want to meet earlier than today, Curtis. Our video editing team needed the extra time to try and salvage it. In fact they were still working on it until your last bathroom break. About a week ago, they discovered that the security video for the lab from that day wasn't totally lost. But it was badly damaged. They were able to salvage the last minute or so. Only they've seen it so far, so it'll be just as new to the rest of us as to you."

The room darkened and an LCD projector came on and showed the grainy footage against the far wall. Curtis watched as a squirrel in a lab smock was manipulating something on a lab table. His back was to the camera, and he was blocking the camera's view of whatever he was doing. He took a couple steps back from the table and towards the camera. There was a flash and then static-snow on the screen. At the flash, several of the squirrels cringed, tucking their tails close to their bodies. Curtis sat back a moment thinking.

"Can you slow down the last 10 seconds or so? Maybe advance it frame-by-frame?"

The vid tech squirrel who had played the footage tapped a few icons on the smartphone in front of him. The footage appeared again in slow motion. This time, before the flash, everyone could see sparks and smoke appear against the far wall. In the next frame, there was a bright sphere where Aldin was standing and then the sparks became a bright flash and the footage ended.

"She—it," Curtis cursed slowly. "That's not possible. It's only theoretical, and on the edge of crazy theoretical at that. Like the sort of mumbo jumbo physics they use in science fiction." He shook his head in disbelief. Please back it up again." He waited for the frame with the sparks on the far wall. "Freeze it there. Good. Do you have a way to zoom it in on those sparks?"

The vid tech chattered softly, "It'll be grainier than it already is, but I'll try." It was digital black squares grainy, but they could all see it looked sort of like a rack computer system.

"Any idea what kind of computer that is?"

A white-pelted squirrel to his right chatterspat and uttered some other squirrel screeches. The others glared at him. After another moment, he calmed down and drooped his tail and turned to

Curtis. “My apologies for my outburst, Dr. Devon. I’m Mentat Cloud(chitter). That’s like your doctorate among us. Bio-medicine in my case. Aldin was my son. That,” he pointed at the screen with his tail, “is or was bunny-tech. If Aldin was doing the research you said he was doing, he shouldn’t have had a need to use that regardless of what it did. Bunny-tech is dangerous as you witnessed. Yes, I might be a bit biased. My father took a risk with bunny-tech once. Fortunately,” he glanced sideways at Lady Slipper, “no one died in that foolishness. Sadly, it looks like my son did. Not how I wanted to prove my point that we should keep away from it.”

Curtis nodded and turned back to the group in general. “Where do you get your electric power from?”

“We have a few water turbines hidden in the outlet to the lake. We have several banks of batteries to save it up during the night when there is less demand.”

“And at maximum load, how much electricity could you use at once without causing the lights to flicker or draw on the battery reserves?”

“Two-hundred and fifty,” a squirrel at the far end started, paused thinking about it, “maybe 300 kilowatts. During spring run-off maybe three-hundred-fifty. Enough power for about a dozen of your human dwellings for a day with normal power demand.”

“And how much of that are you using?”

“Between us and the sporting camps,” (drooptail) “most of it. It’s the reason for the battery banks”

Curtis nodded. “Interesting. I never imagined you’d need that much.”

“We have several industries going on down here to assist the Army of Fudd,” Cloud(chitter) replied. “Mostly bio-medical, but other things too, including a small distillery.” He crinkled his nose. “There’s one faction of the Army of Fudd that flies supplies in to us but they only accept payment in drinking alcohol.” He shook his head very human like back and forth. “They call it tequila. I don’t understand why your kind consumes poison like that.”

“Bio-medical?”

Cloud(chitter) flicked his tail up and down once and nodded. “We produce antibunnies.”

“Huh?”

They all looked at him and then all looked at Lady Slipper. “I thought you said he knew about the War,” Birch said for the group.

“As I told Eugene,” Curtis explained before Lady Slipper could respond in anyway, “I was attacked once, but have chosen to not get involved, though a Fudd tried to recruit me soon after the attack explaining about the devilbunnies. So, what is this ‘antibunnies’ thing.”

“The recruiter told you about the devilbunnies and how they want to take over the world, right?”

Curtis nodded.

“Did he also tell you that some of them are a disease carrier?”

Curtis shook his head slowly side-to-side.

“It is called Human-Lapine Virus, or ‘Bunnyvirus’. It can turn humans into devilbunnies, if the infected human survives the transformation. We manufacture an antivirus, nicknamed ‘antibunnies,’ that protects humans from it. You need a yearly booster shot to remain immune as it doesn’t last in your body.”

Curtis sat back. “Whoa. Yeah, this is getting deep.” He played around with one of his empty water bottles for a moment. “I think I might have a preliminary theory, but I’d need to look at the actual lab, if possible, to see how far off I am,” he paused as they all looked at him. Having all those beady rodent eyes on him was almost unnerving. “The kind of research Aldin was conducting if that is what he was really doing requires temperatures cooled down to a few degrees Kelvin, er, a few hundred degrees below zero Fahrenheit.” The squirrels all looked at one another and shivered at the thought of temperatures that cold.

“That takes more power than it sounds like you can spare. If he was doing that on a regular basis, you’d possibly experience brown-outs while he worked, or worse. That is, unless he was doing it late at night when there’s less demand for the power you’re generating. And power fluctuations are never good for equipment needed to produce temperatures that cold or any electronics or equipment in general.”

“So, that,” Birch pointed at the screen with his tail, “might have been his power source.”

“I doubt it. It may be an interface to control it. That’s why I want to see the lab if possible even if there isn’t much left to it. If it is just the interface, the power source could still be there, and you might have a bigger problem here as I suspect you’d want it shut down based on how you’ve stated your feelings on ‘bunny tech’. If you don’t understand fire and play with it, you’ll get burned.” That was met with nervous chittering around the table. “Please advance to the frame with the bright sphere, again.”

He waited. The video tech in his hurry left it enlarged. All stared.

“Is that fuzzy thing a tree branch I see inside the sphere?” Curtis shook his head not believing what he was seeing. “Now, that,” he pointed at the screen, “that is pure science fiction. At least until now. Whatever he was using for power, there may have been a brief surge in power before the power source or the controls blew. If this was science fiction, the mumbo jumbo the writers would use for the television audience or book readers would be something along the lines of, ‘he blew a door open in the space-time continuum and got sucked through.’ But again, if he was doing the research you say he was doing, it shouldn’t have caused that. So, maybe there’s some other ‘bunny tech’ hooked-up over there he wasn’t aware of. The power surge caused whatever it was to malfunction and send him to where ever.”

They stared at him blankly. He thought for a moment and tried a different tact, calling upon his teaching skills. “You know, this would be easier if you simply watched some science fiction once in a while. Anyway, one of the theories out there is that there are multiple parallel universes. Now, there are different sub-theories to it. We won’t go into those details. Here’s the basics.” He grabbed one of his empty water bottles and placed it on the table. “We are aware of three dimensions. You and I can see dots, first dimension.” He pulled a sheet of paper off the pad and put a dot on it and showed it to them. “We can also see squares and other flat, two-dimensional objects, like this sheet of paper. And we see each other, objects that fill three dimensions. Front-to-back, side-to-side, and up-and-down. Like you, me, and this water bottle.

“According to parallel universe theory there are infinite dimensions taking up the same space. He put the sheet of paper on the table in front of him and set a water bottle on top directly over the dot. If you were the dot, you couldn’t see the paper or the bottle because you only know the first dimension. If you were the paper, you’d know about the dot, but again as you only know two dimensions, you can’t look-up and see the bottle. They occupy the same space and no one in one would notice the others above them. But what if there were other dimensions beyond these three? We and the bottle can’t see anything higher up that may be sitting on us.” He pulled out his old scout knife from his pocket and cut the edges off a water bottle cap. He set it on his water bottle that still had water in it. “But one of versions of parallel universe theory is that there are an infinite number of them. One just like the other but slightly different all stacked in this same space. In that version of the theory, there isn’t one water bottle here in front of you, but an uncountable number of them. And it could be that the difference among them is a single event that happened differently. For example, Eugene told me that your enslaved ancestors here rebelled against their bunny masters. What would this place be like today, if their rebellion had failed?”

The squirrels shuddered at the thought.

“By this theory, that reality exists somewhere out there moving right along beside our reality, occupying the same space.” He set an empty bottle upside down on top of the other bottle with water in it. He then quickly flipped it over. “But, let’s say you could open a door like the one behind me between two of those universes. Let these two bottles represent those two universes and the cap a possible doorway.” He held onto the top water bottle and yanked the barrier out

from between the two bottles so the upper drained into the lower. He was only partially successful and spilled some water on the table as the upper bottle fell over as he tried to steady it. He put the cap on the bottle still standing on the table. "If you were standing on or in that doorway when it opened, just like the water passing from one bottle to the other here, you'd pass through. What I spilled could be the explosion as this wouldn't be easy to do and who knows what would happen." He shook his head, "But we don't have the technology to open such a doorway if that theory is true."

Curtis pointed again at the screen. "And based on that, it could be true. It boggles my mind. My colleagues would call me crazy for saying that. But based on what you've presented me and that picture, it is a possibility. And if true, then the tip of Aldin's tail got caught in the doorway as it slammed shut. Ditto with those branch tips you found, except they came from the other side of the doorway."

Some of them nodded. Whether or not they really understood was another question.

"There's another possibility. There's another theory," he held up the sheet of paper again. "Let this represent our universe and how we see it. By that theory, though we see it like this, it's really," he crumpled it up, "like this. If you came up with the right technology to bridge one of these gaps you could travel what we perceive as a long distance in the blink of an eye. Again, the science fiction writers love this idea. It makes it easy to write stories of space travel in the near future. They use different terms for it. Wormholes, jump gates, and star gates to name a few. If one of those opened up around Aldin, the result could be similar to a door way to a parallel universe."

"So what can we do to prevent another door or gate opening?" Cloud(chitter) asked. "It is obvious, at least to me, that it would be too dangerous to try and reopen it if we even knew how to and try to get Aldin back."

"That's correct and there would be no promise you'd open the door to the right universe or bridge one of these gaps in the right place. As to how to prevent it, that's why I need to see the lab. The easy answer is don't let anyone else ever use this 'bunny technology,' as you call it, again. But to give you a better, more thorough answer, I need more information."

"Are you claustrophobic?"

"No."

"Good, because the tunnels between here and there are bunny-size, between 26 and 30 inches in height. You'll have to crawl. But not tonight. Come back tomorrow, but follow the other shore of the lake. We'll have a scout signal you when it's time to head for shore."

Curtis heard the door opened behind him. He was slightly startled as a squirrel leaped up on the table with a small syringe in its forepaws.

“Meanwhile,” Cloud(chitter) continued, “before you leave, we offer you an antibunnies shot. It is your choice if you choose to accept it. However, we’d prefer our business partners to not sprout fur, long ears, claws, and a cotton tail should they have an unfortunate encounter with the enemy.”