

Curtis wasn't sure if it was the same squirrel or a different one that led him out and back to the lake. It didn't speak the entire trip. He rubbed his arm where he got the shot as he pulled the canoe back out onto the lake. On the trek back up lake, he thought-chewed on what he had seen and what it could possibly mean. He was excited and scared at the same time.

Dinner was excellent. Everything was made from scratch. A couple of the other guests had been very successful fishing at one of the remote lakes and shared their rainbow trout with all. Cookie was the nickname Neill's wife used. She explained it was the standard nickname for lumberjack camp cooks. While she wasn't cooking for lumberjacks, she was cooking in the same North Woods and that was close enough. If he ate like this all week, regardless of how much he exercised, he's probably gain weight.

He slept soundly for the first time in what seemed like years and awoke refreshed. Again, Cookie had quite the spread for breakfast. Just about anything you'd expect, in serving bowls passed around the table family-style. Several styles of eggs, flapjacks with real maple syrup, bacon, sausage links, flannel hash, muffins, diced potatoes and baked beans. Cookie had again pointed out that baked beans were traditional. And hers were excellent. Just the right amount of molasses combined with the beans and baked all night. He learned they made their own syrup tapping their own trees around the camp.

He put on a pair of jeans, grabbed a pack lunch and his day pack, got in a canoe, and headed down lake. He was only a little past half-way down the lake, when he saw movement in one of the trees on shore. He looked again and moved closer. He was then able to clearly make-out a squirrel wigwagging its tail back and forth. He raised his canoe paddle and wigwagged back. The squirrel darted down the tree trunk as Curtis beached his canoe. He dragged it up on shore and into a set of high-bush blueberry bushes as directed by the scout. He looked carefully at it. It looked like the one from yesterday.

"Are you Springtail?"

The squirrel flicked its tail up and down once and nodded. After a moment, it spoke. "Sorry, I don't talk much." It looked down and scuffed a paw on the branch it was perched on. "Shy. Not serve as a scout long. I haven't met many humans yet." It flicked its tail about a bit. "It's hard to fight instinct to run away from you. This way, it is about a third mile uphill. Very steep in parts. I'll go slower than I did yesterday."

It was a very strenuous climb, but Curtis was in good shape despite being a university professor. One of the things he hadn't had time to tell Eugene Pomerleau was that he followed in Eugene's footsteps and remained in scouting as a volunteer all this time. So, of course, he kept in shape traipsing across the countryside following a bunch of teenage boys on their adventures. When they arrived at the entrance, three squirrels were waiting for them, the non-albino white one, the one who made the initial presentation yesterday, and another. It took a moment to recall the names of the two he had previously met.

“Good morning, Mentat Cloudchitter, Oakleaf, and...”

“Pine Tassel.”

“Thanks. I hope you’ll forgive me for not trying to mimic the chittering sound that is part of your name, Mentat.”

“It’s alright. My own fault. On my naming day, my parents tried to name me Clouddrifter after some deceased Fudd they knew who gave his life protecting Nahmakanta. Naming day waits until our eyes are opened, about two weeks after birth. By then we’re already trying to talk. They said my name to me. I tried to repeat it. I got the ‘cloud’ part, but couldn’t pronounce ‘drifter’. Instead I (chitter). After a few tries, they gave up and decided to make my name Cloud(chitter).”

Curtis laughed. “I’m sorry, but that’s just too cute.”

“I’m used to it. I’m here to give you final instructions. I’m not going with you. The less we send in, the less we risk. You can still change your mind now, but once you go in, you can’t turn around until you are nearly to the lab Aldin used. There’s not enough room in the tunnel. Oakleaf will lead you and Pine Tassel will follow. Both will film the entire time. When you get to the lab study whatever you must. If you find the power source, should it is still be running AND you can figure out how to disable it safely, please do so.”

“I understand,” Curtis replied as he put on a pair of light gloves and accepted the knee and elbow pads provided to him. He didn’t question where the squirrels got them from. Finally, he put on a helmet with chin strap and headlamp. He looked down at Oakleaf and Pine Tassel and just then noticed they had a squirrel-sized helmets with tiny LED headlamps. There was a Go-Pro™-like camera strapped to each of their backs at the top of a tiny backpack. Again, Curtis thought to himself how surreal this seemed. Curtis’ daypack was rigged-up on a rope tied to his waist to be dragged behind him. Extra batteries were stashed in it as a precaution.

“Ready?” Oakleaf asked, raising his tail briefly in a question mark.

“Yes.”

Oakleaf lifted a boulder, that turned out to be a fake like yesterday’s, but it was smaller. The tunnel beyond it was about 30 inches square as he had been warned.

“We’ll close it,” Cloud(chitter) indicated himself and Springtail. “Be safe.”

As the door closed behind him, Curtis mumbled under his breath, “It’s like Alice going down the rabbit hole.”

“I heard that,” Oakleaf called from ahead of him, but didn’t look back so as to not blind him. “Pretty close as this WAS a rabbit hole at one time, except you’ll wish this one led to Wonderland. Yes, I’ve read a little of your human fiction and watched some of your video entertainment. Strange tale. I’ll go slow for you. If too slow, speak-up.”

They went a little ways and it was a bit tight in spots for him, but Curtis had been cave spelunking in scouts. This was easy compared to that.

“At this pace, it’ll take about twenty minutes or so to reach the lab. We’ll be descending about a quarter-mile, by the way.”

“Understood.”

At one point he almost got stuck. *26 to 30 inches my ass,* he thought to himself. Guess he thought too soon it was easier than regular spelunking. Pine Tassel had to crawl up on him and wedge himself between Curtis’ back and the ceiling. He tried to untie and then simply gnawed through the rope to Curtis’ pack at his belt. Curtis was then able to shimmy-crawl through the narrow space. Pine Tassel then dragged the rope close enough for Curtis to be able to reach behind him and pull on it. He was amazed at the strength of the squirrel.

“Oakleaf, if there’s another tunnel that goes around that section that’s wider, please lead me through it on the return trip.”

“I wish there was.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

“There used to be a second tunnel to the surface. It collapsed long before I was born about 20 years ago, maybe longer.”

“How were you able to drag my pack through to me?” Curtis asked back to Pine Tassel as they continued down the tunnel.

“Proportional to our size we’re pretty strong. From a standstill, we can leap straight up triple our height. Also, from a standstill we can leap forward close to eight times our length. We can pull ourselves up a tree branch using a single claw. Hurts, but we can do it if it means escaping a predator.”

Curtis thought about that a moment. “I’m impressed. If humans had the same abilities, there’d be some new world records in track and field sports.”

“What’s that?”

“Humans competing against each other to see who can run the fastest, jump the highest or furthest. If a human could jump forward 8 times their height from a standstill, we could clear nearly 50 ft. That’s more than double the record for a running long jump. That’s where you get a running head start and then leap.”

Oakleaf thought about that a moment. “You humans sure are strange at times.”

Curtis chuckled.

Twenty minutes passed, then another ten. Oakleaf explained it was taking longer because of the delay in the tight section Curtis had gotten stuck in. Actually, he didn’t want to admit that he under-estimated how long it was taking guiding a human through the tight tunnels. They turned another corner and saw the busted open doorway. Once inside, Curtis was able to carefully stand up. His head touched the ceiling. He groaned a little as he carefully stretched his limbs. He looked about. There was a reinforced steel door on the floor in front of him and assorted broken lab equipment smashed against the walls and spread on the floor.

“I’m starting to get too old for this.”

“Then why you insist on coming in here?” Pine Tassel asked while holding his tail up in a question mark briefly. He looked about making sure the camera filmed everything about him just as Oakleaf was doing.

“Sorry, figure of speech. Reminding myself I’m not a young 20-something anymore and I need to be more careful.” Curtis walked over to the rounded depression. He opened his day bag and pulled out a telescoping pointer he used in his lectures and extended it. Kneeling, he reached into the depression with it and tapped about.

Oakleaf looked at him with curiosity waiting for an explanation.

“If this is a doorway to somewhere else and isn’t completely closed, I’d rather lose my pointer than fall through it myself. I’m probably being overcautious because someone retrieved those tree branches and Aldin’s tail from it.”

Oakleaf twitched his tail nervously. “That was me. It never occurred to me it might be a doorway at the time and it could still be open.”

Curtis pulled the glove off his left hand and tentatively reached into the depression and touched it. “Whoa. Perfectly smooth. That’s just incredible.” He shook his head again in disbelief. “Okay, enough fooling around. I just had to see that for myself.” He stood back-up carefully, put the pointer back in his pack and looked about to orient himself to where the security camera had been. “Any idea where the security camera was mounted.”

Oakleaf pointed to the left of the doorway with his tail. “It was mounted to the left of the doorway. What was left of it was smashed-up on the floor. I retrieved what was left of it when I retrieved the other items.”

After looking about for a bit, he found what was left of the camera mount. Standing there and looking towards the depression he then knew where to go to look for what was left of the correct rack computer stand or whatever it had been as there had been several on the walls from the looks of the debris. He crossed the room, avoiding the depression. He looked at what was left of the electronics, poking through what looked like burnt capacitors and some pink computer chips, one of which was embossed with the word, BUNTEL™.

“This looks like it was a computer of some sort. Not a power source.” He looked up. “But there are some wires dangling out of the wall here.” He pulled a multimeter out of his pack. He turned it on, tapped the two probes together, adjusted a knob on the meter, and tapped them again. Satisfied, he carefully touched the probes to the exposed wires. He moved the probes about a couple times, turned a knob and did so again. He repeated this process several times. “Do you know if there are any maps or schematics of this facility?”

“Only the ones we created the first time we decided to explore it and that would be just a floor plan. When someone wants to use this facility they have to string in their own wire along the tunnels. We use battery operated game cameras for security. They are installed in the rooms to be used and have motion sensors to know when to turn on or off.”

“I see, so this,” he pointed to the dangling wire, “is original to the facility.”

“Yes.”

He held up the multimeter where the two squirrels and their cameras could see that there was no reading. “Well, fortunately there’s no longer any power to this outlet.” Curtis looked about as he tucked the multimeter back in his pack. He pointed to some debris to his left. That looks like it might have been refrigeration equipment. That would explain why Aldin chose this particular lab room. He paused a moment in thought. “Okay, so if someone uses this place, you said they have to provide their own power. What about ventilation?”

“Ventilation?”

“Yes, without proper ventilation, the air in here would get stale in a hurry. This doesn’t smell stale.” He searched around until he found a small vent back near the doorway. He wet a finger and held it up to it. He could feel the faint flow of air. He pointed this out to the squirrels.

“If you were not aware of this, then, I’m guessing it may not be hooked-up to your power system.”

“Rabbit pellets,” Oakleaf uttered under his breath.

“’fraid so,” Curtis responded. “So, I can only assume there is another power source here somewhere. Are there other rooms I can access from here?”

“A couple.”

“Lead on.”