

It wasn't far from the first chamber back down the tunnel, and a turn to the left at a cross tunnel to the next lab room. The door was ajar, but undamaged. The interior looked untouched, which seemed unusual considering how close it was to the one Aldin had been using. Curtis looked about and randomly chose a computer rack at the far end of the room. He checked it carefully. He was able to shift it away from the wall. It had what looked like a standard outlet and plug behind it.

"Prepare to run if something goes wrong as I disconnect this."

Both squirrels tensed as Curtis yanked the plug. Nothing happened, not that he expected anything to happen. Curtis pulled out his multimeter again and tested the outlet. He showed the positive reading to the two squirrels and their cameras. "Houston, we have a problem."

"Who's Houston?" Pine Tassel asked raising his tail in a question mark.

Curtis just shook his head. "Figure of speech. It would be difficult to explain. However, this," he indicated the multimeter with a tilt of his head, "means we do have a problem. There is a working power source down here somewhere." He looked about again. "Any other doors out of here other than the one we came through?"

"No," Oakhurst replied.

"Well, then there isn't much more we can learn in here. However, before we leave, I'm going to disconnect everything. Based on your Mentat Cloudchitter's thoughts on 'bunnytech,'" he made quotation marks in the air, "he'd probably appreciate it if we did so."

Thirty minutes later, they were back in the tunnel/hallway. A few more twists and turns at intersections and they entered a third room. This one looked untouched except for some squirrel paw prints in the dust. They led to the right wall and ended. Another set led back. Oakhurst's tail twitched.

"I don't have anything on the maps I made going past this room that indicates there is anything beyond it. But, I hadn't bothered entering it when I mapped things, having not seen anything to indicate it wasn't more than just a room like the others."

"Those paw prints appear to be fairly recent," Pine Tassel added.

Oakhurst bounded over following the paw prints to where they stopped. He turned to Curtis and Pine Tassel. "There is a concealed doorway here." He yanked on something and then pushed and a small doorway opened. He looked at the tunnel beyond. "Unfortunately, it is too small for you, Curtis."

Curtis brushed aside the dust where he stood, sat down and pulled his lunch out of his pack. “Go ahead and check it out. Just don’t forget I’m here and I probably can’t find my way back to the surface without one of you considering the number of twists and turns you led me through at some of the intersections.”

The two squirrels chattered back and forth a moment. Oakhurst then looked again at Curtis. “You’ll stay put?”

“I don’t have much other choice, do I?” he bit into his sandwich on thick, homemade whole wheat bread.

“We’ll be back in about an hour or so.”

The two squirrels ducked down the tunnel. After Curtis finished his meal, he inspected the room. Again, he disconnected anything connected to outlets. He tested a few and they were live. A little over an hour later, the squirrels returned, both twitching their tails back and forth.

“I wish I could find some pathway between here and where that tunnel leads so you could assist in making sense of what we saw.”

“You found the power source?”

“Either that or some possibly very dangerous bunny tech. We filmed everything we could, but we didn’t carry any equipment with us to review the footage. We’ll have to go back.”

Curtis nodded and fell in the middle on the way back up. The narrow part was just as tight going up as coming down, except, he remembered to untie his pack in advance this time. Once they were at the surface, Oakhurst explained, that while he and Pine Tassel could get to Nahmakanta quickly through the trees, they didn’t want to leave Curtis behind to find his way. As such, they were willing to ride across and down the lake in Curtis’ canoe.

Once back in the same spot as the previous morning, Oakhurst had bounded ahead with both cameras and Pine Tassel led Curtis. It didn’t seem to take as long to get to the human entrance this time. After several twists and turns below ground, Curtis found himself again in Conference Room Almond. The squirrels who had assembled there the previous day were waiting for him.

Lady Slipper nodded her head at him. “Thank you, Dr. Devon for your assistance. From here, we’ll have to be on our own based on what Oakhurst has explained briefly. Knowing how curious some humans can be, you’re welcome to stay through the briefing on what Oakhurst and Pine Tassel found.

Curtis nodded and sat down. Oakhurst brought up video footage from both cameras side-by-side time-synced together starting from where they entered the newly found tunnel. He sped-up the

footage. “We walked for about 15 minutes. There were other side passages, but we followed the pawprints in the dust. They led to a slightly ajar door.”

On screen on the left, you could see a paw reach outward in the bottom of the camera frame and carefully pull open a door. On the right, you could see the whole squirrel do so. Beyond was a lit chamber a little larger than the lab room Aldin had been using. Now the view of the two cameras split-up as the two squirrels looked about.

On one camera, the pawprints led to the right of the door and what looked like a row of electric power breaker boxes. One was open and showed what look like standard breaker switches inside. Several had a pink square next to them along with strange symbols. Meanwhile, the other camera showed that there were gauges on several walls and panels within the room with the occasional computer terminal. On the far wall was a row of glass windows. First the left camera and then the right camera zoned in on the windows and looked beyond. Past the glass was another chamber. There was a faint pulsating glow to the far room. Within it was some sort of large metal container. Now the two cameras passed slowly over each gauge in order to get a clear picture of each. The cameras then pulled back to get clear pictures of whole rows of gauges and other machinery in the room. All of them had unfamiliar symbols on them.

Cloud(chitter) bristled. “Written Devilbunny also called Bunnyspeak.”

“Can you read that?” Curtis asked.

“A little. Mentat Snowpaw can decipher it more quickly for us.”

Lady Slipper tapped the smartphone in front of her. The face of a tawny brown squirrel with black ear tips stared back from the large screen. He looked upset at first until he recognized who had called him. “Father, can you pull away from what you’re working on and come up to CR Almond?”

“Give me five minutes, hon.”

Five minutes passed and Mentat Snowpaw bounded into the room. Curtis tried not to stare at the tawny brown squirrel. Snowpaw appeared the same as an eastern gray squirrel in size and shape, except for his tawny brown fur and the tips of his ears and tail along with his paws were black, just like his daughter. Lady Slipper briefly explained the situation that his help was needed to translate some Bunnyspeak. Snowpaw nodded, leaped-up on Curtis’ table and introduced himself to the human visitor. “Mustard Snowpaw, Mentat of Nahmakanta.” He offered his forepaw in the human handshake gesture.

Curtis smiled riley as he accepted the handshake with his index finger and thumb. “Dr. Curtis Devon, Physics Department, University of New Hampshire.”

“UNH? The bunnies haven’t noticed you there yet?” Mustard shook his head.

“No, and hopefully, it will stay that way. So, you can read Devilbunny?”

“Of course. I use to be one,” Mustard switched to a fake British accent as Curtis stared, “But I got bett’r.” He switched back. “Long story. If you’re around a few more days and care to share a beer, I’ll drop by and tell it.” He turned back to his daughter. “Show me what you’ve got.”

Lady Slipper called-up the video footage as it scrolled over gauges, Mustard paused the video here and there. “Energy output gauges. Coolant level gauges. Fuel level gauges. Fuel temperature gauges. Standard breaker boxes with what each breaker is assigned to such as sub-zero lab, medical research, and so on,” he trailed off a moment. “Where is this footage from, again?”

“Across the lake at the old lab,” Curtis replied before anyone else could.

“Across the lake?” Again, Mustard trailed off a moment and then his eyes widened enough to show the whites. “Frith on a stick!”

“I take it that’s not good.”

“Dr. Devon, I was a techbun before my ‘accident’. Picture an electrician crossed with a computer programmer and engineer. These gauges in this configuration mean only one thing, a power plant of some sort. According to those who came before us, there had been a small nuclear plant in there at one time that had been dismantled long before the rebellion and the US Air Force jet crash. I pray it really was and this isn’t that plant.”

Curtis did his best to keep calm at the thought of an unsupervised, thirty plus year old nuclear power plant nearby. “Nuclear isn’t my specialty. However, there are some things missing here if this is a nuclear plant regardless of how advanced ‘bunnytech,’” he made quotation marks in the air, “is supposed to be. Splitting atoms is just the first step. That produces a lot of energy in the form of heat. You need a way to translate that into electricity. So if you pass water over/through the container the nuclear reaction is taking place in, it will heat into steam. You can then pass that steam through a turbine to generate electricity.”

Curtis pointed at the footage on screen. “If that thing in the other room is a nuclear reaction vessel, it would have melted down a long time ago as you can’t leave them unmonitored for long periods of time, never mind decades. That would have been all over world news and none of you would be here. There’s no way to keep the resulting amount of radiation leak a secret. There’s no indication of water piping or a turbine unless those are hidden from the view available through those windows. Look through the footage again, surely the rabbits would have some sort of radiation hazard symbol, right?”

“Yes, they would, come to think of it.” Mustard spent some time reviewing the footage, zooming in here and there. “No radiation hazard warnings.”

“Well, that’s possibly a relief,” Curtis quipped. “Unfortunately, I have no idea what that is and as such can’t provide you any suggestions on how to shut it down, if it can be safely shut down.”

The squirrels chattered back and forth as Mustard continued to look over the footage. Lady Slipper looked up and apologized to Curtis for leaving him out of the conversation. “Thank you for your assistance, Dr. Devon. Based on the evidence, your best theory is that Aldin has crossed into some other universe or some other planet in our own. There is no way with our current knowledge to find him or try and bring him back, nor would you recommend we attempt such a thing if we knew how to do it. The Council agrees on this last part. As such, Aldin is lost for good.” She turned briefly to Cloud(chitter). “I’m sorry, Mentat.” She turned back to Curtis. “We’ll have to figure out how to disable this power source on our own as there is no practical way to get you in that room. You are welcome to spend the rest of the week we’ve provided for you vacationing at the sport...”

“Sweet Frith bedding a human!” Mustard blurted out. He paused the footage, backed it up and stared again at some of the gauges.

All looked at him.

“When was this filmed?”

“About an hour ago.”

Mustard punched the smartphone in front of him with such force that his claw puncturing the glass. A squirrel appeared on screen, “IT Office.”

“IT!” Mustard shrieked. “Get a modified smartphone with the latest version of BUNIX™ we’ve cracked and a code-cracking squirrel up here to CR Almond as quickly as possible! Yesterday preferred!” Mustard stomped a hindpaw while his tail thrashed about.

“Yes, Men...” Answered the squirrel on screen and was cut off as the smartphone shorted out with a few sparks and a small puff of smoke.

Mustard glanced at the smartphone he had punctured and then at his daughter and spoke in a slightly calmer voice, “Please contact storage. Have them pull the 2 liter we were saving for Colonel Pomerleau’s next visit and rush it up here.” He turned to Curtis as she did so. “When it arrives, Dr. Devon, I need you to take it back to the camps as fast as you can paddle. Make sure it is shared at dinner. Point out to Cookie that Moxie™ is as traditional to Maine as her baked beans. She’ll make sure everyone has some whether or not they like it. I just hope we have enough time.”

Lady Slipper looked at her father for an explanation as did the others.

He pointed to the screen. “That was banned long before the Omega Weapons Treaty was signed by the Fudds and Devilbunnies. There shouldn’t be one here. It’s a Cuton™ Reactor and it’s going critical based on these readings.”