

## Prologue

An eastern gray squirrel stood in front of a table that was just his height with some lab instruments on it. It looked like a normal squirrel you might toss treats to in a city park, except this one was wearing a miniature lab coat. Its tail was tucked up inside the back of the coat. The tip of the tail poked out of the back of the collar and over its head. It reached forward holding a set of tweezers in one forepaw and released a tiny object over what looked like a petri dish with fog rolling off it. The object floated just over the dish. The squirrel nicked the end of the object with the tweezers and made it spin in place. It smiled and chattered in delight as it reached over to what looked like a smartphone and tapped at a virtual keyboard on its screen.

On the far wall, something sparked. A loud piercing noise followed and more things sparked and popped. The whine increased in pitch painfully. Smoke bellowed forth. The squirrel took two steps back grasping at its ears. A bright flash engulfed the squirrel.

As a tiny section of Nesuntabunt Mountain shifted, creating a small avalanche of rocks and dirt into Nahmakanta Lake below, a deep rumble that could be felt as much as heard echoed over the lake and off the other low mountains that surrounded it. Located 30 miles northeast of Greenville, Maine, the lake, itself, stretches roughly 4 miles northwest to southeast and is a little over a half mile wide, surrounded by state public reserve land. The US Geological Services would record an earthquake registering roughly 2.6 on the Richter scale centered fairly close to the surface of that mountain just west of the lake. High enough on the scale for sensitive instruments to notice, but not for people to feel unless they were close by. Though the Appalachian Trail skirts along the southwest shore of the lake and then up and over Nesuntabunt Mountain, it was too early in the summer for any thru-hikers to notice. And, fortunately, the slide didn't affect the trail.

Neill Fournier did take notice. As the owner/caretaker of Nahmakanata Lake Camps at the far northwestern end of the lake for more than 20 years, he felt it as much as heard it. He also saw the small slide of rocks and dirt into the lake about a half-mile down from the camps. The area of the slide had been unstable as long as he owned the camps. The previous owner told him an Air Force jet had crashed there some time in the late 80's and it had been unstable ever since. Normally, slides occurred in severe weather or during the spring melt. Fortunately, it was turn-over day, so there were no customers to witness it.

His only concern was for his neighbors along the southeastern shore at the far end of the lake. Neill got his power from his neighbors. None of his normal customers knew of those neighbors. He made sure they all thought the power for the sporting camp water pump and electronic device charging stations were supplied by the generator in the shed behind the main lodge. He kept a boom box in the locked shed with a CD recording of the generator running, which he'd play most afternoons on repeat loop for a couple hours to help provide the illusion. Of course, those customers quickly learned the only feature on their "smartphones" that worked this far into the wilderness was the camera. Despite the warnings about that on the sporting camp's website,

customers still brought them with them. The slide was on the opposite shore from those neighbors and nowhere near the underwater turbine hidden in the outlet to the lake at the far southeastern end. As such, Neill wasn't too concerned for them either. He figured if there was a problem, he'd learn of it soon enough.

Those secret neighbors were intelligent squirrels. He didn't even know the full truth behind his neighbors' history. He only knew that they were escaped lab animals and their descendants. That's all he needed to know. He didn't trust the Government, which is one of the reasons he lived out here deep in the Maine wilderness. If a bunch of squirrels who could speak English claim they were escaped lab animals, he wasn't going to question it. It fit right in with his beliefs that the Government was always up to no good. Besides, who would he tell? Others would think he was crazy. Or worse, it would attract the attention of some of the Government. So it was best to keep the secret.

At some point after he first met them, he had agreed to be a supply mail drop for them in return for the free power. When a customer rented a camp to be charged on the Oakhurst Dairy account, his neighbors always paid the bill in full. He never questioned where the money came from as they always paid promptly without question. He had a specific camp set aside for those visitors at the far eastern end of the row of cabins with a line of cedar bushes to provide privacy from the other cabins.

Those neighbors were more concerned with that slide and earthquake than he knew. Nor would he ever learn the truth about the accident that caused it. At that moment, at the opposite end of the lake the Council of Elders were assembling in the branches of a giant white pine tree that served as their assembly "hall". The council's name was a little misleading these days. It had started as an assembly of the eldest of the squirrels who met to discuss matters and settle disputes. Over the years, the membership of the council had evolved. If you were just a few years old, but had travelled a lot serving in scouting detail with the Army of Fudd, you were just as likely to be asked to serve as those who had lived a decade by the side of the lake. Anyone could suggest new members for consideration to the council. The number on the council varied between 9 and 15 or so members. Currently there were about 14, but no one had really taken tally lately. Not all members were always present at Nahmakanta. Some still served actively as scouts with the Army of Fudd. Membership was for as long as you wished to serve. It wasn't for life, though some served that long.

On this particular day, Lady Slipper, wished she was serving actively with the scouts, fighting devilbunnies, and not here at home. Seventeen years old, she had served on the council now for nearly a decade and a half. She had been personally asked by the then head of the council, Ash Puffcheeks/Busheytail, to join soon after Lady Slipper's return to Nahmakanta way back in '04. It had been just after a raid on a bunny warren in the far west in the interior of Washington State that freed over a hundred squirrel slaves. Ash and her mate, the legendary Mentat Aldin Busheytail, had long since retired and "vanished" deeper into the wilderness. As much of an

honor as it had been to be chosen at such a young age to serve on the Council, Lady Slipper preferred to be on the front line. Now, she found herself the head of the council.

Lady Slipper looked more or less like a normal eastern gray squirrel. Except for the black in her fur on the paws, her ear tips and tail tip. Why she was slightly different is not discussed in polite company. Despite her unusual background, Lady Slipper was highly respected by the others, which is probably why she had been chosen to lead the council several years ago.

Lady Slipper settled on her branch and waited for the half-dozen other members of the Council present in the area to arrive. Their reason to meet was to investigate what caused the earthquake, which was in the vicinity of the original devilbunny-run Nahmakanta Lab. The original lab had long been abandoned after a freak “accident” when a US Air Force jet out on a routine training mission crashed into and destroyed the lab back in mid-1980. Or so most thought, including their human neighbor, Neill, along with most of the devilbunny command structure. A successful squirrel rebellion had taken place in the relocated lab where the squirrels of Nahmakanta still lived. What had been left of the original lab had been considered off limits to most of the squirrels for safety sake due to the damage and some residual radiation. It had been rumored the buns had a small nuclear reactor in the lab. That rumor was true and false. It had been disassembled and cleaned-up before the “accident”. Some, including members of the Council of Elders, knew that portions of the old lab were intact and the radiation rumor had been made-up to keep those who shouldn’t be there away from the facility. Riskier experiments were conducted there, well away from the Nahmakanta settlement for safety’s sake. So, obviously, that earthquake indicated something had probably gone terribly wrong over there.

The meeting didn’t take long as the investigation would be assigned to others more knowledgeable. They would report their findings to the Council as soon as they had something to report. The assembly was more of a formality than anything.