

Chapter 3

The next call was two months later. Rick arrived at the appointed time and proceeded upstairs as directed. He immediately gravitated over to a workbench to what he assumed was his suit based on the coloration of the fur and the tell-tale long bushy tail.

“You’re right on time,” Jim stated as he gestured to the fursuit on the bench.

“I can’t believe you’ve completed it so quickly.”

“Remember, we’ve got a whole team working on this. Are you as excited as I am to give this a try?”

“You bet.”

“Great. First, you’ll need to change out of your street clothes into this.” Jim held up what looked like an old school one-piece underwear union suit. That is, if you updated the design of a union suit as it definitely didn’t look like wool and it was white instead of red.

It was very smooth to the touch. “What is this?” Rick asked.

“An UnderArmor™ competitor. It’s lightweight, strong, and durable. It’ll make it easier to get into the suit.” Jim pointed to the door leading to the measuring room Rick used previously.

Rick was in and out in just a couple minutes. The union suit was like an adult onesie complete with built in feet and attached baklava. Only Rick’s face and hands were uncovered.

“Have a seat.” Jim gestured to a waiting stool. Rick sat and Jim passed him the suit body. “See if you have any issues getting into it.”

Rick looked it over and noted the foot paws were built into it. He easily slipped right in. He had to semi-squat as he got off the stool, but that was planned all along. He could briefly stretch his legs, but the build of the suit encouraged him to quickly move back into a squat. Once he had it slipped on around his body, he looked for a zipper or even Velcro. After a minute or so of puzzled searching he simply tried holding the opening together. To his amazement it stuck together loosely. Without uttering a word, Jim held out the suit head. It looked complete now. The bucktooth incisors were in place along with whiskers. It looked like someone had taken a head off a real squirrel and enlarged it to human size.

“And I thought the team had done an amazing job on the head on my previous visit,” Rick stated as he marveled at the head a moment before orienting it to put on. He closed his eyes, fitted the head on, and pressed the hidden button. Like before the earbuds inserted themselves and a computer voice stated, “Activated”. He slowly opened his eyes to a normal field of vision. He turned his head and held his hand up to his nose and gazed at it through the camera. “So, you did add the extra camera?”

“Correct. You should be able to switch views through the menu system.”

Rick did so and blinked a couple times. He actually liked the wider view. “Okay, I’ve switched to ‘squirrel vision’.” (chuckle)

Jim handed him the hand paws. Rick marveled at them a moment including the claws and noting that while they were furred, the palms were not. Instead, they were the same tough material as the pads on the footpaws. Rick slipped them on.

“Now I’ve got a message prompt: Seal suit, Y or N?” Before waiting for Jim to respond, Rick chose ‘Y’. He nearly jumped in place as he felt the suit tighten slightly around him and the loose edges of the body along with where the head and handpaws met the body snug tight against the suit. He felt a tugging at his legs. He moved down into a full squat and the tugging ceased. At the bottom right side of his vision, a message popped-up briefly, ‘Suit sealed and synced.’ It was immediately replaced with the standard drop-down menu. His tail briefly wigwagged sideways of its own accord.

“What do you think?” Jim asked, pointing to a large mirror on the wall.

Rick gazed at the suit reflected back at him in the mirror and admired himself. The fur coloration of the head blended perfectly with the colorful body, maroonish-brown on top, medium brown on the sides and cream on the tummy. The maroonish-brown and medium brown blended together down his back and partway down the tail. The rest of the tail was creamy beige like his tummy. There were a couple of splotches of black on his shoulders and hips. He sat/squatted on the floor and held his arms in front of him pretending to hold an acorn. His tail towered nearly a foot (20cm) above his head, longer than his body just like a real Malabar giant squirrel’s tail would. He activated an up/down tail swish and the tail did so. He noted how he was now staring around the room at just over three feet (one meter) from the floor.

Rick laughed. “I’m a god damn giant sparkle squirrel!” He exclaimed excitedly and turned sideways continuing to gaze in the mirror. He then took a tentative step and nearly tripped. “Hey stupid,” he uttered aloud. “You’re a giant sparkle squirrel now. You need to move like one and not try to walk like a human.” He laughed at himself and paused staring for a moment. “Nope. No squirrel noise menu. If you get that app working, Jim, I think the first thing I’m doing is pulling a bunch of squirrel chitters and calls off the net and program those into the custom menu.” He laughed again.

At this Jim also laughed for a moment and then apologized explaining he should be more professional in front of a client.

“No, it’s alright. And technically, I’m a beta tester, not a client. That makes me sort of a semi-employee. Instead of a paycheck, the company is paying me the old fashion Yankee way, through barter. In this case, this suit when it’s all said and done. As for movement, I’m the one who wanted a quad-feral squirrel suit, remember. Give me a moment to figure out how to ‘walk’ like a squirrel.” Rick chuckled again in amusement.

Jim nodded and then asked, “What’s a ‘sparkle squirrel’?”

“You’re not one of the furry employees?”

“No, I’m a robotics techie/nerd who saw this as an interesting challenge. But I’ve started reading up on the fandom. It’s, shall I say, um...interesting.”

“Yes, like every fandom, you need to be careful what you look at about it on the Internet. When you’ve got time, look-up ‘sparkle dog.’ Basically, a character with a color-scheme you wouldn’t find in real life. Except this squirrel coloration is based on a squirrel found deep in the jungles of India, not something you’d encounter here. Now, then...” Rick trailed off briefly as he closed his eyes in thought trying to remember how squirrels move about. “Focus, Rick-son,” he muttered, “be the squirrel.” He concentrated on how he believed Pistachio would move about based on his observations of squirrels in the wild. He opened his eyes again, bent forward and touched the floor with his handpaws. “One, two, and...” He leaned down and forward, putting weight on his hands, and kicked his feet forward tentatively. “Three!” As they landed just behind and to the sides of his hands, he arched his back moving his hands forward again. With every scampering hop he seemed to get better at it. Stretching like he never thought he could, he was now landing his feet outside of and nearly in-line with his hands. Not quite as well as a squirrel would do, but his 34-year-old human body wasn’t so flexible as squirrel’s either, which could land its rear paws in front of the front ones on such a hop. But what he was able to do was good enough for him.

Rick was near the far side of the room in no time when he accidentally landed his left foot on his left hand, tripped, and tumbled muzzle over tail landing against the wall. Jim rushed over as Rick rolled onto his back laughing deeply grabbing onto his cream-colored tummy with his handpaws, his legs pointed in the air, still in a squat position. His tail was straight out behind him, twitching as he belly-laughed.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Rick gasped between bouts of laughter. “The only thing I may have injured is my dignity.” He laughed again. “That is, until I reminded myself that what dignity I had probably went out the door as soon as I got into a giant multi-hued feral sparkle squirrel suit and started to pretend to be one.” He laughed again and Jim had a hard time not joining in. Rick rolled back on his stomach and sat up. “I’ll just need a lot of practice doing this. That’s all. This is fun.” He giggled again. He tried to stand-up and felt the suit tug at his legs until he was back into a squat. “Interesting,” Rick quipped. “It gently forces me back into a squat. How’s it do that?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t reveal our trade secrets on how the robotics work, Rick. At least it’s working properly, reminding you that you’re supposed to be a feral squirrel while in suit.”

“No, that’s fine. But if there’s something you can explain on how it does what it does without jeopardizing those trade secrets it might make it easier for me to explain it as people ask me at cons. How else am I supposed to help promote your company’s products?”

“I’ll discuss that with Nate.”

“Gotcha. You’re ‘just the tech’ or something like that. It’s above your pay scale.”

“Bingo.” Jim picked-up his tablet again. “Alright, I’m going to need to run a series of tests with you.”

Rick nodded as he reached down the sides of the suit with his hands and they slipped into the suit. “Wait.” He slipped them in and out, gazing down. He had to bend about slightly to get a good look. “You put pockets in this thing? But they blend in. I didn’t realize they were there.”

“Of course. How else do you expect to carry your wallet or phone if you want to? No fanny pack needed. As long as you don’t stick more than that in, they won’t show.”

“So, I’m a giant, multi-hued feral sparkle toon squirrel!” Rick chuckled shaking his head. “You seemed to have thought of everything.”

“Well, we tried. Unfortunately, you won’t find a huge space-defying mallet in the pocket. Time to move onto the next test.”

There was scamper/hopping on a treadmill. There were stretches. He tested the dexterity of his hands through the handpaws. He was able to access apps on his smartphone with the handpaws on. And so on. At some point Rick got thirsty only to find a bite valve poking his cheek, near his mouth within the suit. He didn’t recall seeing that when he put the suit on. It was easy to pull into place with his tongue.

“Built in water bladder, huh?” He asked after sucking in some cool water.

“Of course. Two 1-liter pouches worked into the suit.” If you feel along the sides of your upper torso, you should be able to find where they are.” Rick found them.

“What if I get hugged pretty hard? Won’t I get water squirted in my face? That might be bad for the electronics.”

“Sounds like a good idea for our next test. The industrial bite valve should prevent that. With your permission, let’s find out.”

Rick nodded, raised his arms, and nearly got the breath knocked out of him in the powerful bear hug Jim locked him in, lifting him off the floor briefly. He gasped for breath as Jim set him back down and released him.

“Sorry,” Jim stated. “Part of the testing. Did you stay dry?”

Rick panted a bit and then nodded. “Yeah, the valve works. Not a drop.”

“Excellent,” Jim poked at his tablet computer.

“How is the water being kept cool?”

“Now that is something I can actually answer. The suit has a built-in cooling system similar to what you’d find in commercial mascots, except it’s part of the suit instead of a separate vest. The water bladders are snugged-up against the cooling system. Likewise, your tail wigwags as you hop about aren’t just for show. Basically, your tail is a heat sink for the cooling system. You may have noticed it occasionally wigwags on its own without you prompting it to do so. That’s the cooling system kicking in waving off excess heat.” As Jim finished this statement, the tail wigwagged as if on cue.

“Neat.”

“Alright, next test...”

Rick wasn’t sure how long they had gone on. At some point a new message popped up in the goggles, ‘Alert, Power Low.’

“My batteries need recharging.”

Jim glanced at the clock on his tablet. “About three hours, just as I figured. It’s probably time for you to get out of the suit anyway. Your legs are probably starting to cramp-up. I’m amazed you went this long crouching like that.”

“It’s been three hours?” Rick replied in surprise. “I lost track of time.”

Deep down, Rick was hesitant to remove the suit. He was having too much fun pretending to be a giant sparkle squirrel. He never suited before this and only knew what others told him. They were right. You needed to experience it to really appreciate it. He accessed the menu and chose “Suit-unseal-Y.” Once unsealed, he closed his eyes, pressed the button on the right side of the head and removed it. He sighed.

“Yes, I’m sure you’re glad to take a break,” Jim stated misunderstanding the sigh.

Rick opened his eyes to a wave of dizziness. He shook his head a bit. “Just as before, I seem to be more disoriented after going back to normal human vision than going to ‘squirrel vision’.”

“Next time try switching from ‘squirrel’ to ‘human’ vision before powering down. Maybe that will make it easier.”

“Noted,” Rick replied. He found the seam to the suit and it easily parted without a sound. He sat and was able to slide it off easily. As he extended his legs and tried stretching, they both immediately charley horsed on him. “God damn!” he cried out as he grabbed onto his legs as all the muscles in his lower legs tried to contract at once. The muscle spasms were clearly visible through the union suit. Rick scooted off the stool onto the floor. Forcing his way through the pain, he extended both legs in front of him, parallel to the floor. Jim was immediately on the

floor, applying pressure behind the knee of one leg and then the other. The muscles slowly relaxed.

“Well, now we know how long you can actually squat. Are you alright?”

“Pins and needles still and I’ll bet it’ll hurt to walk and climb stairs, but that’s my fault.” Rick shook his head as a few tears trickled down his eyes from the pain. “I lost track of time.” He continued to massage the legs. “Wait? How come I’m not soaking wet with sweat? I’ve been in that suit for three hours and you had me running around a bit there for a while.”

“Obviously, the cooling system did its job.” Jim responded with pride in his voice. “Now, if you feel you can stand, I’ll show you how to plug it in to recharge.” He set the suit body on the workbench, pulled-out a standard mini-USB cellphone charger and showed Rick the receptacle for it inside the left pocket of the suit.

“What about the head?”

Jim aligned the head with the body until a small green LED came on in the right eye and blinked slowly. “The head has a magnetic power connector similar to what some laptops and tablets have. Once it switches from blink to a steady light, it’ll be fully charged. It should take about an hour. That’s my next test. You’re done for today. And even if you wanted to go another round, I’d stop you after what just happened. Your body needs the break. Also, there are some issues you may not have noticed, but I did. I’ve got some more work to do on this. Can you be back next Saturday to try this again? It’ll be a shorter session. I don’t want you to cramp-up like that again.”

“Sure. See you then.”