

Chapter 12

Melissa Sagenthrope stood in the lobby, digital voice recorder in hand, con security person by her side. She wore a con press badge. Much to her disappointment, many declined to be interviewed. She looked about hoping to spot the colorful squirrel suiter who had calmed her son the day before.

Rick walked up to her. “Hello Ms. Sagenthrope,” Rick offered his hand. “‘Pistachio’ or as you saw me yesterday, ‘Mal’ the Malabar giant squirrel. No Seth today, huh?”

She recognized his face from the brief time he had removed his suit head for her son. She accepted his hand and provided a firm shake.

“I’m working, so he’s home with his father. Where’s your costume?”

“In my hotel room recharging. It’s the one disadvantage of a high-tech fursuit.” Rick gestured around to the fursuiters around them in the lobby. “Unlike a regular fursuit, mine has batteries. If you like, we could talk up in the room I’m sharing with three employees of *Second Fur*. We’ll show you the suit. Then we can head back down here and maybe I can help get others to open up to you.”

She nodded.

Rick turned to the security staff person. “I’ll take responsibility if you would like or you can join us.”

The security person checked in through his radio a moment. “If you’re taking responsibility, I don’t need to join you. Thank you.”

Rick guided the reporter to an elevator.

“Obviously, ‘Pistachio’ isn’t your real name.”

Rick chuckled. “Of course not. And most who attend one of these conventions only know everyone else by their furry name. Few know others by their real name.” The elevator doors opened. They waited for three fursuiters to step out and then they got in. No one else joined them.

“Why is that?” Melissa asked as the doors closed.

“There are a few possible reasons, Ms. Sagenthrope. One is due to the negative publicity of the fandom particularly by Hollywood. While there are some negative aspects out there, if you look, you’ll find similar in any other fandom. Another is that while the furry fandom is open and welcoming to all who are willing to be open and welcoming,” Rick paused at the look Melissa gave him. “Yeah, I know that might sound silly phrased that way, but I’m not sure how better to describe it. While it’s open and welcoming it doesn’t tolerate those who are intolerant or close-

minded. As it's open and welcoming, there are a higher percentage of the LGBTQIA+ community within it versus the general population. Many of them have families that are, shall we say, not so open to other sexual orientation or viewpoints. And many of those families do not realize said furry family member is LGBTQIA+. And the furry community member wishes to keep it that way as they're not ready at this time, if ever, to come out to their families." Rick paused again trying to come up with the right words. "As a result, the furry fandom has become associated with that community to the public along with the misconceived bad connotations that some view with that." The elevator doors opened. "So, there are a couple of examples why most only use their character's name in the fandom. With the way the Internet is, it wouldn't take long to put two and two together if someone's real name became associated with their furry name in some circles resulting in trouble for that furry fan.

"So, now you have some idea as to why some here won't share their real name with you and why many were declining your request to be interviewed. Many are probably afraid their voice would be recognized. Perhaps you could offer to disguise their voice." He gave her his business card as he led her down the hall to the suite he shared with the others. "I'm fortunate. My wife and siblings, those who have asked anyway, have no issues with furry, nor does my employer." Rick shrugged. "I go by Pistachio or Stash the Eurasian red squirrel in furry circles, but my real name is Richard 'Rick' Michaud. I also serve as the advisor for the student furry group at White Mountain State University. Here we are."

He led her into the suite. The others were inside waiting. He directed her to the dining/seating area. "This is Sheila Folf. Her furry character is a cross between a fox and wolf, thus Folf." They shook hands. "Cantaloupe Raccoon." More hand shaking. "And Jim the 'normie'."

"'Normie?'"

"A non-furry, like you. He's the lead robotics tech at Second Fur Mascot Costumes. He along with these two and others worked together to bring 'Mal' the Malibar Giant Squirrel to life."

"'Mal' is our first test suit. I could give you a sales pitch, but I know that's not what you're here for. We're a new subsidiary of Second Limb Prosthetics."

"Really?" Melissa responded with surprise in her tone. "I'm familiar with that company. I did a piece on one of our soldiers who was a customer of yours about a year ago. He praised the service he received, and the cost compared to what other companies had wanted to charge for his prosthetic leg even with VA benefits. Unless it was pointed out to you, you couldn't tell he had a prosthetic."

"Those low prices are why we're trying to branch out to other revenue streams such as fursuits." Jim gestured to the squirrel suit laying against the wall. The green LED at the edge of the eye glowed steadily. "If we can make a decent profit through this venture, we can keep our prices low for the soldiers who need our services. And that's as far as I promise to go towards a sales pitch as I know you didn't come up here to see me in particular."

“No, it’s alright, that’s interesting. So, what’s the difference between ‘Mal’ and other fursuits out there? That’s what you just called it, right? A fursuit and not a mascot costume.”

“Correct,” Sheila answered. “Let me go retrieve my flof fursuit and we’ll show you the difference.” She opened the storage bin she kept it in and spread the suit on the table for Melissa to look at. “Most full body fursuits are like this. The main suit you slip into and zip-up or Velcro shut. Some have attached feet, while others have separate feet. Paw hand gloves and the head. I’m fine with you slipping on the gloves and trying my head if you want. It’s not easy to describe to others who haven’t experienced it themselves.”

“I may?”

“Go ahead.”

Melissa set her recorder on the table, slipped the 4 fingered gloves on, and then put the head on. She looked around. “There isn’t a lot of vision.”

“No, and your voice gets muffled. Getting warm yet?”

“Yes,” Melissa answered as she carefully removed the paw gloves and head, setting them back on the table. “Thank you.”

“Would you care to try high tech?” Jim asked as he lifted the Mal suit head up onto the table. Meanwhile, Sheila swabbed out her fursuit head with an alcohol towelette.

“Sure. Are there any special instructions or do I just put it on?”

Rick turned it over to show her. “Inside, as you can see, there’s a pair of goggles. There are also earbuds. Close your eyes and fit the head on. Once you feel the goggles are in place, press the button here on the right side below the ear.” He showed her. “Brace yourself as the earbuds will insert themselves. The computer will tell you when it’s ready and then you can open your eyes. Keep yourself seated for this.”

Melissa followed the directions. She looked about and held a hand-up in front of the suit head. “So, VR goggles and a camera?”

“Yes.”

“And I hear you clearly. The earbuds are hooked to an external microphone, right?”

Rick nodded. “Do you see the blinking cursor? If so, look at it.”

“Oh!” Melissa exclaimed. “So, this is how you activated the tail and made the squirrel chitter sounds?” She activated a chitter. “Neat. I’ve read things about AlphaGoggles EyeGlass Computers™ before they pulled it from the market as they needed more work before release. I never thought I’d experience something like it.”

“This is the same concept,” Sheila replied. “But be careful what you choose.”

Melissa nearly jumped out of her seat as she stared about. “This is crazy.”

“You just chose squirrel vision, right?” Jim asked. “If so, I strongly recommend you go back to normal vision before powering the head down.”

Melissa paused a moment and then reached up to the right side of the head and powered down the computer before removing the head.

“That wide angle ‘squirrel vision’ was freaky.” She looked at Rick. “Which do you use?”

Without asking, Sheila swabbed down the surfaces inside the Mal head as she and the others all turned to Rick.

“Somehow, I can handle the squirrel vision. Don’t ask me how. I just can. Now that you’ve had a tour of basic versus high tech fursuits, what questions do you have for me?”

The interview went quickly after that with Rick providing his work background and how he got into the fandom. Sheila/Liz and Cantaloupe/George gave brief responses also. While they were being interviewed, Rick slipped into the bathroom and got into a ‘onsie’. Fortunately, Second Fur had provided him with 4 ‘onsies,’ one for each day of the con. He came back into the sitting area as Melissa wrapped up her questions for Sheila and Cantaloupe. Rick lifted the suit body and proceeded to put it on.

“Please forgive me for posing in my underwear, Ms. Sagenthrope. I do need to suit up as the fursuit parade occurs soon. Suiters usually minimize what they wear under the suit to prolong how long they can wear one before needing a cool-off break. After the parade, we’ll try to get some others to interview with you.”

She watched in fascination as Rick turned the suit on and it sealed itself. He settled into a squat. The tail wigwagged.

Mal chittered. “I’ll admit, I am really enjoying playing as Mal the Malibar giant squirrel. It makes me feel like a kid again.”

“It must be hard to move about.”

Mal shrugged and his tail wigwagged again. “Just a bit of practice.”

“He’s the one who wanted the fursuit to be as much like a normal squirrel as possible. He tumbled over himself, head over tail, his first time trying to move about in it,” Jim interjected.

(gigglechitter) “And I scared him, but by the time he was by my side, I had rolled over onto my back and simply couldn’t stop laughing at the silliness of it.”

“As you’re talking, you’re using the wider ‘squirrel vision,’ aren’t you?”

Mal nodded. “Of course. Here come the others nearly behind me, which is a reason I like the wider field of vision, especially compared to the narrow vision a regular fursuit head provides. And, I wouldn’t survive long as a prey creature without it.” (gigglechitter) “Sheila tried to hunt me down in the public spaces the first night of the con.”

“At least until ‘squirrel snack’ here pointed out that eating other con guests in public spaces was against the con Code of Conduct,” Sheila responded.

Mal turned to Sheila and Cantaloupe. “Ready?” They nodded. “Then, let’s go.”