

## Chapter 23

Pistachio lost track of time. When he'd wake-up either Cantaloupe or Sheila was there to provide him food and water and then chide him into resting again. He was always in pain, but it wasn't overwhelming, except during the really strange dreams. In them, he was surrounded by humans poking and prodding his body. He was in a semi-sleep state in the dream. He couldn't open his eyes, but he knew they were there as he could smell them. They spoke to each other and somehow, he understood them, yet didn't. Also, he was in much more pain whenever he experienced this dream. It was like they were torturing him. He could feel bones breaking. He'd try to cry out from the pain but couldn't. The best he could do was twitch his body a bit. He really hated this dream. He always had a hard time waking from it.

"He's shivering again," a female said. He felt his head get stroked gently and then something was laid against his body. He felt someone hold his paw.

"It's part of the shock his body is going through as it changes," a male voice spoke. "I've been able to halt him from shrinking further for the moment, but I can't stop the change process. I can make some modifications only. I'm really sorry, Dr. Michaud."

"His squirrel character is a Eurasian red," the female responded. "As you can't stop this from happening, can you at least make him that species? I think he'll handle his new body better that way."

"I'll try."

This made little sense to him. He had always been a Eurasian red squirrel. What were they talking about by 'make him a Eurasian red?' He drifted off again and woke-up to Sheila giving him another tongue bath. He would try to describe the dream to her. She'd give a knowing glance to Cantaloupe while reassuring him it was just a dream. Cantaloupe would then snuggle up to him to help keep him warm as his fur continued to slowly grow back in.

But the dream kept returning. Human scents and voices. Someone gently holding his paw, stroking the fur on the back of his head and neck, and whispering in his ear to hang-in there. He enjoyed the fur stroking. But it didn't block the excruciating pain. He'd work hard to wake-up from the dream to find either Cantaloupe or Sheila there to reassure him.

Then that strange dream returned yet again. However, this time it was a little different. The pain was absent. He stirred where he lay. Slowly, he came awake in the dream, and opened his eyes. He slowly moved his head about taking in the strange sounds, lighting, scents, and setting. It seemed real. Neither Sheila nor Cantaloupe were around and worse, he couldn't smell they had been around. He wasn't in a nest of leaves and pine needles, but on a strange sleeping platform of some sort with something covering most of his body. His mind had a name for the 'bedsheet,' but both the name and the object seemed alien to him. All the weird scents nearly drowned out the other scent. Humans. Fight or flight tried to set-in from the strangeness of it all. He nervously twitched his tail briefly before fighting down the urge to send out a warning scree. Somehow, he fought it off as he shook his head trying to clear it. Where were Sheila and Cantaloupe? Though

he'd been here before in his dreams, it was much more vivid this time, probably because he could see this time and look about.

"He's awake," a human quietly called out to someone not within his field of vision. At least, he assumed it was human. It was hard to tell with all the clothing covering most of it except the eyes. How did he know what that was? And it was the smallest human he had ever seen. It may be twice his height and not the six plus times his height as it should be. "Dr. Zebronski, Mr. Mee-shoe is awake, please report to the quarantine room, immediately." The human was close in her pronunciation of Michaud. This pleased Pistachio for some reason, which confused him further, especially when he realized he clearly understood the human's speech. How was that possible?

Pistachio slowly sat-up, and the strange covering slid off his back. He felt a wave of dizziness wash over him. He slowly shook his head to try and clear it. There were thin stringy things attached to his chest. His mind interpreted them as 'wires,' but part of him wasn't sure what those were, though another part knew that's what they were. Then he noticed the other thing stuck into his forelimb. His mind named it as an 'IV', whatever that was. He slowly looked about and chittered briefly. His tail wigwagged nervously as he searched for a possible escape route. He was trapped just like in the previous dreams, but at least now he could see and move. As he looked about, he saw nowhere he could flee to. His tail wigwagged nervously.

The human kept its distance and actually crouched down trying to make itself look smaller. "Mr. Michaud, please try to remain calm. You've been through a lot. You are in your hospital room at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. You were struck by lightning ten days ago and have been here since then. Dr. Zebronski will be right in."

The squirrel looked nervously at the human and continued wigwagging his tail. How was it he understood her? He thought it was female based on the voice. And why was it crouching away from him? He smelled fear coming from her. Why was she, an apex predator, afraid of him, Pistachio, a prey animal? Pistachio's mind clouded with confusion as he again looked about the rest of the 'room.' There had to be somewhere he could flee to. An opening appeared briefly in the far wall. Before he could think to make a leap for it, another human passed through it, and it closed again. 'Door' came into his mind as the name for that opening.

"Mr. Michaud, I'm glad to see you're awake. How do you feel?"

Pistachio wigwagged his tail again and chittered nervously. Like the other human, this one was small, only about twice his size. This was weird. How could that be? This one also sounded female, but it was hard to tell with all the clothing covering it.

"How is it you and I understand each other? Who is this Mr. Michaud?" He pronounced it correctly. "And who are you?" Pistachio crouched back as far as he could on the strange platform with his tail directly over his body, swirling it in a brief circle above his body and head. He chittered nervously as he glanced back and forth between the two predators. His paws nearly got tangled in the wires. He quickly nipped them off to free himself. An annoying sound emitted from the box the wires led to. Pistachio felt his forelimb tug due to the IV. He sniffed at it, bit at

the metal tip where it entered his forelimb, and yanked it free, yelping a little at the pain. He licked the wound quickly while keeping an eye on the two humans. One of them reached for the noisy box, touched it, and the noise ceased.

“You are Richard Michaud, my patient. I am Dr. Leona Zebronski, Mr. Michaud. I have been in charge of your medical treatment since your arrival here. And it is fortunate, that we can still communicate with each other verbally. The staff wasn’t sure if that would be possible once you awakened considering your condition.”

Pistachio blinked a couple of times, trying to understand what the human meant, all while keeping an eye on both of them. “My name is Pistachio.” He didn’t relax his stance as he blinked for a moment. “You humans have such weird names, Dr. Leona Zebronski.” He was able to pronounce it pretty close though he was unsure how he was able to speak the human language so well.

The one calling herself Dr. Zebronski glanced at the other human. “You don’t remember?” She asked him.

“Remember what?” Pistachio replied raising his tail briefly. He quickly cocked his head about, again trying to find somewhere to escape while he stalled for time. There wasn’t anywhere to flee except through the door behind the humans.

“Where you were before arriving here?”

Pistachio wigwagged his tail some more. “Some friends are caring for me after lightning struck and destroyed my nest and the tree it was in.”

Pistachio didn’t miss that the unnamed one was slowly circling around to his left.

“Not quite, though friends did save your life,” Dr. Zebronski stated. “You were at a bowling alley in a squirrel costume when the alley was stuck by lightning. You were electrocuted. Fortunately, thanks to the quick action of those friend, you survived, though there were side effects. Side effects we’re still trying to figure out.”

Something flickered in the back of Pistachio’s mind. He shook it off as he needed to concentrate on where the second human was. Seeing she was getting too close, he chittergrowled. “Stay back!” He uttered a series of chitterbarks and bared his teeth in warning, wigwagging his tail trying to make himself look bigger.

Dr. Zebronski waved to the nurse to stop her. “He’s viewing us as a threat.”

Pistachio made his move while they were distracted and leapt between them towards the ‘door.’ He grasped at the ‘handle’ and again wasn’t sure how he knew the term or how to operate it and yanked down on the handle. The door opened. He darted through and slammed it shut. He fumbled at it and found a smaller knob on it that latched with a satisfying click as one of the humans tried to open the now locked door.

There was a second door in front of him. This one he opened cautiously and found a third one beyond. Pistachio wigwagged his tail as he darted to the third door. Again, he opened that one cautiously. Air hissed around the opening. He looked out into a tunnel, which his mind named a 'hallway.' He looked left and then right. To his right he could see daylight in the distance. He darted that way as fast as his paws would take him. His claws skittered and clacked loudly on the smooth "linoleum" floor. At least that was the name for the flooring that flashed in his head.

"Code Green, East Patient Tower, Third Floor. Use extreme caution. Code Green, East Patient Tower, Third Floor. Use extreme caution..." A human voice intoned over and over from somewhere overhead in the hallway.

Ahead to his left, a human came through a doorway, took one look at Pistachio, let out a scream, dropping the tray it had in its hands, and fled back the way it came. Pistachio ignored it as he slid to a stop in front of the clear barrier between him and freedom. Something in his mind warned him about the 'window' and that he wouldn't be able to just leap through to the oak tree beyond. His tail whipped about in fear as he quickly patted at the clear barrier with his forepaws until he found another latch like on the door. A section of the window opened in and downward. He could smell fresh air. Beyond it was a second barrier. His mind named it a 'screen'. His claws quickly slashed through this second and final barrier. It would be a tight fit, but he should be able to squeeze through.

"Stop him!" someone cried-out behind him.

Pistachio wasted no time. He wiggled through the opening onto a narrow ledge and leapt to the oak. To his shock, it was smaller than it first appeared to be as the branch sagged dangerously under him. He leapt a second time further up the branch just as the section he first grabbed onto snapped. He fumbled a bit on the branch and dangled briefly by just his front paws before pulling himself up and regaining his balance. Why was this so hard? Climbing had always been second nature to him. Maybe the small humans had done something to him. Right now, it didn't matter. He needed to concentrate on fleeing. As he scrambled along the branch to the trunk he seemed to get better at climbing.

Up or down? He looked about briefly. There were no other trees within leaping distance. So, down it would have to be. He nearly lost his grip as he started down, scrabbled a few times before gaining a proper grip. Again, he fought down the frustration of this. There was no time for it. He needed to concentrate on fleeing! He shook his head a moment to try and clear it. He then quickly climbed down the tree to the ground. Putting the strange human structure behind him, he ran for the forest of trees beyond the large area of human-killed ground which his mind named 'parking lot.'