

Chapter 26

Pistachio ran as fast as he could through the undergrowth dodging branches as he went. Several times, he crossed a pathway that his mind called a 'hiking trail.' Twice more, he startled other humans along the trail as he crossed paths with them. He was in full-on panic mode now. If there was a tree big enough, he'd flee up it. As it was, all of them were too small for him. He could flee up one, but then he'd be trapped. None of them had branches big enough for him to go from tree to tree. What kind of a messed-up world was this?

He was suddenly clear of the forest and skidded to a halt a few body lengths short of the latest road. There were multiple humans standing next to their trucks. They had guns! He turned and darted back towards the trees, chittering in fear.

"No, don't shoot him! Let me try to reason with him!"

The voice sounded vaguely familiar, but he wasn't going to stop. He crashed through the underbrush and darted to his left until he came across a largish white pine. He quickly scaled it and circled around the other side and held still, fighting the urge to send out a danger scree.

"Rick?!" the voice cried out and paused. "Pistachio?!" The voice got closer. Pistachio held still as the human passed under his tree. "Rick?! Pistachio?!"

That voice. He recognized it from the previous nightmares. The human looked up straight at him as he held still hoping his fur camouflaged enough against the trunk of the tree so she, the human was female, wouldn't spot him. She wandered on a little way calling his name and that other name, Rick, several times. She paused and wandered back to the base of the pine tree.

"I'm betting you're up there, Pistachio. I followed the trail you made as you fled, breaking branches as you went. There aren't any broken branches beyond this tree."

His tail twitched in fear, betraying his location.

"There you are! I knew it. Please come down, Pistachio. You're safe. They won't harm you if I'm with you, hon."

Pistachio chittered nervously as he turned around and faced downward at the human.

"That's right, hon. I'm no threat to you." She paused a moment. "You must be awfully hungry, tired, and thirsty. You've covered over 25 miles (40km) since yesterday afternoon." She reached into her pocket and ripped open some packaging. "I've got a granola bar. It's not much but it's food." She stood at the base of the tree, raised one arm and waved the granola bar in that hand.

Pistachio's stomach rumbled again. He was hungry. And it was so tempting. He came down a little way and hesitated.

“That’s right hon. Just a little further.” She held her arm still, extending the bar as high up as she could reach.

Pistachio felt he could trust this human for some reason, but he wasn’t sure why. Slowly and cautiously, he made his way down, tail constantly wigwagging, just far enough to snap the bar out of her hand with his teeth. He fled back up and quickly gnawed through it.

“I’ve got one more, hon, but you’re going to have to come all the way down for it.” She walked a few body lengths away from the base of the tree and sat down against a smaller maple tree. She waved the granola bar in her hand up at him.

Eventually, hunger won out and Pistachio slowly crept down the tree. He sprawled out on the ground facing her with his tail over his body, flicking it back and forth fearfully. She held the bar out towards him. He crawled forward and reached for it. She pulled it out of his reach. Pistachio chattered in frustration.

“You need to trust me, Pistachio. I’m no threat to you.” She held the bar out again, but not very far from her body.

Pistachio worked up the nerve and got closer. She didn’t pull the bar away as he reached for it carefully with his teeth. He froze as he got a good smell of her hand. His eyes grew large enough for her to see the whites as the granola bar fell from his mouth.

“You,” his nose quivered. “I dreamed of you. You tried to comfort me through the pain. You held my paw and stroked my head.” Pistachio flicked his tail about in confusion.

There were tears in Abigail’s eyes. “I’m afraid it wasn’t a dream, hon. I wish this was just a nightmare, but it isn’t.”

Pistachio crept right up to Abigail, leaving the granola bar behind. She froze, so did he. “You asked me to trust you,” Pistachio said and chattered briefly as his tail flicked up over his head. “Now, you need to trust me. I need to make sure. I promise I won’t bite you as long as you don’t try to grab me. I’m having a hard-enough time fighting my instincts telling me to flee.” He sniffed all over her, occasionally flicking his tail. His whiskers were ticklish. He then pulled back, retrieved the granola bar, and then sat near her. “I don’t know how I know, but your name is Abigail Michaud and I know you are no threat to me.” There was a bit of confusion in the tone of his voice as he nibbled at the granola bar.

Abigail nodded. “Yes. And you are…”

“Pistachio.” He pointed to his chest with his tail. “I’m a Eurasian red squirrel, but somehow I’m a lot bigger than I should be.” He quickly gnawed through the rest of the granola bar before continuing. “That’s why the trees seem so small, isn’t it? It’s not that you and the other humans are tiny. It’s because, somehow I’m nearly as big as you.” He looked her up and down. “Yes, sitting like that, you’re only slightly larger than me.” He shook his head a moment and seemed to stare off into the distance and blinked a few times. He then held up a paw in a very human

fashion to keep her from responding. “You’re looking for your mate, Richard Michaud.” Pistachio drooped his tail. “I understand now why Dr. Leona Zebronski called me by his name when I first woke up. I can feel his memories up here,” he pointed to his head with the tip of his tail. Pistachio shook his head again. “They made themselves known as I scented you. And the way they’ve come rushing in, to use one of your human phrases, I’m developing the mother of all headaches.” He put both his forepaws against his head in emphasis. “I think that’s the right term based on those memories. And it’s his memories that are helping me to talk to you and understand you in return. But, I’m Pistachio,” he paused again, shaking his head. “Please be patient while I try to sort through this. I’ll explain the best I can, but I need time to understand what’s running through my head.” He eyes darted about. “Imagine binge-watching several TV series as you call them all at the same time on fast forward, but somehow you retain everything from them. I’m supposed to be just a simple squirrel. I shouldn’t even know what a TV series is, but I do.” He placed his forepaws on his head again while closing his eyes. “Spirit, this hurts worse than the time Rick banged his head on that cast-iron sewer pipe in the basement.” He fell silent, his tail twitching now and then.

A medical technician and dart gun wielding game warden approached. Abigail signaled to them, that all was well. “He needs more time. It’ll be fine. I’ll get him to come out. Just give us more time and space.” They backed off.

There was silence for several minutes. Finally, Pistachio opened his eyes again and looked about. “Thank you for waving them off. As I said, I need more time to take this in and understand in a way I can explain. But I’m hungry, thirsty, and my instincts still want me to flee away from you and the others by the road.” He drooped his tail. “And it’s going to take an awful lot of these,” he picked up a green pinecone, “to satisfy my hunger.”

“Come back to the road. You need to go back to the hospital, hon. We can stop and get some food along the way.”

“The others won’t try to shoot me, will they?” he flicked his tail nervously back and forth.

“No, as long as you don’t threaten them.”

Pistachio thought about that for a moment while nervously twitching his tail. “Alright. Rick would trust you, so I can. Lead the way.”

She led and he followed. The other humans tensed-up at first until Abigail reassured them that Pistachio was cooperating. She opened a door in one of the vehicles. “Get in, Pistachio.”

Pistachio flicked his tail nervously again, but worked-up the courage and leapt in. She got in after him, closed the door and proceeded to draw her seatbelt over her body and latch it in place. Pistachio watched this. Then he looked on his side and found his seatbelt and proceeded to mimic what she did.

“This isn’t very comfortable. It squishes my tail.” He shifted slightly sideways, partially freeing his tail from the seat back. “That’s a little better.”

A voice came from a box in the front of the vehicle, "Patient has been found and is cooperating. Repeat, patient has been found and is cooperating."

Two other humans got in the front of the vehicle as a different voice came from the box, "Roger that."

Abigail leaned forward against the plexiglass with holes in it separating the front seat from the rear. "Would you mind stopping at the Rumney Diner. Pistachio is hungry."

The other two looked at each other and then at her.

"It was part of the deal to coax him out. I promised he'd get fed. We'll make it a to go order, obviously."

The driver nodded. It was a short trip back down the mountain road to Rumney. They quickly pulled over at the diner. "Lunch stop as requested, ma'am," the driver stated.

"What would you like, hon?" Abigail asked.

Pistachio wigwagged his tail again. "I'm craving protein. I think a burger with grilled onions would hit the spot." There was confusion on his muzzle for a moment. "I'm not sure why that's what I want." He paused again as his eyes seemed to dart about and then continued, "From what I'm seeing in Richard's memories, he likes burgers among other things. So, I'm willing to give it a shot. Whole grain bun, lightly toasted if possible."

"Add a couple bottles of water to that, please."

The driver got out of the vehicle and went into the diner. It wasn't long before he returned and opened Abigail's door and handed a Styrofoam container and two bottles of water to her. She thanked him before he closed the door, circled back around to the other side of the vehicle, and got in.

Pistachio stared at the bottle trying to figure it out. Abigail opened and removed the cap and demonstrated taking a sip. Pistachio tried to mimic her, only to spill it all over the front of his fur. He chittered in annoyance.

"Obviously, I can't drink the same way as a human."

Abigail chuckled a little before pouring some in her cupped hand for him to lap. Pistachio unbuckled his seatbelt to be better able to bend over and lap at the water. She then set the Styrofoam box on the seat between them and opened it up. Inside was a burger on a whole grain bun as requested and a side of French fries. She picked-up a couple fries and ate them. Pistachio carefully picked-up the burger sniffing at it and then dug into it. He forced himself to chew it carefully, though he wanted to wolf it down. He had to take several little bites with his incisors and then pause as he chewed it at the back of his mouth before swallowing and then repeat the

process. He hadn't realized how hungry he had been. He quickly worked his way through the fries too. Abigail cupped her hand again and poured water in it for him to lap when he asked. When he finished, she capped the bottle and set it aside and then closed the now empty box and put it down at her feet.

Pistachio didn't bother to refasten his seatbelt. He stared out the window briefly as they passed a directional sign indicating the turn to Groton. The vehicle didn't turn as they were heading west to Hanover back to the hospital. "So, that's why I felt drawn to go there."

"Go where, hon?"

"Your and Rick's home. I had climbed up a hill this morning, looked about, spotted a human settlement to the east and felt drawn to it. It was Groton I was looking at. I resisted the urge as it didn't make sense why I'd want to go towards a human settlement while trying to flee from humans."

Pistachio shook his head again and closed his eyes a moment. When he opened them, he reached for Abigail's closest hand with one of his slightly smaller paws and held it with a firm, but gentle grip. He then reached with his other forepaw and gently stroked the back of her hand with the pads of his paw, being careful to not scratch her with his claws. He looked her in the eyes as best he could as his squirrel eyes were in their proper place to the side of his head instead of in front like a human's.

"Thank you for the food and water. It's given me time to sort through some of the jumble in my head. I can see in Rick's memories what happened. And please be patient as I explain it this way." Pistachio flicked his tail up and down once. "Rick had been bowling with a bunch of students. He serves as their club advisor. He was wearing a high-tech squirrel costume," Pistachio paused. "What he'd call a fursuit, pretending to be me, though it was the wrong species." He blinked a moment. "Giant Malabar. Very colorful. The students were using my name instead of Rick's and he responded to it as his own. Then the batteries that operate the fursuit ran low and needed recharging. He plugged it into an electrical outlet to recharge. He was eating pizza and talking to someone named, Jim, when lightning struck outside." Pistachio paused a moment and quivered all over. "There was a power surge inside and we were electrocuted." He looked in shock at Abigail. "Our heart stopped as our body burned. There was a moment of extreme pain before we fell over and died. We were floating near the ceiling and could see the students working on our body. There was this bright light and we were being drawn towards it. Other humans arrived. They touched us with these paddle things and there was another electrical jolt and more pain. Things turned black. Then, I 'woke-up' in extreme pain from the burns with Sheila and Cantaloupe pulling me out of the remains of my splintered tree which had also just been struck by lightning."

"Who are Sheila and Cantaloupe?" Abigail asked.

"A blue fox-wolf hybrid and an orange and tan raccoon respectively. They belong to two furry community members Rick knows, humans who work for Second Fur, where the fursuit was made. They helped make it. His subconscious borrowed their furry characters for some reason and put

them into my world, maybe to give me some company.” Pistachio shrugged very human-like and his tail flicked-up his back. “They’re good friends to me, probably ‘cause that’s what Rick decided they were.

“As for me, I am Pistachio, Rick’s squirrel character. I realize that I’m just some character he made-up in his mind.” Pistachio paused for a moment gathering his thoughts and seemed to stare blankly for a moment. “And I’ve been part of him for a very, very long time, it seems, all the way back to grade school in one form or another. I was more of a cartoonish squirrel similar to Acorn Squirrel on *Animalmania* at first. However, for the past 15 or so years, basically, as long as he’s known you, I’ve been a normal, though sentient, Eurasian red squirrel. I’m his squirrel-side you reference from time-to-time for his habits on ‘hoarding’ food though he’s always good at rotating through your food larder stocks to being up bright and early and ready to take on the day with the sunrise.

“But I shouldn’t be here, Abigail. I don’t understand why I’m here instead of your Rick. I’m trying to call out to him in our mind, but I don’t feel him as being present, for lack of a better term. His memories are there for me to access, but that’s all I can feel of him. I’ll keep trying because I know Rick is important to you. I see that in his memories. I can see how much you matter to him, and I assume he matters to you. While I’m some small part of his mind, I’m not him. Your mate may be gone and somehow, left me behind in his place.” Pistachio drooped his tail. “I don’t know how to explain it. I’m trying to be as honest as I can as his memories show he’d do likewise.”

Tears filled Abigail’s eyes.

“Please understand,” Pistachio continued. “When Sheila and Cantaloupe found me, I was badly burned, most likely as bad off as your mate had been here. I was barely alive. With what little strength I still had in me, I had pleaded with them to end my life. I was in so much pain and didn’t think I’d survive much longer. I just wanted the pain to end. I gave Sheila permission to eat me. She refused and they both worked on nursing me back to health. Now, I better understand in that dream world, Rick’s subconscious, or whatever you want to call it, why they insisted on keeping me alive despite the pain. They must have been representing Rick’s will to survive. Of course, at the time, that was **my** reality and I didn’t know I was just a made-up character in some human’s mind.” He paused a moment in thought. “I never sustained an injury there before the lightning strike. I had the simple existence of a squirrel, well, a talking one anyway.”

Still holding Abigail’s hand in his forepaws, he looked at what parts of his body he could see. “There’s one thing other thing I don’t understand, though. We...Rick and I were badly burned. Yet, I’m not human. I’m a giant, nearly human-size squirrel.” He swished his tail. “And there are no signs of those burns, though the nurse and Dr. Zebronski said I’d only been unconscious about ten days. Why is that? Isn’t your mate human like you?” There was confusion in his voice.

“Yes, my mate had been human, Pistachio,” Abigail replied as she brought around her other hand. “May I pet you?”

Pistachio hesitated a moment but nodded. "As Rick's mate I know can trust you."

Abigail brushed her hand gently along his head and then scratched him at the back of the neck. He found it very pleasing and totally relaxed for the first time since waking up in this strange place. Deep down, he knew Rick's mate wouldn't harm him. A mixture of a chitter and a purr rumbled quietly out of him.

"My Rick changed into you, Pistachio. I can't explain exactly how it worked. The transformation healed the burns as it changed you into the giant squirrel you are now. Of course, you felt pain despite being unconscious considering what your body went through. Whether you're Rick or just the part of him called Pistachio, you're still my husband. My mate." She gently kissed him on the forehead. "We'll get through this somehow, hon."

Pistachio laid down, semi-sprawled on the seat, setting his head in her lap as she continued to gently pet him. He quickly fell asleep feeling safe for the first time since awakening in this strange human world.