

Chapter 27

Pistachio slowly awakened as Abigail nudged him.

“We’re back at the hospital, hon. They’re bringing a gurney out for you. You’ll need to ride on it back to your room.”

Pistachio looked out the window. “Why are they covered in those strange plastic suits?”

“They’re afraid you might be contagious.” She paused at the look from him. “They’re afraid if you bite someone, that person would also change into a giant squirrel.”

“Yet you’re not covered like them.”

“I’m not afraid of you nor of the danger if it is true. You’re my husband.”

Pistachio thought on this for a moment before replying, “As long as they don’t try to attack me, I won’t have a reason to fight back.”

One of the suit-covered humans opened Abigail’s door. She stepped out. “Come on, Pistachio.” She put a hand on the gurney. “Up here.”

Pistachio complied, sitting on the gurney, and was quickly whisked inside. He looked about as they moved down a hallway and to a door that opened as a bell chimed and into a small room barely long enough for the gurney. He knew from Rick’s memories it was an elevator, a human device for hauling things from one floor to another. The door closed and he felt the sensation of them moving upward. It stopped after a very brief time. The door opened again as a bell chimed and the gurney was whisked out into another hallway and eventually to a room marked ‘Quarantine.’ Through all this, Abigail remained at his side, so he remained calm though part of him wanted to flee from all the humans.

Inside, Dr. Zebronski and a nurse, both wrapped in plastic coverings, masks, and face shields were waiting.

“You should cover-up, Dr. Michaud.”

“I will not. I’m not afraid of Pistachio or what it would mean should he accidentally bite me, which he won’t.”

Pistachio nodded in agreement. “I’m sorry for my behavior and reaction yesterday, Dr. Zebronski. I now understand you were trying to help me. I’m sure we have a lot to discuss, but before you start anything, please let me sniff you.”

The doctor and nurse looked at each other and then at Abigail.

“Pistachio is doing his best to fight the instinct to flee again. If I understand him correctly, he needs to sniff you as he did me to...”

“I promise I won’t bite,” Pistachio cut in. “But you need to hold still as I sniff over you.” He flicked his tail about a few times. “I need to do this to...” he paused a moment as his eyes seemed to look blankly for a moment, “imprint in my mind that you are a friend here to help me, and not a predator out to get me.”

Dr. Zebronski hesitated a moment and then stepped forward and held out a hand. Pistachio gently took it in his forepaws, partially slid back the covering and sniffed at the back of her wrist. He slid the covering back and let go. “Thank you. Again, I’m sorry for how I behaved yesterday.” The nurse followed suit nervously. Again, Pistachio repeated what he had done with Dr. Zabronski and thanked the nurse afterward. “Go ahead and examine me as you need to, but please talk through what you want/need to do. Up here,” he pointed to his head with his tail, “I’m a giant, wild squirrel, doc, and you remain a predator to me, though one I can trust.”

Abigail briefed them on the encounter at Stinson Lake and the return trip. Dr. Zabronski nodded and turned to her patient.

“I need to touch you all over, Pistachio, to check for fleas, ticks, and any injuries you may have inflicted on yourself.”

Pistachio nodded. “Go ahead. You’ll find a small bite wound on my left shoulder.”

“What bit you?”

Pistachio flicked his tail up and down once. “A marten tried to attack me last night hoping to make me its dinner. It was a fatal error on his part.” Pistachio drooped his tail. “The predator became prey. I had mortally wounded it in self-defense. I then put it out of its misery and didn’t let the meat go to waste.” He hesitated a moment. “I was very hungry at the time.”

Abigail stared in horror at Pistachio’s confession. Dr. Zebronski simply nodded as she poked and prodded at the giant squirrel. “The wound is small and seems to be healing alright. I’ll leave it be, but we’ll keep an eye on it. I’m not finding any parasites. You got lucky on that part. It sounds like you had no problem with your meal last night nor the burger you had for lunch.”

“The burger was excellent, though for some reason I think I would prefer it closer to medium rather than well-done. Or at least Rick would have preferred it medium.”

The nurse nodded at Pistachio. “Safety protocols at most restaurants.”

“For humans, yes, but I’m not exactly human, am I?” He raised his tail briefly in sort of a question mark pose.

“No,” Dr. Zebronski answered. “But you have just told me you enjoyed that burger earlier today as a human would have.”

“Like humans, squirrels are omnivores, Dr. Zebronski,” Pistachio paused as his gaze seemed to go blank briefly. “Pardon the blank stare. I’m accessing something in Rick’s memories. Yes, there we go. Tree squirrels are omnivores as I said before. Or at least that’s one of the things Rick read up on in regard to my kind and was quick to remind others at furry meets. And what I know about Eurasian red squirrels is based on what he knows whether its factual or not. And as I, apparently, still have human vocal cords and maintain Rick’s memories, perhaps I’m really something between the two species.” Pistachio wigwagged his tail perplexed at the thought. “My squirrel side would prefer to be squirrel-sized, but obviously, this is what I’m stuck with. Is there something you could do to help me find Rick up here?” He pointed to his head with his tail. “Mind you, I like living, but I understand this is his body. I won’t deny him of it if he’s still around. And,” he glanced at Abigail, “it’s real important to his mate that he be found.”

“I’m a medical doctor, not a psychiatrist. I will arrange for one to speak with you shortly. Perhaps the change,” she paused, “no, that’s not strong enough a term. Perhaps the metamorphosis was both physical and to a point, mental.”