

Chapter 28

There was another knock at the door and another human dressed in personal protective equipment like the doctor and nurse peaked in. “Is now a good time?”

“As good a time as any,” Abigail replied and glanced at Dr. Zebronski. “You’re call.”

“You may enter,” Dr. Zebronski responded.

The human entered carrying a laptop. Pistachio watched him cautiously, wigwagging his tail.

“I’m thankful they found you safe and sound. I was afraid the process would unpause itself. I had a hard-enough time getting it to do as it did without you losing any more body mass.”

“Hasn’t he changed enough already?” Abigail replied.

“That’s up to him,” Ross replied, setting his laptop down on a rolling tray. He turned to Pistachio. “Mr. Michaud, I’m Ross Delling. It’s my fault this happened to you.”

Pistachio’s tail twitched. “My name is Pistachio, Mr. Delling. I can understand the name mix-up. However, as you humans would put it, ‘Rick’s not home’ at the moment.”

Ross glanced Abigail and Dr. Zebronski. “I see. Maybe I should have tried to pause it sooner. I’m so sorry.”

“No, you did what you could,” Abigail responded. “But my Rick may have already been gone before you took control.” She quickly briefed him.

He sighed. “I see,” he repeated. He turned to Pistachio.

“Before you go any further, Mr. Delling, please hold-out your hand and let me sniff you.” Pistachio’s tail wigwagged in a circular pattern over his back. “I need to ingrain in my mind that you’re here to help me.”

Ross hesitated a moment before holding out his hand. Pistachio gently held Ross’ arm, pushed back the protective covering, and sniffed at the back of his hand. He then slid the covering back in place before releasing his grip. “Thank you,” he said.

Ross paused a moment before continuing. “Please believe me when I say, I never intended this to be inflicted on you/Rick. When I learned what happened, I did what I could to mitigate the damage. It was touch and go for a while.”

“What was?”

“The nanobots got scrambled pretty badly by the electrical surge. For a while I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to control them at all. Jim helped in that matter. The surge activated them.

By the time I got involved, the transformation had already progressed too far. That surge also caused the bots to work in one of the features of the fursuit into your change, the pockets.”

“Pockets?” Pistachio asked, reaching down, and found, that yes, he had pockets. He cocked his head sideways to get a better look. They blended in with his fur just as Rick’s memories indicated they did in the fursuit. “Interesting. So, I’ve got pockets like a cartoon character.”

Ross continued. “I was able to get the change to stop at this point before you shrank too much. However, there is no way I can reverse you from a squirrel back into a human as there was too much mass loss in the process, unless you want to be a midget at best.”

Pistachio nodded. “I can see how that would be important for Rick to know, but I’m fine being a squirrel. How did you know to make me a Eurasian red squirrel? I assume you did that because they’re not native to this area.”

“Your wife requested that. While I couldn’t stop the change, there were some alterations I could do such as the species, for example. I also gave you some modesty without the need for pants.”

“Modesty?” Pistachio paused with his eyes staring off blankly for a moment until he found the meaning of the term in Rick’s memories. “Ah, yes, that explains why my manhood is in a pouch-like pocket as I discovered early this morning. I find this a bit weird how you humans need to hide your sex from each other like this.” He stopped short of sticking his paws in the pouch and simply pointed. “Then again, Rick would probably be happy with it if he was here. And it’s not uncomfortable, which I’m sure is what you’d be concerned about. These nanobot things you’re talking about, what are they?” Pistachio briefly held his tail up in a curl like a question mark.

“Tiny robots you can’t see without a powerful microscope,” Ross replied. “The ones in you were programmed to alter human DNA into squirrel DNA.”

Again, Pistachio seemed to stare off into the distance. “Please don’t be alarmed as I stare off blankly like this. I’m just trying to find the meaning of the terms you’re using in Rick’s memories.” He paused another moment and then his eyes widened. “Oh! So, basically, DNA is the blueprint that makes an individual who they are. Alright. So, these nanobot things erased most of what made Rick human and rewrote it to transform his body into this. Interesting. Maybe that’s why I’m here instead of him. Where did you learn to make and control these nanobot things?”

“I attended Boston Tech’s robotics program but dropped-out due to boredom. I could have taught the classes I was required to take. I spent several years at MyRobot, Inc. before Mr. Santorum hired me to work on prosthetics. In my spare time, I did a lot of research on the net. You’d be amazed at what you can find out there if you know where to look. It took me many months to create and program them. I don’t think anyone else has figured out how to combine the research available out there into something like this. At least not yet, anyway.”

Pistachio nodded. He wasn't sure why he was so curious about all this. Maybe it was Rick trying to poke through? Who knows, but he felt he needed to continue asking questions. "Please pardon all the questions. I'm not sure why I'm so curious about this. So, why me?"

Ross sighed. "Purely accidental. I never intended anyone else to be a victim of this, Mr. Michaud," he paused. "I mean, Pistachio. As I've said to Mr. Santorum and your wife, I had intended to be my own experimental subject."

Pistachio nodded. "So, you planned to change yourself into a squirrel?" His tail wigwagged in amusement. "Well, personally, being a squirrel is better than human, especially based on what I see in Rick's memories of humankind in general. So, somehow Rick...I was infected with these...nanobots that you intended for yourself?"

Ross nodded. "Yes, as the first prototype fursuit was a squirrel. If it had been some other species, I'd have gone for whatever it was. As you said, it would be better than being human. My plan was to 'borrow' the suit and use it to practice being the animal and then trigger the nanobots. An automated message would then go to Second Fur when I was done with the suit providing its location for retrieval. I'd be long gone into the forest by then."

Pistachio nodded again and thought for a moment taking that in. "Though Rick liked to play a squirrel in furry circles, I'm not sure what his reaction will be if I ever draw him out and he sees what's happened to our body." He wigwagged his tail in thought. "That's provided he's still up here." He pointed to his head with his tail. "You said that you've paused these nanobots. What does that mean?"

"Yes. At this point, I can shut them down and they'll flush harmlessly out of your body. Or, I can turn them back on and let them complete the change, shrinking you down to a normal-size squirrel. Probably three or four more days. I don't know if you'd maintain your/Rick's memories or not if you chose to go that route. When you fled, my biggest fear was that the nanobots would somehow unpause themselves and finish the process without allowing you the choice."

Pistachio's eyes widened as Ross explained about the nanobots. He wasn't stuck as a giant squirrel! He could just ask this human to finish this nanobot-thingy process and he could be normal. He glanced at Abigail as he suddenly smelled fear coming from her. He drooped his tail as he looked at her and saw the fear in her eyes that matched what he could smell. Rick's memories of her were very strong and he felt compelled not to hurt her. He slowly nodded at her.

"If you hadn't found me when you did, Abigail, I'd have been a normal-size squirrel in three- or four-days' time. I suspect that's what was driving me to flee as far away from humans as I could run." He turned to Ross Delling. "Thank you for doing what you can, Mr. Delling. Obviously, I have a lot to think about. I assume that if you turn off the nanobots now and down the road, if I change my mind, you could rebuild these nanobot things and change me the rest of the way, right?"

Ross paused for a moment in thought. "Yes, but it would take time to do so."

He glanced at Abigail. "It feels strange saying this. Squirrels don't normally keep mates. We tend to be as you humans put it, 'one-night stands' and then the female chases the male off and raises the pups on her own." He paused again. "At least that's what Rick has learned in his hobby research. But Rick's feelings for you are near overwhelming. You have stayed by our side through this ordeal, Abigail or as Rick calls you, Abbie, hoping to get your husband back. For your sake and Rick's, for now I'll stay like this. I really feel, this body is on loan to me, at least for the moment. As such I don't have the right to claim it yet. So, I'll continue to try and find Rick for you up here." He pointed to his head with his tail. "However, if I can't turn him up by late spring," he paused a moment, "the end of the spring school semester, then he is most likely gone. At that point, I hope you'll be able to let him go and that you let me be in body what I am in mind. I am Pistachio, a common Eurasian red squirrel. Do we have a deal?"

Tears rolled freely down Abigail's face and she embraced the squirrel in a hug and sobbed on his shoulder.

"You don't have to do this," she managed between sobs.

"No, but I owe you and Rick this much. And it's obvious you're not ready to let go of him yet. And his memories of you are very strong. If I were to become what I view as normal now and then found him, I don't think he'd forgive me." He glanced at Ross while he continued to hold onto Abigail, gently stroking her head as she scratched the back his neck while crying into his furry shoulder. "Shut them down, Mr. Delling."

"Immediately." Ross tapped a couple keys on his laptop and stared at the screen a moment. "Done."

Pistachio looked about the room and gestured. "Would you and Dr. Zebronski mind if I have some time alone with Rick's/my mate?" He wigwagged his tail.