

Chapter 31

“Thank you for coming in to visit my patient, Dr. Canatori.”

Dr. Canatori offered his hand to Dr. Zebronski. “My pleasure, Dr. Zebronski, but I’m unsure why you’d need me to drop in without one of our furry ambassadors...” he trailed off in mid-sentence as Dr. Zebronski knocked on and opened the door into her patient’s room.

Dr. Canatori stared at the giant reddish-gray tasseled-ear squirrel, who looked back at him. There was definite intelligence in its eyes as it watched him. Its tail flicked briefly up and down once.

“He’s real? I had several phone calls yesterday from the media and others about several giant squirrel sightings in the Rumney and Stinson Mountain areas. Of course, I didn’t know what they were talking about at the time.”

“Yes. Pistachio didn’t react to well when he first woke up and went on, let’s say, an adventure.” Dr. Zebronski turned to her patient. “Pistachio, this is Dr. Joe Canatori from the Squam Lake Science Center. He’s a wildlife veterinarian.”

The squirrel smiled as he sat-up and offered a paw to Dr. Canatori. “Pleased to meet you, Dr. Canatori,” he responded.

Dr. Canatori’s jaw dropped briefly and it took him a moment to regain his composure and accept the offered paw. It was slightly smaller than his hand. The grip was firm, but Pistachio seemed to be careful in his grip. The squirrel also leaned forward and sniffed his hand before releasing it.

“You can talk?”

Pistachio wigwagged his tail briefly and chittered in amusement. “Of course. Can’t you?”

Dr. Canatori looked at the squirrel and then at Dr. Zebronski and back at the squirrel who continued to watch him intently. “But...but how?”

Pistachio looked at Dr. Zebronski. “I’m guessing you didn’t brief him about me before bringing him to see me?”

Dr. Zebronski shook her head in the negative as she turned to Dr. Canatori. “If I told you in advance my patient was a former human who had been transformed into a giant squirrel, how would you have reacted?”

“That you were pulling my leg.” He paused a moment. “Yes, I can see why you didn’t give me much info. How did this happen?”

Dr. Zebronski briefed him. Throughout the briefing, Dr. Canatori kept glancing at Pistachio. The giant squirrel simply gazed back at him and wigwagged his tail now and then.

“Fascinating,” he responded and turned back to Pistachio. “So, you identify as Pistachio and not Richard Michaud.”

Pistachio nodded in the affirmative. “I have his memories, but it’s like he was someone else and not me.”

Dr. Canatori reached out to touch him. Pistachio blocked where he was reaching with one of his hand-like forepaws. He was gentle, but firm.

“I’m not a dumb animal, Doc. But I’m also fighting against the instincts telling me to run away. I know Dr. Zebronski brought you here to try and help me. I want to cooperate, but you’ve got to help me in order for me to do so. I’ve already sniffed your hand a bit to ingrain into my mind that you’re a friend and not a predator out to get me. I need you to tell me what you wish to do. Surprises are likely to trigger my instincts. I don’t want to flee and I, especially, don’t want to accidentally hurt you.” His tail flicked up and down once on that last sentence.

Dr. Canatori nodded. “My apologies, Pistachio. I’d like to examine you.”

“Do what you need to do, Doc, but talk me through it. Just warn me where you wish to touch next.”

“Alright, let’s start by having a look at your teeth.”

Pistachio opened his mouth wide for the vet and didn’t flinch as Dr. Canatori touched his jaw and turned his head this way and that to get a look at all his teeth. From there, he moved to other parts of Pistachio’s body, always warning him where he was to reach next. They made small talk about Dr. Canatori’s work at the science center and how he’d bring animals from the center to schools and the children’s ward at the hospital, educating kids about New Hampshire’s wild animals. The animals in question were used due to being around humans too long, so they couldn’t be reintroduced into the wild. Dr. Canatori called them his furry ambassadors. He was surprised and fascinated by the flap/pouch that hid Pistachio’s genitals. He carefully inspected Pistachio’s tail and eventually, stroked the fur on the back of his head and neck roughly where the reddish color blended into gray. Pistachio emitted a soft chitter that sounded almost like a cat purr.

“You’re getting a little personal, doc, but I’m enjoying that.”

“I figured you’d enjoy that. And your fur is so soft. Your coat is healthy. You’ve got a small wound on your left shoulder that’s healing nicely.”

“I wasn’t so well behaved the day I first woke-up like this. I fled the hospital and had a run-in with a martin. It didn’t go well for the martin.”

“I see.” Dr. Canatorie responded as he finished checking Pistachio over. “Thank you for your time and cooperation. It’s incredible. For the most part, on the exterior you match-up to a wild squirrel, blown-up in size. Just a few things don’t match-up.”

“The pockets and ‘modesty’ pouch, right?”

“And the fact you’ve got the vocal cords to communicate with us. Let’s get you measured.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a seamstress-style measuring tape. He touched one end of it to Pistachio’s nose. Pistachio gigglechattered briefly as he took hold of the end of the tape for Dr. Canatori. “Thank you. Thirty-five inches (eighty-nine cm), nose to base of tail.” He pulled out a small notepad and jotted it down. He measured Pistachio’s tail next finding it was also thirty-five inches long. Finally, his waist at its widest was twenty-eight inches (seventy-four cm). He had Pistachio get on a scale and recorded his weight at fifty-two pounds (twenty-three-and-a-half kg). The vet then pulled out his phone. Pistachio tried to look at the screen, his tail wigwagging back and forth a few times.

“What are you looking up, Doc?”

“Well, Eurasian Reds aren’t native to North America, so I need to look up some statistics to do some calculations to compare to you.”

Pistachio nodded as his eyes looked distant for a moment. “A normal Eurasian is seven-and-a-half to nine inches long nose to base of tail, roughly eight-inch waist and the tail is six to eight inches long. Weight is between nine and twelve ounces. Or if you want to go metric like in most of Europe, nineteen to twenty-three cm, twenty cm, fifteen to twenty cm, and two-hundred-fifty-five to three-hundred-forty grams, respectively.”

Dr. Canatori stared at his screen as the same info came up. “How did you know?”

“I’m my human’s character. He did a lot of research on Eurasian red squirrels so he could properly play the part in the furry fandom.”

Dr. Canatori nodded. He pulled up the calculator app on his phone.

“You’re now trying to determine if based on my larger proportions I’m near the correct weight, right?”

“Yes. I need to determine that to make sure I recommend the correct dosage of the vaccines you’ll need.”

Pistachio nodded. “You’ll find that based on my proportions, a healthy weight range would be between roughly thirty-three and seventy-six pounds. As I weigh fifty-two pounds, I’m within normal range, slightly less than dead center of that range. Or in metrics fifteen, thirty-four-and-a-half and twenty-three-and-a-half kg.” His tail wigwagged left to right and back in amusement at how easily he calculated the figures in his head. Being stuck in this room was boring, while this mind exercise was entertaining.

Dr. Canatori stared at him as he finished the calculations on his phone. “How did you calculate that so quickly?”

Pistachio wigwagged his tail a few times. “You do have squirrels at your science center, right?”

“Of course.”

“Ever wonder how they leap from tree branch to tree branch quickly and safely?” He tapped his head with the tip of his tail. “We do a lot of rapid calculations up here on a near subconscious level. We have to if we are going to survive those leaps. Provided, it’s not done the same way as humans do math. I’m not sure I could explain how I do it. However, I’ve also got Rick’s memories up here and he’s good at human math. I combined his skills with my rapid ability to do calculations. Realizing I’m roughly four times the length, width, and depth of a normal squirrel, in other words, four times the volume, I simply took the cube of that, sixty-four, and applied it to the weight parameter.”

Dr. Canatori nodded. “I’m impressed.” He turned to Dr. Zebronski. “As soon as you can share the blood tests with me, I’ll be able to provide the vaccine regiment recommendations for Pistachio.” He turned back to the squirrel. “Would you be willing to demonstrate how well you can climb?”

“Only if there’s a tree nearby big enough to accommodate a fifty-two-pound squirrel, Doc. I’d love to stretch my legs. Preferably not the oak I nearly fell out of the other day.” He glanced at Dr. Zebronski. “And I promise I won’t try and flee this time. I’m glad you convinced Abigail to leave for a few hours. I’m not sure how she’d react to me ‘risking my neck’ climbing a tree again.” (gigglechitter)

“There’s a large white pine in the recovery garden if you’re up to it,” Dr. Zebronski added. “And for her own health, your wife needs to take some time away, as I insisted.”

Fifteen minutes later, Pistachio found himself climbing his first tree since his panic fleeing. Remembering how much he had stumbled that first day, he took it slow and easy at first. Now that he better understood how big he was compared to a normal squirrel, Pistachio knew if he slipped and fell, he doubted his tail would serve as much of a parachute and he’d probably be injured. Despite that concern, he quickly picked-up speed as he ascended and soon found himself scrambling up the large white pine tree easily and nimbly. It filled him with delight to get outside, even if it was only briefly.

“That’s high enough!” Dr. Canatori called-up. “Please, turn around and come down slowly. Do at least one circuit of the trunk if you can.”

Pistachio briefly ignored the request as he proceeded higher. “Give me a moment!” he called down. He paused on a large branch where it met the trunk. He carefully reached for and successfully snagged a green pinecone higher up with one forepaw, the other along with his feet firmly grasping the tree. Securing the pinecone in his mouth, he made his way back down, making a couple circuits of the trunk.

“Fascinating!” Dr. Canatori cried-out. “Look at his rear feet. Like a normal squirrel, they rotate around nearly 180 degrees, enabling him to come down headfirst. Hold it right there!” he ordered Pistachio.

Pistachio stopped about ten feet (three m) up the trunk. He let go of his grip with his front paws, confident he finally had the hang of this climbing thing, unlike the day he fled. He dangled by his rear paws while stretching briefly like he had done this many times before, even though it was only one of his first times in this reality. After the stretch he started to gnaw at the pinecone, raining pinecone scales on the ground while enjoying the tiny soft seeds within.

“I was about to ask you to dangle. Wonderful!” Dr. Canatori took some notes on his phone. “Alright, time to do some distance leaping tests.”

“There’s not another tree I can safely leap to from this one, Doc,” Pistachio responded as he pulled the last seed from the cone, dropping the remains of the cone on the ground. “And even if there was, I don’t think the branches could handle the force of a fifty-two-pound squirrel pushing down against it to make the leap, never mind the landing on the other branch.” He paused a moment. “That helps explain how I almost killed myself the other day when I fled. I had leapt from a window to an oak tree. The branch I landed on snapped. I barely had time to leap from it to a safer part of the tree.”

“I realize there aren’t a couple of larger trees nearby, but you can simulate it with some ground leaps. Here, I’ll mark off some distances. Simply pretend there are gaps in between.” Dr. Canatori glanced around. “Or you can attempt some leaps between these benches.”

“Alright, but it won’t be quite the same. Neither the ground nor the benches will flex under me like a tree branch would as I leap.”

Pistachio complied with all the requests though he wasn’t sure why Dr. Canatori needed to see how well he could climb or leap. He **was** a squirrel, after all. But he didn’t question it too much after his initial statements as it meant he got to stay outside away from his room a little longer and get some exercise in. He didn’t bother to point out that they were being watched from several windows of the hospital. After another hour of tests, he was brought back to his room.

“I can’t thank you enough for humoring me.” Dr. Canatori stated. “It would take a lot of training to get a wild squirrel to even semi-cooperate with such a study. Basically, you’d have to raise it from birth to get it to trust humans to that extent. Would you mind if I ask for you to demonstrate your abilities again in the future?”

Pistachio shrugged. “I’d be more than happy to be watched if I got to go out again. I enjoyed the climbing. It gets boring being cooped-up in this room. Maybe you can find some suitable trees nearby where I could demonstrate how different it is to jump from one flexible branch to another in comparison to ground leaping.” He paused for a moment. “Once I’m released, it’s not that far from Groton to Holderness. I could probably arrange to drop by the Science Center at some point.”

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Dr. Canatori's face lit-up as he thanked Pistachio for the future opportunity.