

Chapter 40

“Thank you for coming out to the Science Center, Pistachio.”

“It gives me a chance to be what I am, Dr. Canatori. I should be thanking you.”

“Super. I think I’ve identified some trees at the edge of the center grounds that may work for some leaping tests. I’ll let you inspect them and pass judgement yourself.”

They did meet Pistachio’s approval and he leapt between them several times while Dr. Canatori recorded it. Pistachio enjoyed the workout, embracing his squirrel side deeper than he’d been able to since awakening in the hospital and the resulting panic fleeing from it. An hour quickly passed before Dr. Canatori led him back to the visitor center.

“I have a favor to ask, Doc” Pistachio inquired as they made their way back. “Do you have any suggestions for something natural to repel fleas and ticks? You’ve got me on a monthly prescription chemical treatment like what our pet vet prescribes for our cats. I’d like to try something natural if possible. The chemical treatment has caused a bit of irritation where it’s applied to the scruff of my neck.”

Dr. Canatori nodded a moment in thought. “Cedar oil, clove oil, and mint all work to a point. It would be a bit of trial and error to find the right combination and the first two are rather expensive, though you’d probably only need a few drops every four days or so. The scent of the first two are rather potent. You’ll want to make sure the scent doesn’t bother you or your wife before you commit to trying them. You should also consider any rules in place at work regarding scents. Peggy’s Natural Food Store in Ashland should carry them.”

“Thanks.”

The wildlife vet led the giant squirrel into the visitor center. “I’ve got one more task for you if you’re up to it.”

“What?”

“I’d like you to build a drey right here,” he pointed to a mostly empty exhibit space with a large forked branch mounted in it. It looked large enough that it could easily support Pistachio’s weight. The forked section was close to the floor of the exhibit space.

Pistachio paused staring at it in thought. “I’ve never built one. I’m not quite sure of the process.”

“And you never leapt with confidence between trees much before today, either. But once you got up there, you knew what to do without really thinking about it, right?”

Pistachio nodded. “Though the first couple of leaps were actually a little scary until I could push aside the human fear that was coming through. I guess Rick was sort of afraid of heights, which

is kind of weird for someone who chose a squirrel as his fursona. That might also explain why I nearly fell out of the oak I leapt to when I made my escape from the hospital.”

“Well, I suspect, the knowledge to build a drey is there in your head just like climbing and leaping. You just need to start the task and you’ll quickly figure out what to do. And a giant squirrel-size drey would also be kid-sized. A giant drey near ground level that kids could climb in would be a wonderful addition to our visitor and education center.”

“Give me a little time to think about this, Doc. I need to try and envision it.” He started to look carefully around the forked branch and tested his weight on it.

“Take your time. If you need to leave and come back and do it later, that’s fine, too.”

Pistachio jumped off the branch and paced the space within the exhibit area. He then closed his eyes in thought for a bit. Dr. Canatori patiently waited. Eventually, Pistachio opened his eyes and looked up at the wildlife vet. “Yes, I think I can do this. But I’ll have to harvest a bunch of tree branches and/or saplings to do it on a scale I’d fit in.”

“Excellent! Let me show you which areas you can and can’t cut from.” He led the squirrel over to a map of the science center grounds and pointed to the areas he could harvest from and those that were off limits. Dr. Canatori then pointed to the small cameras mounted and pointed at the exhibit area. “Your work will be recorded.”

“Alright, I’m fine with that.” Pistachio replied and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He carefully swiped at it to not add yet another scratch to the screen. He sent a text to Abigail letting her know he’d be home late. He tucked the phone back in his pocket and went to work.

Pistachio spent the rest of the afternoon darting out of the visitor center and returning carrying thin branches and saplings in his mouth. At first the drey slowly took shape. He soon got the hang of how to weave the branches together as the instinct on how to build a drey came forth to help him. Having human-like opposable thumbs made the task easier than if he could only wrestle with the branches using his mouth and a normal squirrel’s smaller, less opposable thumbs. Soon, the pace increased. Through all this, he never paid attention to the small cameras recording his work. Eventually, he was bringing in mouthfuls of leaves, white pine needles, cedar tips, and moss to line it. As the sun set, he finished it. He looked over his work. *I made this!* he thought with great pride swirling his tail in glee. He then crawled in to test it and adjusted some of the lining material. It was a snug, but comfortable fit. Very comfortable. He felt safe and warm. Before he realized he was doing it, he curled up, closed his eyes, and quickly fell asleep.

When Dr. Canatori came looking for him, he could hear a low snore coming from the completed drey. He didn’t have the heart to disturb the giant squirrel.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Michaud, this Dr. Joe Canatori out to the Squam Lake Science Center.”

“Is Pistachio alright?” There was concern in her voice. “He hasn’t answered my texts. He had text me earlier that he’d be late, but not this late.”

“He’s fine, Dr. Michaud,” Dr. Canatori reassured her. “However, he won’t be going home tonight. After filming him climbing and jumping, I showed him an empty exhibition space inside our visitor center and asked if he’d be willing to try his hand at building a drey, one big enough for him to fit in. He hesitated at first and then quickly took to it, embracing his squirrel side. It’s probably good to allow him to do so now and then. However, in his enthusiasm building it, he overworked himself and has fallen asleep in his handiwork.”

“You’re not trying to make him a specimen of the Center, are you?”

“What? No! Of course not! We normally only teach about native species of New Hampshire. Eurasian red squirrels are obviously not native. And he’s a sentient being. I’d have no right to cage him up. However, thanks to your husband’s hard work we’ll now have a kid-size demonstration drey that they can partially climb in and look about. The info marque we’re producing to place next to it will give him proper credit for its construction, noting that while not built by a native squirrel species, it is quite similar to what a native squirrel would build. I promise you he’ll be home in the morning.”