

Chapter 43

Pistachio stirred as a muzzle nudged him. He yawned and stretched. He knew exactly where he was and that he was safe.

“Welcome back,” Cantaloupe stated and offered the squirrel some acorns.

Pistachio passed on the acorns. “If I’m here, then you and Sheila must have found him.”

“We have, much to my surprise,” Sheila confirmed “But I’m also concerned about us. This virus has thrown us for quite the loop.”

Pistachio shrugged. “It’s just a head cold. We’ll pull through. We just need to sleep it off, which is what we’re doing.” He looked up at the blue folf. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. I’m sure Abbie will be worried and will probably rush us to the hospital, though I tried to reassure her it isn’t necessary before I fell asleep. Now then, you said you found Rick.”

Cantaloupe scuffed a paw. “Well, sort of.”

Pistachio tilted his head at an angle. “What do you mean sort of?”

“She attacked him,” Cantaloupe said.

Pistachio stared at the folf, “You attacked Rick?!”

“He looked like a large cartoonish squirrel and I was hungry. And he could have been this virus we’re fighting for all I knew, posing as a harmless, bedraggled cartoon squirrel. I had him on the ground on his back ready to deliver the killing blow when I recognized his scent.”

“He was confused, scared, and hungry,” Cantaloupe added. “After apologizing to him and reassuring him that he was safe, we fed him and tried to convince him to come with us back to the den.”

“He didn’t want to come to the den. He said he needed to get to a specific tree. He said he didn’t have the heart to make us ‘go away.’ He asked us to lead him to that specific tree he couldn’t find. It took us two days to get to the tree. I’ve never seen such a huge tree before. He thanked us both and started climbing.”

Pistachio nodded. “Well, let’s go.”

“The tree is a long way off,” Sheila admonished. “Like I said, it took us two long days just to get there and another two to return here and summon you.”

“So? It won’t take that long for us to get there now. I think I know a short-cut.”

“How?”

“Well, you put me in charge of this body. Maybe I can manipulate things a bit in this dreamworld. Both of you, touch my forepaws. Let’s get to bottom of this, shall we?”

They both hesitantly touched his paws. He gave them a reassuring look and both relaxed.

“Good, now think of where this huge tree is. Concentrate on that.”

After a moment, the den faded away from around them and they found themselves on the other side of the forest at the foot of a gigantic, ancient English oak tree. Both leapt back in startlement. Pistachio simply nodded in satisfaction.

“That worked better than I expected.” Pistachio looked up at the tree. It had to be at least as large around as a sequoia pine in the Sierra Nevada region of California. “Right, okay.” He glanced at the folf and raccoon. “Wait here,” he said to them.

They both looked dumbfounded at him.

“Well, it’s not like I expect you two to try climbing this. If I need you, I’ll figure out a way to bring you up.” He started scrambling up the trunk. The tree was larger than anything he had ever scaled here in the dream world or in the human reality. There were hundreds of branches splitting off from the main trunk and he was soon out of sight of the ground far below. The tree seemed to go on forever. Pistachio lost track of time as he climbed. He stopped every now and then for a brief rest and then he would continue on. He figured this part wouldn’t be easy.

Eventually, he found Rick’s ‘tree hollow’. It looked like something out of a cartoon with a covered porch mounted over a large branch. There was a round, glass window, a human-like lockable door and a tiny mailbox with ‘R. H. M., 241 English Oak Way’ on it. Next to the door and below the window was a wooden rocking chair with a tail slot up the center. Pistachio leapt onto the porch and tried the door. It was locked of course. He pounded on the door. No one answered. He stood on the rocking chair and peaked through the window. He couldn’t make out much, other than there was no movement within. He sat back and pondered a moment. Then he looked down and yes, there was a welcome mat he hadn’t noticed before. ‘Welcome to the Nut House’ it read with acorns to either side of the text. He lifted the edge and there was a skeleton key, just like in a cartoon. The key fit the lock. He let himself in and slipped the key back under the mat.

Pistachio looked about. This wasn’t anything like his old nesting hollow. It was more like something out of a cartoon, reflecting the entrance. The interior was larger than it should be. There were light switches which worked, though he hadn’t noticed any powerlines leading into the tree. There was squirrel-size furniture in an acorn motif. The kitchen had a human-style refrigerator and an antique cast iron and enamel wood burning cook stove. The stove looked out-of-place, but he recalled in Rick’s memories that his maternal grandmother had one when he was a child and Rick was fond of it. There were a double-hotplate, coffee maker, and microwave on the counter. On the wall was a squirrel clock similar to cat ones he’d seen whose tail swished

back and forth as a pendulum and the squirrel's eyes moved in the opposite direction with the clock face on its tummy.

Out of curiosity, he opened the fridge to find a carton of almond milk, several bottles of nut brown ale, fresh berries, and a pizza box within. The sort of thing one might find in a young bachelor's fridge, except for the berries. The box was from *IT'S A GOOD PIZZA*. Pistachio recognized it as a shop from Rick's childhood neighborhood though the smiling human chef was replaced with a smiling, winking otter wearing a chef hat and holding up its right webbed handpaw in the okay sign. The box had three slices of pizza with ham, pineapple and pine nuts for toppings. He swished his tail about in amusement as he closed the door. The freezer compartment had nut-based ice cream flavors like pistachio and maple walnut from long-gone companies such as Northumberland Creamery, again from Rick's childhood.

He inspected the rest of the kitchen and then followed the stairs leading up to another floor. It led directly into a room with a human-style bed in one corner covered in a quilt with squirrels and acorns on it. Pistachio recognized the style as similar to one Rick owned from his paternal grandmother. Next to this was a little bureau and a window. A door next to the bed led to a bathroom with human-style fixtures. Everything was in the same acorn motif as on the main floor below right down to the bar of soap and soap dish it sat in. The soap smelled faintly of hazelnuts.

Pistachio shook his head in disbelief as he made his way back downstairs and inspected the living room, complete with a La-Z-Critter™ recliner and a flat panel TV on the wall. The recliner had a trough/depression up the middle of the backrest. He tried the recliner. His tail fit perfectly in the trough. It was very comfortable. He quickly got out of it, afraid he'd fall asleep and wind-up back in the human world again. He knew he needed to be fully 'awake' for when the home's occupant arrived. So, he grabbed a plain wooden chair from the small dining table and set it where he could watch the door without being easily seen and waited. The chair, like the rocking chair on the porch, had a convenient slot that accommodated his tail.

About an hour later, the lock clicked, the door opened, and a cartoonish anthro-red squirrel walked in using just its hind legs. The squirrel closed the door and locked it. He hung the key on a hook by the door. Pistachio quietly observed this, noting the other squirrel looked somewhat like an adult version of Acorn from *Animalmania*. The newcomer made his way to the fridge and opened it. He pulled out a bottle of ale and popped the cap with his teeth. He proceeded to spit the cap into a nearby trashcan and take a swig. He then grabbed a pizza slice out of the box.

Pistachio flicked the lights on. "Hello, Rick." The anthro-toon squirrel whipped around in startlement, dropping the bottle in the process. It shattered on the floor, spraying him with ale.