

Chapter 44

Pistachio couldn't help himself as he gigglechittered at what happened. The anthro-toony squirrel wigwagged his tail indignantly as he stared at his visitor, not believing what he was seeing.

"You!? How could you be here?" he barked as he shook ale out of his fur before reaching into a drawer and pulling out a cotton towel with acorns printed on it to wipe down.

Pistachio scampered over to the door and grabbed the broom and dustpan leaning against the wall there. Carrying these in his mouth, he leapt over by the anthro and started to sweep-up the broken glass.

"While we've got strong teeth and jaws, it's not good to use them as a bottle opener." Pistachio chided as he quickly swept-up the glass and reached over for the trash can.

The anthro chattered in annoyance. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"You and I are one and the same, Rick, and you know it already," Pistachio responded briefly before sticking the broom handle in his mouth again so he could bound over by the door to put it back. After setting it back, he continued. "Different aspects and different parts, but we are one. Did you think if I searched hard enough, I wouldn't find you?"

Rick's tail wigwagged in confusion. "We're dead. How can you be here separate from me?"

Pistachio drooped his tail. "Is that what you think? I guess that explains why I'm in control of our body at the moment. Here, let's get you cleaned-off before your fur gets sticky." Pistachio pulled a second towel out of the drawer got it damp in the sink and rubbed over Rick's fur. He grabbed another towel to help dry him. Rick didn't resist the offered help, while his tail lashed back and forth nervously. Pistachio then dropped back down on all four paws and started to soak-up the ale on the floor with the same towels.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Rick. However, I'd prefer you'd be in charge again. The human world isn't my world. It's yours. I'm supposed to be your retreat from it when you need a retreat." Pistachio sat-up and wrung the towels out in the sink and then soaked it with water, wrung it again and mopped the floor with it. "Provided, it's been interesting so far. However, even though I've been there for about a month, I'm still trying to wrap my mind around having a very loyal mate by my side through what our body and mind have gone through. And we're probably back in the hospital at the moment. At least knowing our mate and that I haven't woken up when I should have, she's probably rushed us back to the hospital." Pistachio shrugged. "Anyway, we'll find out soon enough. Again, it should be you out there, not me. It's been a challenge so far trying to juggle the normal day-to-day interactions with humans. Instinct has won a few times and I've simply fled." Pistachio sighchittered. "Interacting with humans is your department, Rick. I'm just the simple squirrel you created here. Or at least I was until I woke up in your world with your memories as a reference point."

Rick shook his head and wigwagged his tail negatively. "I'm dead. We got electrocuted. I saw my body as I floated above and then there was more pain and then a bright light. And then I was here."

Pistachio nodded. "And dead we would be if it weren't for the quick action of two of the furry club students and then the paramedics, and finally the nanites." Pistachio paused a moment. "But before I go any further, we have company waiting at the base of the tree. Maybe we should invite them up." Pistachio snapped his claws and there was a knock on the door. "Come in," he called.

The door unlocked on its own and anthro-toony forms of Sheila and Cantaloupe came in. They looked at Pistachio, Rick and then themselves with confusion on their muzzles.

"My apologies. This is his little world and for some reason he's gone anthro-toony here. So, I guess that's how you wound-up coming through the door. Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. If you're hungry, there's a little pizza left in the fridge, or I can call out for a fresh one." Seeing the combined look of both hunger and confusion on their faces, Pistachio pulled his phone out of his pocket, found *It's a Good Pizza* in his contacts, and sent a quick text order. "I might need your assistance to talk some sense into our human," Pistachio paused glancing at the anthro-squirrel as the folf and raccoon tentatively sat in chairs at the small table. He turned back to Rick as he tossed the towel in the sink and sat-up. "It doesn't surprise me you chose the form of a squirrel here, Rick. But what does surprise me is you went for anthro-toony. You haven't gone for that look since you grew-up. Since then, you've always imagined me as a feral."

"I'm dead. I'm waiting for Abigail to live out the rest of her life. When she arrives, we'll go onto whatever comes next together, across the 'Rainbow Bridge,' through the 'Pearly Gates,' or whatever it is."

Pistachio shook his head. "And despite imagining yourself as a feral all your life, you're not a feral now?"

Rick's tail wigwagged in frustration. "When I arrived here, I couldn't take that form. This is as close as I could get." He pointed to Sheila with his tail. "And then when they found me, she attacked me."

"Rick, I'm sorry." The folf apologized. "I was hungry. A nice squirrel dinner would have suited me fine. But after I pounced, I did stop my attack as soon as I recognized your scent." She turned to Pistachio. "I was confused as I told you earlier because he didn't look like Rick, but he smelled right. I'll admit I didn't believe you when you were last here Pistachio and said you weren't Rick. I'm sorry for that."

Rick drooped his tail. "I'd been wondering lost in the forest for days. It didn't make any sense that I couldn't tell my way around. And when they found me, I didn't have the heart to make them vanish though it confused me why they were here in this limbo between the human world and the afterlife. They led me to this tree as I asked and I climbed until I found a suitable hollow and then created what you see here to give me some place to 'live' while waiting for Abbie." He

paused a moment. "Maybe that bottle of ale had more imaginary alcohol content then I thought. Or perhaps in my loneliness waiting for her, I've gone off the deep end."

"And he was so persuasive that he needed to move on," Cantaloupe added. "Which is why we didn't try too hard to bring him back to the den for you, Pistachio."

"We remembered our promise to you, Pistachio," Sheila piped in. "So, as soon as we could, we summoned you."

Pistachio was both amused and saddened. "You...we," he gestured to Rick, himself, the raccoon and folf with his tail, "are not dead, Rick. And you're not looney. You've fled deep into your subconscious." He gestured to the folf and raccoon. "If it weren't for them, we would be dead for real despite all the efforts used on us in the human world. They represent whatever small part of us was determined to survive. When you were electrocuted in the human world, lightning struck our nest and tree here, destroying it. We were burned as badly here as there. They found me barely alive. I pleaded with them to put me out of my misery. They refused. I didn't understand why they'd do that at the time, but when I awoke in the human world, I began to understand it. But most nights, when I slept there, it was deep, dreamless sleep. I couldn't get back here to really search for you until now. I've only been able to find my way back here, briefly a few times. The first time, I suspect, due to the side effects of the vaccine cocktail Dr. C injected in us putting me in a deep enough sleep to reach this place, only to have those two send me back. And the second time, only after a very restful afternoon just being a squirrel without worrying about the human world."

"That's when he better understood his new role in charge of our body," Cantaloupe stated. "And regardless of what we tried to do to get him to wake-up, he refused to leave until we promised to look for you. Of course, neither Sheila nor I believed we'd find you. We assumed Pistachio was you."

Pistachio nodded and looked at Rick. "We need you to face the real world, Rick. Your mate/wife needs you. She'll take me in your place, but she really wants you back. As far as she's concerned, I am a very delusional version of you."

He pulled a stool over and got up on it. "I know you're going to have a hard time, but we'll be there for you."

"Why the stool?" Rick asked. "Wouldn't a chair comfortable?"

"Yes, but this way you can have a better look at our new body."

"What?"

"Remember those nanites I mentioned before I invited Sheila and Cantaloupe in? Take a good look at me, 'cause that's what they did to us/you. In the process of healing our/your severe burns and probably saving us from death, we were transformed into a squirrel. You're finally the squirrel you dreamed of being here as me. Well, sort of, as we're nearly as large as a human."

Rick stared at Pistachio in disbelief.

“Well, go on. Look me over, feel about as you need to. It’s your body as much as mine. Get yourself familiar with it. You’re going to need to learn to live with it.” Pistachio poked his right forepaw briefly into his pocket and pulled out the vibrating phone and glanced at it. “Pizza will be here shortly. And, yes, we’ve got pockets just like the Mal fursuit. While they couldn’t stop the change, they could make some manipulations to the process.” Remembering that Rick kept his dream world G-rated, he turned his back on their guests before pulling down the covering flap that hid his genitals. Rick stared. “Built in shorts like tighty whities so we can be modest in public without needing to wear pants except in certain circumstances as I’ve quickly learned.” He glanced his head sideways so he could better see their guests, who had turned beet red in embarrassment, despite the warning and though they could not see what Rick saw. “My apologies for embarrassing you. But our human needs to learn this.”

Rick inspected Pistachio’s body. Eventually, he carefully drew the flap back over covering up his manhood. He uncovered and covered it again a few times to better understand how it worked. “Sort of like a marsupial pouch,” he mumbled. He then shook his head, closing his eyes, and wigwagged his tail side-to-side. “No. This is just a bad dream. I’ll wake-up upstairs shortly.”

There was a knock at the door. “*It’s a Good Pizza* delivery!” a male voice yelled through the door.

“Enter,” Pistachio answered before Rick could say anything.

An anthro-toony multi-limbed fox opened the door. He had a brownish-red poncho-like shirt with the *It’s a Good Pizza* logo embroidered on it and brown bandana on his head. His arms/wrists (all six of them) were wrapped in a gauze-like fabric. He held a padded insulated bag in one upper-most arm. His ears each sported 3 plain steel-colored rings. Another one was on his bottom lip. He didn’t wear pants, not like there was anything for an anthro-toony fox to hide in a G-rated world. What looked like a cross between a motorcycle and a hovercraft straight out of a B-rated sci-fi movie floated in the air just beyond the edge of the porch.

“Extra-large all meat pizza with extra cheese for Mr. Michaud!” the fox cried out, correctly pronouncing ‘Me-Shoo’ as he pulled a box out of the insulated bag. Steam wafted from the box. Sheila and Cantaloupe started to involuntarily drool from the smells wafting from the box.

Pistachio scampered over. “Excellent. Please set it on the table.”

“That’ll be \$24.95 Mr. Michaud.”

As the fox laid the box on the table, followed by a small stack of napkins with the *It’s a Good* log on them, Pistachio pulled two cartoonish tens, and a twenty out of his pocket in that order. He shrugged and handed all three bills to the fox. “Keep the change.”

The fox’s eyes went wide at the large tip. “Wow! Thank you, Mr. Michaud!”

The fox closed the door as he left. Pistachio stared after the closed door a moment as the sound of the hover-bike contraption fired-up and then lowered in volume as it drove off. “Rick, for some reason I’m not sure who that was, but I should. I suspect you met him somewhere at some point, maybe another furry’s character like these two,” he gestured towards Sheila and Cantaloupe while turning to them. “Well, dig in.” They didn’t hesitate.

“Rick,” Rick stated.

“Huh?” Pistachio responded.

“The fox’s name. Seriously, the fursona’s name is Rick. He belongs to a furry I met at a couple of cons. In the past he has appreciated getting surprise cameos in artwork.”

Pistachio nodded. “Sounds fitting in this case.” He grabbed a slice and started nibbling. Both Sheila and Cantaloupe paused staring at him. “What? Squirrels are omnivores, remember?” he replied between mouthfuls. “We just tend to be opportunists rather than hunters as Rick here has pointed out to many a human at fur meets.” Pistachio’s eyes lit-up. “Wow! This is really good.” He turned to Rick. “So, that’s why we like the pizza at that bowling alley. It’s as close to this from our childhood as you can get, huh?” He nibbled some more. “Have a seat and dig-in. We’ll eat and let you think on what I’ve said for a while.”

Rick hesitantly came over and took a slice himself. It was very good New England-style pizza. The fresh dough crust was not too thick, nor too thin. Homemade sauce with oregano and a little garlic. Lots of gooey mozzarella cheese. Very generous amount of toppings. None of them talked for a while, enjoying the pizza. They quickly polished off the pie.

Pistachio wiped his paws and muzzle with a napkin with the toony otter *IT’S A GOOD PIZZA* logo on it. “Alright, I hope everyone’s hunger is now sated as we’re running out of time. I can feel our body starting to stir and try to awaken. I need you to be the one that wakes-up, Rick.” He gently put his forepaw on Rick’s hand paw. Sheila and Cantaloupe did likewise.

Rick tried to pull away, but while gentle, Pistachio’s grip on his hand paw was too strong. The memories of the past month since Pistachio first awoke in the human world flooded into him. Pistachio and the others finally released their grip on him. Rick quickly pulled his paw away, shook his head in the negative, and cursed, “God, my head aches! It’s like you hit me on the head with a mallet!” Then his eyes shot wide. “You’re not lying. It’s real? We’re alive?”

“Yes, it’s real, Rick. And we need you to be the one who wakes-up. Not me.”

Rick closed his eyes in thought a moment and shook his head. “I’m trying, but I can’t. I don’t seem to know how to go back.” There was frustration in his voice.

Pistachio patiently wigwagged his tail. “Alright. Let’s see if this will work.” He moved over next to Rick again. Rick backed away wigwagging his tail fearfully. Pistachio drooped his tail. “You

need to trust me as I have trusted you to not harm me here in this dream world all these years. Please get back here in front of me and turn around with your back to me.”

Rick hesitated again, (sighchittered) and then stepped in front of the feral squirrel and turned his back to him as Pistachio had instructed. Pistachio stood-up on his hindpaws and gently touched Rick on the shoulders. His forepaws glowed a moment and then passed into Rick. Rick began to shudder at the sensation. The glow moved down the rest of his and Rick’s bodies as Pistachio passed into Rick until they glowed brightly. Sheila and Cantaloupe raised their paws to block the glare from the blinding glow. As the glow diminished, only Pistachio remained. He blinked a moment and shook his head as he looked about.

“Wow, that was a bit trippy, but it seems to have worked,” he said to the folf and raccoon.

“Who are you?” Sheila asked with hesitation.

“Richard Michaud. I am also Pistachio. We are one as we were before the accident. I am in Pistachio’s form as that is the proper form to take here and it is also how we look like now in reality. I can feel I am waking up as the Pistachio part of me knew was happening. But I now better understand what has happened. There is little time left. You are part of me too.” He scampered over to the folf and raccoon. “I can’t thank you two enough for not giving up on me and for saving our life. Also, for believing Pistachio when he insisted, I was lost out here. Alas, I can’t let you, my will to live, to remain separate from the rest of me. What Pistachio didn’t fully comprehend was our mind had been shattered by the lightning strike and resulting transformation by the nanites. And so, I must do as I must do to ensure I remain sane upon waking.” He hugged the two of them tightly. They didn’t resist, and instead merge into him. Again, Richard glowed brightly for a moment. As the light faded, he was all alone. The dreamworld around him then faded.