

Chapter 56

Rick sat down at a table in the student union building with his back to the wall. He thanked the staffer who carried his travel mug to the table for him. A wood fire was crackling in the granite stone fireplace on the other side of the room. He took a sip and watched the snow drift down through the floor-to-ceiling windows to either side of the fireplace. It was your typical late-November day in the foothills of the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

Students sat in various chairs and on the floor chatting and/or studying. Most paid no attention to Rick as they had gotten use to his presence over the past couple of months. Though it was a bit uncomfortable against his fur, he wore a red WMSU polo shirt. Despite his clothing medical waiver, he found others were more comfortable in his presence if he had at least a shirt on. So, he put up with the itchy discomfort of his fur getting rumped by the shirt rather than attract extra attention. A male student came over, said hi and asked for a selfie with him, explaining his folks didn't believe him about Rick. Rick obliged and handed him a card to share with his folks. After that student left, Josie and another student joined him at his table.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Stash. This is..."

"Jeanne Malcom, your roommate. I've seen her at a few of the furry meets." Rick turned to Jeanne. "Are you here because you're finally considering joining the Furry Club?" Rick's tail flicked up bending into a question mark shape briefly before dropping back down behind him.

Jeanne laughed. "You're always so persistent, Mr. Michaud. No. While the group is interesting and the things you do are fun, I just don't see myself as furry. I've never imagined myself as anything other than human."

"Not even something mythical like a unicorn, pink pony, cartoon character, or perhaps, a dragon?" He asked in amusement.

"No." She shook her head in the negative. "Honestly, I'm here for moral support for Josie."

Rick arched an eyebrow, which looked a bit strange on a squirrel. Was that a hint of fear he could smell coming from both of them? That would be very unusual for Josie. He looked at her trying to read her. She was doing a good job trying to hide it in her body language. He shrugged to himself and sipped his coffee waiting for her to speak.

She looked down a moment, swiveling the straw in the fountain soft drink she had just bought, causing the crushed ice within to clack against itself, before looking up at him. "I need to ask some questions that you might find a little personal, Stash. And if you don't wish to answer them, that's alright."

"Go ahead, Josie, and I'll let you know what I think. As you're aware, I'm always willing to listen."

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Josie paused again, swirling her straw some more and finally asked, “What was it like to go through the process of changing into your fursona?”

Rick went from a slight natural for a squirrel slouch forward in his chair to sitting straight up as his tail twitched back and forth rapidly a few times before he got it under control.

“Like I said you don’t have to answer if you don’t wish.”

It took a moment for Rick to calm down before he replied. “No, it’s not that, Josie. You caught me off guard and I need to chew on that for a bit. And with this tail, it’s a good thing I don’t play poker, as it’s very expressive making it more difficult to hide my reactions.” He thought for a moment. “You do know that the transformation process was covered in my televised interview with Melissa Sagenthrope back in October, right?” He briefly glanced at Jeanne and turned his attention back to Josie.

“And that interview wasn’t with you, but with your fursona, Pistachio. You weren’t there, so to speak. Just like it was Pistachio who approved of your wife becoming the club’s temporary advisor. And again, at the reopening event at the Canaan Bowl-O-Rama. it was Pistachio who was there and not you. In the interview, he kind of glossed over the experience as I recall.”

Rick nodded once. “Yes, you’re correct in that it was him in the interview, at the club meeting after the interview, and at the Bowl-O-Rama instead of me.” He thought for a moment. “And, yes, he did gloss over it for good reason. However, as you’d like details, let me answer that by starting with a question. Growing up, did you ever break a bone?”

“I was on the basketball team in junior high school,” Josie answered. “I came down wrong on a blocking leap. I fell sideways onto the court floor and tried to break my fall reaching out with my left arm. I wound up breaking my humerus. That was the end of basketball for me.”

“Was the break painful?”

Josie nodded. “Very painful. Fortunately, it was a clean break and easy for the doctor to reset.”

Rick seemed to stare off blankly a moment and sighed. He gave the two young women his full attention again. “Take a good look at my body and compare it to yours. Look at how much my skull has changed and especially, my legs,” he stretched out his left leg out sideways for emphasis. “Many if not most of the bones in my body broke and reformed to reshape me from a human to a giant squirrel. Remember your broken bone? Now amplify that throughout most of your body. Imagine the pain from that, Josie. Now imagine what you went through in your healing process on top of that. Then condense that over a course of nine to ten days. That’s one of the reasons Pistachio glossed over it in the interview.”

Both women shuddered. “I thought you/Pistachio were unconscious through the process,” Josie responded.

“Pistachio was. And I wasn’t, um, present. You witnessed my electrocution at the bowling alley. The whole out-of-body experience thing you read about others experiencing when they’re near death? I experienced that. The literal shock my body experienced ripped apart my mind. I should not have survived that accident after the electrical surge that went through me and how badly I burned as the suit fuse-melted to my skin.”

Jeanne visibly paled and involuntarily shuddered.

He turned to Jeanne. “I’m sorry if I’m getting too graphic for you. If you need to step away, I won’t be offended.”

“No, it’s alright. I just didn’t expect you to be so frank.”

Rich shrugged. “If a student asks me something and I choose to answer, I don’t hold back. Just as the student knows if they need to get something off their chest, they don’t need to hold back with me either.” He took another sip from his travel mug and continued. “The human side of my mind assumed I had died as it retreated deep into my subconscious. Prior to the accident, I’ve told you, Josie, and some of the other club members before that I sometimes would dream of my fursona, right? Well, I retreated into Pistachio’s world, assumed I was in some sort of limbo and that I was put there to wait for Abbie to pass on, so that we could together go onto the afterlife/next world/state of being or whatever comes next.

“Those tiny nanobot thingies are probably the only reason I’m still alive. While I, Rick, retreated far into my subconscious thinking I had died, my squirrel fursona, Pistachio, held-onto life. Even he thought we should be dead. But another part of our mind, call it the survival-instinct-part if you want, wouldn’t let him die. He begged to be allowed to die, but that survival instinct clung to life and kept him alive. Despite being mostly unconscious during the transformation process, he felt all of the pain of our body breaking and reforming. I, personally, didn’t feel it.” Rick closed his eyes a moment. Suddenly, he shuddered and spasmed, raising concern from the two students.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Rick continued as he opened his eyes. “Much as Pistachio could access my memories, I can access what he experienced while I was ‘away.’ Like for him accessing my memories, it’s like it was someone else, like watching a movie kind of thing but in virtual reality. It happened to him, not me, but if I call up the memories, I can feel it. I can’t take it for too long. I don’t know how he survived it. I can’t put the pain into words. And I feel guilty about that as I had never mistreated Pistachio in any stories or art, I had put him in,” Rick trailed off a moment as he seemed to stare blankly at the distance and then looked back at them. “And then when it should have been me going through that, I abandoned it to him to go through.” Rick shook his head. “I still feel very guilty over that. Maybe it was my mind’s way of handling the trauma of the transformation, Josie, by hiding from it and letting poor Pistachio deal with it. If it weren’t for his determination to pull me out of our subconscious, I wouldn’t be here and you’d be asking him these questions instead of me. It’s one of the reasons I went through with the legal name change process, making his name part of my own. I felt it was the least I could do for what my fursona part of me did for the rest of me.”

Rick paused a moment. "I'm not always good with coming up with the right words. Maybe I sound crazy explaining it like this, but maybe I am a bit nuts as a result of this." He tapped his right forepaw against his shirt. "Suffice it to say it was so painful that I literally lost my mind for a while as you witnessed when I...well Pistachio first returned from my/our first hospital stint immediately after the transformation."

Josie nodded. "Thank you for your honesty, Stash."

"Have I ever been anything less than honest to you and the other members of the club in the past when you needed someone to talk to?"

"No, never," Josie replied.

Rick did his best imitation of a smile as it wasn't so easy to do such with his muzzle. "And your next question is?"

"Are you happy living now as your squirrel fursona?"

Rick gigglechittered. "Well, I don't have much of a choice, do I? It's not like this can be reversed per what they determined as I've lost too much body mass. I could fret and whine and complain all day and it won't make a difference. I'd still be a roughly three-foot-tall, fifty-pound talking squirrel. So, I make do. If the world gives you lemons, make lemonade or a lemon pie. So far, other than that one attempt on my life, it's been alright. Of course, I'm fortunate to live here in Groton, a liberal arts college town where most are tolerant of others who are," he paused a moment in emphasis, "different." He drifted off a moment in thought and then continued. "Deep down, I do enjoy being a squirrel rather than human. And I love having this huge fluffy tail." He swirled it about in a circle for emphasis and then grabbed it briefly to hug it. "However, if I had been given the choice, I'd rather be anthro then full-on feral."

"Really!?" Josie replied in surprise. "But, isn't Pistachio feral?"

"Yes, but it's hard doing things in a bipedal world as a quadruped as I've quickly learned. WMSU still hasn't figured out what to do with me and as you know, I remain on medical leave." Rick wigwagged his tail several times again. "Which is frustrating. I want to work. I really miss my job in the Conference Department."

He lifted his reusable WMSU Furry Club travel cup up and pointed to it with his tail and paused a moment. "Did I mention I love having a tail? It just occurred to me that I use it to point like that without really thinking about it. It's not really prehensile, yet, I can do things like point with it, which I think is kind of neat." He paused again. "Where was I? Oh, yes. I'm fortunate that one of the staff in Nutty's Nest Café," he pointed to the union building snack shop with his tail, "offered to carry this," he pointed again to the travel cup with his tail, "over to the table for me. I think they felt sorry as I attempted to carry it while trying to scamper along on three paws. I'm glad we went with a sealed-top design with this mug fundraiser two years ago. Otherwise, I'd have spilled most of it on just the first couple of bounds." He looked at the handle a moment.

“Maybe if I could create a horizontal bite-piece that could clamp onto the vertical handle. Then I could carry it in my mouth and keep it mostly level as I bound along.”

Rick shrugged and took another sip of his drink using both paws to bring it to his muzzle before continuing. “This is decaf hazelnut, by the way. I think I’ve finally gotten over the caffeine withdrawal.” He sipped again before continuing. “I used to drink coffee just for the morning caffeine boost. Now, well, I like the bitter taste, even if I can’t have caffeine anymore.”

“No caffeine?”

Rick shook his head in the negative. “Sends my heart rate through the roof as I learned the hard way.” He paused another moment. “You ever see what happens to a cartoon squirrel on caffeine? That gag isn’t far from the truth in my case.” Rick shuddered a moment. “Other things I’ve had to adapt to, relying on Abbie to do the groceries. I used to do most of the groceries for our small household. That’s not so easy anymore. I can only balance on my rear legs pushing a cart for short periods of time. And it’s not easy to nudge one along while scampering on all four paws.” He got up off his seat a moment and stood on his hind paws stretching showing that by doing so, he could be close to a normal human’s height. “And it’s a challenge getting anything off the top shelf. They frown upon you trying to climb them and carry back down the item you want in your mouth to put in the cart.” He sat back down.

“It’s also tough at times to fight down the fear/flight instincts, but I’ve got it under much better control than Pistachio had. I don’t need to constantly sniff new people’s hands to ingrain in me they’re not a predator out to get me as poor Pistachio needed to do. You’ll note the seat I chose is against the backwall. It’s so no ‘predators’ can sneak-up on me. In addition, I have a higher metabolism than prior to my change. I tend to eat more, smaller meals/snacks throughout the day. As a result, I also have a lot of pent-up energy that I need to burn off. I do a lot of climbing up and down some of the larger trees in the back yard to try and burn some of that off. I wish they were closer together so I could leap between them too. Maybe that’s Pistachio trying to surface.” Rick shrugged while wigwagging his tail once as his face lit-up. “I got it! I need to get a giant hamster wheel installed in the house and hook it up to a generator.” Rick grinned the best he could.

Josie and Jeanne both chuckled as they envisioned the giant squirrel on a giant hamster wheel.

“Good. I’m glad I got a small laugh out of that. I’m also thankful that despite being feral, Pistachio had the process stopped when he did.”

They both stared at him.

“Yes, that part wasn’t in the interview. While the saboteur couldn’t stop me from changing, he was able to pause the process at this point. The legs transformed early in the process, so he couldn’t make me anthro even if I had been conscious at the time and asked. When Pistachio woke-up in my place, well, that was interesting.” Rick gave a brief overview of Pistachio escape and eventual return to the hospital.

“The new stories about the giant animal that fled across Route 3 out by Rumney and then scared the hikers up on Mount Stitson?”

“Yup, that was me/Pistachio. Anyway, upon his return to the hospital, he met the saboteur who apologized profusely as I wasn’t the target of his little experiment. He gave Pistachio the option to stop the process then and there or let it finish transforming him all the way down to a normal-size squirrel. As Pistachio is depicted as a sapient normal-size feral Eurasian red squirrel, I’m surprised he opted to stop it. I’m also very thankful he did. Otherwise, I’d be about this big,” Rick held his forepaws apart the appropriate distance for a normal squirrel, “and probably trapped in a cage in some lab being studied. Or if there was enough publicity to make it difficult to make me ‘disappear,’ maybe the folks over the Squam Lake Science Center would have taken me in. I probably wouldn’t have vocal cords and would need a compact keyboard to communicate. That’s provided I remained sapient/sentient.”

“Wow.”

Rick nodded as he took another sip of his coffee. “Despite being close to human size, I’ve still got squirrel instincts as I’ve already mentioned. Pistachio has built a drey/nest big enough for us to fit in comfortably out to the Science Center. It’s on display for the public to look in. I’ve also had to get use to a heightened sense of smell. So, I don’t have to look at you to tell you’re still nervous right now, Josie.” He looked at Jeanne, “And I don’t mean to be scaring you either, Jeanne. My nose can tell. I’m really sorry. If there’s something I can do to help you relax, just say so.”

Jeanne simply nodded. “I had a bad encounter with a large dog when I was young. I know you’re no threat, but your claws are making me nervous.”

Rick did his best to imitate a smile. “Well, then, that’s easy to fix.” He pulled a pair of cotton gardening-type gloves out of his fanny pack and slid them on. “Does that help?”

Jeanne laughed. “You look silly with them on, but I appreciate it. Why do you keep a pair with you?”

“I need both my feet and my forepaw/hands to get around. If I wash my hands just before a meal, how am I to keep them clean from the washroom to the table?”

“Makes sense. Now I’ve got a question if Josie doesn’t mind me butting in.” Josie didn’t protest, so Jeanne continued. “Can you talk to squirrels, Mr. Michaud?”

Rick drooped his tail. “No. I would need to learn the language first if they have one beyond chits and calls. I understand some calls, such as when a gray warns of a ‘predator nearby’,” he barked it a couple times. “But beyond that, alas, I’m out of luck unless someone comes-up with an English to Squirrel Chitter course. If I were to try and chitter-talk to a squirrel right now, it would probably look at me in confusion over the jibberish coming out of my muzzle before scampering off. It would be like you trying to talk to a foreigner who doesn’t understand English nor you their language.”

He turned back to Josie. "I can tell there's something still eating at you, and I'm guessing it's one of the reasons you've asked me these questions. It's also why I chose to answer them." Rick sat back in his slight squirrel-slouch pose with his gloved forepaws around his travel mug on the table. He took another sip and waited.

After a moment, Josie nodded. "Yes, you're right and as you have been honest with me. I guess I need to be likewise in return." She paused again.

"No pressure, Josie. If you're not comfortable saying why, it's alright."

She paused a little longer. "Thank you for telling me what I can expect, Stash" she hesitated a moment. "You know, should/when they finally figure out how to duplicate what happened to you." Again, she paused briefly. "'Cause I'm willing to go through it, despite the pain, even the risk of losing my sanity if it means I could become an anthro-raccoon. I wanted an idea of what to expect." She then blushed and looked down.

There was silence for a moment as Rick watched both her and Jeanne. Jeanne seemed to expect the confession. "Look at me Josie," he said gently and paused until she did so. "There is nothing to be embarrassed by that. I'm not going to try and talk you into or out of it. Nor would I tease you about it. Not like I'd have any right to question it as a giant squirrel." His tail wigwagged a few times. "And I wouldn't have done so even before my accident. It's your choice, but you might have to wait a long time.

"Yes, there are those who are studying the process that did this to me," he put one of his gloved forepaw hands against his furry chest. "It's part of the settlement with the saboteur. They had intended to perform this experiment on themselves, believe it or not. Those studying the process are doing it for medical reasons, not for transformation, as far as I know. Afterall, it healed the second and third degree burns across my body in a few days. Imagine the aid to medical science that could provide if they could figure out how to repeat it without the squirrely side-effects." Rick wigwagged his tail again for emphasis. "Maybe down the road, who knows when, they might consider the 'extreme body modification' market potential in this. If/when they reach that point, you might have to settle for normal raccoon colors, Josie, rather than violet and white, unless they can find a way to alter genes to include non-natural colors. And maybe they'll stretch it over a longer period of time to minimize the pain and stress to the body. If they reach that point, maybe they could temporarily shut-down the body's pain receptors for the duration of the transformation. Who knows? I'm not a medical doctor. All I can do is guess." Rick paused a moment and then continued. "To be honest, I didn't want to be the first to go through this. I told my Mémère that much."

"Mem-may?"

"My grandmother. As I was saying, I didn't want to be the first. But after the process was around a decade or so, I'd probably be willing go for it, though again, I'd aim for anthro or semi-anthro as I do enjoy climbing. I was always a squirrel-at-heart. Some label such a feeling as a therian or therianism. I never needed a label to know what I always was in here," he put a gloved forepaw

to his chest. “If deep down, you feel the same way, Josie, and you’re a raccoon-at-heart, don’t hesitate to go for it if that is what you choose if/when the process becomes available. Just be yourself whatever that is. Yeah, sounds kind of wishy-washy, but I’m not sure how else to put it.

“If you want to talk to a professional, Counselor Shim in the student LGBTQIA+ office,” Rick paused a moment drooping his tail. “Man, I hope I didn’t miss any letters in that. There seems to be more each time, I refer someone to them. Anyway, Counselor Shim will gladly lend you an ear. She’s versed on therianism. If my wife hadn’t accepted being the club advisor, I’d,” he paused, “well, Pistachio, probably would have suggested the club approach her.”

“Now, then,” Rick stated sternly while he looked straight at Jeanne. “While I’ve played along, you haven’t fooled me, Jeanne. I’m aware you’re a reporter for the student newspaper. You could have asked straight-up for an interview.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet and pulled a business card out. “Prior to you publishing anything from this,” he slid over Melissa Sagenthrope’s business card, “please contact Ms. Sagenthrope first. And if you are truly Josie’s friend, you won’t publish anything about her therian confession. For some, it’s like coming ‘out of the closet’ for the first time confessing they’re gay/lesbian or trans.”

“I told you he wouldn’t be fooled,” Josie gently elbowed her roommate, “when you asked to tag along in my meeting with him.” She faced Rick again. “Thank you, Stash, I really appreciate you sharing and listening.”

Rick simply nodded as his tummy suddenly audibly grumbled. He sighed and chittered at the same time. “With that done with for now, remember what I said about needing to eat more often? I guess it’s time for a mid-afternoon snack.” He pulled a reusable plastic container out of his fanny pack. “Either of you interested in some apple slices?”