

Chapter 59

The following Monday, Rick reported to a conference room within WMSU's main administration building for a meeting arranged just that morning. He expected this would happen after the weekend accident and he would be called into a meeting. His first warning sign that this wasn't going to be a normal meeting were the news media vehicles outside. He avoided the main entrance they were clustered around ducking in through a side entrance. Once at the conference room, he was taken aback as he didn't expect to see so many staff and administration members in the room. The university's president, Theo Kraston, head of HR, Joseph Reliant, athletic director, Dr. Gregory Bechard, and his supervisor, Wynona York were there as he expected. He did not expect to also see the heads of alumni relations, fundraising, media/public relations, student recruitment, and members of the mascot selection team, along with his wife.

"Good morning. Please have a seat Mr. Michaud," Theo stated calmly.

Rick sat in the offered chair next to his wife and twitched his tail nervously. Someone had thought about him as there were a couple of pillows mounted vertically against the backrest providing a channel for his tail. Introductions were made around the room. There were name tent cards propped-up in front of everyone along with bottles of water from nearby Tenny Mountain Springs. There was an empty glass next to the one in front of him.

"As you know," Dr. Bechard started, "I like to get right to the point. We need to discuss what you did at the game, Mr. Michaud."

Rick drooped his tail. "Yes, about that, I'm sorry. I didn't seem have much of a choice as the crowd chanted for me."

"Why are you apologizing? You did the right thing. The crowd asked for you to take over and you did. And you did a great job for being put on the spot."

"You also did well in deflecting the reporter's questions on the name of the student," Shannon, head of media/public relations added. "A lot of people can't handle that kind of pressure. And you prevented her from pushing the issue by citing the federal student privacy law."

Joseph Reliant, head of HR spoke next. "For the last two-and-a-half months we've been trying to figure out where to employ you within WMSU, Mr. Michaud. That is why we had left you on medical leave all this time." He nodded towards Wynona York. "As your supervisor has reported, you are missed in the Department of Conferences..."

"But I can't physically do half the job."

"No, and while we could just sit you behind a desk and have you perform standard office work, that would seem to be a waste of your talents. You interact well with the students and they with you in your new body. We weren't really ready yet to hold this meeting with you. But Ms. Gibbs's accident not only forced us to finalize this quicker but also add to it."

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Rick looked about in semi-confusion. “Where are you going with this?”

Theo leaned forward slightly on the conference table. “We have created a new position specifically for you and your unique talents, Mr. Michaud. We would like you to become the university’s goodwill ambassador. Your official start date would be January First as this semester only has a couple weeks left. However, you’d be welcome to start immediately.”

Joseph Reliant spoke up again. “Your duties would include representing the university at various events across the state including alumni events and local festivals. Assist student recruitment at various college information fairs. When on campus, offer an ear to students as you do now.”

“Wait a minute. A lot of those duties are filled by Nutty.”

“Yes,” Theo replied. “And we’ve come to realize, it’s an awful lot to ask a student to cover all that for a half-tuition scholarship. The original plan was to spin all that off and let the student simply be the sports mascot as Nutty was originally intended to be. All those other tasks and duties were added on over the years.” She nodded to Joseph, who continued.

“Originally, the Goodwill Ambassador position was to call for you to substitute on occasion for Nutty, especially when two different WMSU teams were playing at once, as a secondary university mascot.”

“However, due to the accident on Saturday,” Dr. Gregory Bechard added in. “And with the destruction of the Nutty mascot suit, that puts Nutty on hiatus until further notice. Even if Nutty hadn’t been damaged, we’d put the character on the sidelines for the rest of the season, so to say, out of respect for Ms. Gibbs. Due to that, you would now be the new sports mascot at least through the end of this school year.”

“Wait? What?!” Rick stammered, his tail wigwagging wildly about behind him. “I can’t! It’s tradition that a student plays that role!”

Dr. Bechard continued as if he wasn’t interrupted. “We’ve already contacted Second Fur to contract the construction of a new body suit as the head wasn’t damaged. They won’t have a replacement suit body ready until at least late next summer or maybe early next fall. They have several orders ahead of ours. The delay would be longer, but the robotic tail is salvageable.” He leaned forward on the table, looking straight at Rick. “Our teams need a mascot to lead on student cheering, and the students have already chosen you to fill that role. Ms. Gibbs has given her blessing, too, after your meeting with her yesterday. Let’s put it this way, Mr. Michaud. Our star quarterback has just been pulled from the field with a season-ending injury. I’m asking my back-up, whose been keeping the bench warm, to go out there and play. You, in this case, are the back-up quarterback.”

“But...but...” Rick stammered a moment trying to get his thoughts together. “Tradition requires that Nutty be portrayed by a student,” he repeated.

“And as you stated at the game, you’re not Nutty. You’re Pistachio,” Michelle Carpenter of alumni relations stated. “I’ve been on the phone most of the weekend since the accident with various alumni, including those who donated to the Nutty scholarship. Many of them saw the footage of the accident and the students choosing you on the news. They understand and would support you taking over for the rest of the school year due to the circumstances.”

Joseph slid the written job description across the table to Rick.

Theo spoke again. “Mr. Michaud...Richard, Pistachio, Stash. If you don’t want to break tradition, sign-up for a course in the spring to cover the student requirement. As an employee, you can take a couple of courses a year tuition free. Please consider accepting this position. WMSU needs you. We need you.” She paused a moment. “The students need you.”

Rick looked about the room as his tail continued wigwagging rapidly. He felt cornered. His squirrel side was screaming at him to flee.

Sensing through Rick’s body language that he was ready to bolt at any moment Abbie asked, “May I take my husband into another room to think on this a bit?”

With nods around the room, Abbie took the job description sheet, opened the door, and Rick bolted. He fled far down the hallway and skidded to a halt as he remembered there was press outside. He warning chitterscreed quietly as he looked back. Abbie had opened a door into another conference room, back down the hallway in the other direction. She waved to him. He fled into the room. She followed him and shut the door.

Rick immediately started pacing back and forth as his tail wigwagging nervously with each scampering hop. There was the look of pure fear in his eyes. Abbie patiently waited for him to work it out of his system as she glanced over the complete job description. After a while he seemed to calm down and stopped pacing.

“Thank you for getting me out of there.”

“I could see you were ready to bolt, hon.”

Rick nodded. “My Pistachio side was winning out in there. I felt cornered. I could use some time tree climbing right now, except, I fear I wouldn’t come down for some time.” He then glanced towards the job description she was holding. “What do you think, Abbie?”

“I think they’ve struggled with trying to find a way to accommodate the new you, hon. They could have just left you on medical leave until you quit in frustration. Instead, they’ve done their best to come-up with something for you. After looking this over, I don’t see it as much different from some of the things you do now supporting the students in the furry club or when you were moonlighting for Second Fur in that fursuit.” She handed the job description over to him. “And you get an immediate seven percent pay hike to boot, though you also shift from hourly pay to salary.”

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

“Really?” He asked as he read through it, his tail slowly swishing back and forth as he thought for a bit. “Do you think I should accept it, hon?” He finally asked.

“Obviously, the decision is yours, Rick. You know I’ll support you either way.” She hugged him giving him a scratch on the back of the neck.

Rick chittered quietly and then was silent for a bit reading over the description again. Finally, he nodded. “Alright, let’s go talk to them again.”

They returned to the conference room.

“I’ve read through this,” Rick held up the paper. “I’ll accept the offer on one condition.” He paused a moment. “I want this group to reevaluate this and see how I’m doing next summer.”

“Agreed.” There was applause around the room.

“While the position officially starts in January, we hope you’re willing to jump right in immediately.”

“And appear before the waiting news media, right?” He paused while they nodded. “Is Melissa Sagenthrope among them?”

“Yes, anticipating you’d want her present, I, personally, contacted her and asked her to be here,” Theo answered.

“Very well, let’s go greet the media.”

Later that afternoon, Rick was back at the hospital paying another visit to Nancy and gave her the news. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I knew before my accident. They had asked for my input on you filling in for Nutty from time to time. Now, well, it’s not like I’ll be able to continue as Nutty. As you may recall the first time we met, I had suggested you take over then.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence. I’ve got big shoes to fill. I could really use some tips from the most recent Nutty if you’re willing to share, along with any suggestions you have for studying. I’m going to enroll in a graduate course next semester in keeping with the tradition that WMSU’s mascot is a student. However, I haven’t taken a class in over a decade. My study skills are a bit rusty.”