

Chapter 61

“Hey! Leave Stash alone!” The student athlete had stopped his teammate before he could tickle the sleeping giant squirrel on the nose with a fake squirrel tail. Rick was curled-up on a couple of seats near the middle of the charter bus.

“Oh come, on, I was just going to have a little fun.”

“Didn’t you read through that article in the *Avalanche* at the end of the last semester or his bio in the program for our last home game? I can’t imagine what he’s gone through.” Stash’s defender gestured out the window to the night beyond. “I’m amazed he’s kept any of his humanity at all. How would you like to have an animal’s instincts fighting with your human mind? He’s a giant-ass squirrel with sharp claws and teeth. I happened to be studying in the student center the day he was interviewed for that story in the *Avalanche*. At one point he got up, went over to the fireplace and picked-up a one-inch (2.5cm) diameter stick. It cracked loudly as he bit through it with no effort. I heard him comment, how regular size squirrels can crack a Brazil nut with their jaws, so he figured the stick would be easy for him. What do you think would happen if you scare him awake and his squirrel-side lashes out in self-defense before he could get those instincts under control? I’ll tell you what would happen. He’d kick your sorry ass into next week! If he bit you...” Stash’s defender trailed off and shuddered. He handed over a copy of the game program with Pistachio on the cover. “Read through it and show our living mascot a bit more respect.”

Others on the bus agreed with Stash’s defender and the would-be troublemaker hesitated for a brief moment before sitting back in his seat. He read through the offered bio article. “Holy, shit!” He uttered a few minutes later. “You weren’t kidding.” He pointed to the article. “His first day after his transformation as a squirrel, when he woke-up, he had fled the hospital, and settled for the night on a tree branch. In the middle of the night he’d been startled awake by a martin. I’ve seen one of those before.” He held his hands apart the appropriate 18 or so inches (45cm). Member of the weasel family, unafraid to take on prey bigger than it. Stash killed it in self-defense and ate it ‘cause he was hungry and hunger won out.” He glanced nervously over at the resting giant squirrel. “He made a squirrel predator his prey.”

“Why do you think I stopped you? He’s fuckin’ strong for his size too. Can you do a pull-up with just two fingers?” Stash’s defender pointed to the sleeping squirrel. “He can. I’ve seen it! Some students had invited him to join them on the climbing wall. Obviously, it was really easy for him. That’s where I saw him do the two-finger pull-up with ease. Don’t tempt fate, dude. Let Stash sleep. He’s earned the rest after how hard he worked on the sidelines riling up our fans who made the trip down to Keene to watch and cheer us on this evening. As few in number as they were compared to the home team’s fans, they seemed nearly as loud to me.”

“I’ve noticed our competitors have been missing more free throws when he’s present. Yeah, fine, I’ll leave him alone.”

Hello to all my friends and followers out there in Chatter and Telegraph. In case you haven't heard, I've got a new job at White Mountain State University. I'm now the uni's Goodwill Ambassador promoting the uni at events all across New England. In addition, I'm "pinch hitting" as the sports mascot after the tragic accident Nutty experienced last December. As such, I'm booked almost every day and every single weekend through the end of the spring semester. So, sadly, you won't be seeing me at any cons between now and mid-June. I will be Guest of Honor at Catamount Con as I had made that commitment prior to the new job. Unfortunately, it'll probably be my only con this year. Thank you for your support and patience as I can't be as active on social media these days.

Rick waved to people from the float as it passed through downtown Groton, one of many entries in the parade, which was part of the town's and WMSU's Winter Carnival week. People cheered back at him. At the end of the parade route the float, like those before it, pulled into a parking lot at the edge of the university campus.

"Hey, Pistachio!" a student called out as he got off the float. "Come join us by the fire!"

Rick scampered over and others made room for the giant squirrel near the fire barrel. Rick pulled a glove off his right forepaw and fished his phone out of his pocket. He pulled-up his schedule and glanced at it. "I can't stay long. I need to be over to the box sled races in 20 minutes."

"You've got boots but no jacket?" One of them asked while offering him some hot chocolate, which he accepted.

"Thanks for the hot chocolate. Boots and heavy-duty gloves as I've got no fur on my paw pads." He held-up his exposed paw a moment to show that there was no fur on his pads. Some steam wafted off it in the cold. "I find running through the snow barefoot no more pleasant than you would. I don't know how my wild cousins handle it. Also, I have no jacket as that would mat down my fur and actually make me feel cold. My fluffed-up fur actually insulates me from the cold fairly well as long as the temps don't dip below 10F (-12C) or so as I've learned by trial and error." He sipped at the hot chocolate.

"What are you going to do after the box sled races?"

Rick thought for a moment. "Maybe I'll join in one of the pick-up games of broom hockey." He wigwagged his tail, "except, I might try to use my tail in place of a broom as I need all four paws to move about. I think I'm also supposed to be a judge at the snow sculpture contest mid-afternoon at the town common." Rick thumbed through his schedule and nodded. "Yup, I need to be at the common for 3pm to judge."