

When Paws Meet Grass

Some foxes love people. Some foxes would prefer to run away and be by themselves. Some foxes will click and laugh while you pet them, cherishing every second of the interaction. Some refuse to be pet, preferring to curl up tightly into a ball and comfort themselves. There are red foxes, arctic foxes, gray foxes, and loads of other types. But despite there being all these different kinds, people often merge them together and think all of them are the same.

Some people need to listen to blaring music to calm down and recharge. Some people can only calm down by lying in a dark room and listening to nature sounds. And as someone on the Autistic spectrum, I can for sure tell you that no two Autistic people are exactly alike. So why would foxes be any different?

I'm in the middle of my shift volunteering at the fox sanctuary, which I started doing a few months after graduating high school. When I walked the stage, all I knew was what other people wanted me to do and expected of me. But I never took the time to ask myself: What do *I* want? Now, as I watch fluffy bodies of various colors roam across yards at the sanctuary, my mouth tugs itself into a tender smile. Every time I watch foxes guard their territory by screeching and placing their paws on another fox's shoulders, or chase each other around their yards until their bodies fall onto the cool grass beneath them, they remind me to trust and listen to myself. They remind me that I should speak up for myself as I am the only person who truly knows what's best for me, and that I am totally in control of my life circumstances.

I'm keeping tabs on the live feed from the yard cameras while Raine cuts up raw chicken, a before bedtime treat for the foxes. I swipe to the next video feed to find Fredrick and Fiona zooming around their yard. Another smile finds its way onto my face before I jump at the loud

noise that is Raine's ringtone. I look over and see my brother Spencer is calling. My head cocks to the side and my eyebrows scrunch. Raine looks over at me, her hands still occupied with the raw chicken.

"Savannah, could you answer the phone for me?"

"He just left his shift here, I wonder what's up," I say before I accept his call.

Raine and I barely get to say hi before his shaky voice exudes from the speakerphone.

"Raine, I found a fox cub laying on the side of the road. One of the back legs doesn't look so good. I'm a little ways down the street. What should I do?"

Spencer pauses, revealing clicking and screeching in the background. Raine sets down the knife and leans closer to her phone.

"I'll come right over." She then looks over at me, eyebrows furrowed and mouth slightly opened. "Savannah, can you grab animal handling gloves and a crate, then meet me at my car? I need to find someone else to do night duty."

As the image of a fox cub with a limp back leg unable to sprint through the woods without pain nor the protection of their family settles in my mind, my hands begin to wring without my permission. But I don't have much time to be sad right now. "Be right back, Raine."

My heart gradually begins to beat harder on my chest with each step I take and with each thought my brain dedicates to the mental picture of the fox. My feet push harder against the floor, leading me to the garage faster. I pop the door open, grasp my hand around a crate's handle, and grab handling gloves from a nearby shelf as my hand reaches over to push the garage opener. As the garage door rolls up, the first thing I see are Raine's red barn boots rushing over to her van. A few moments later, the garage door reveals me and the supplies to Raine. She grabs the crate, puts it in the backseat, and I jump into the passenger seat with the gloves in my hands.

The drive down the road contains a silence I'm not sure I should fill. I wonder if Raine is thinking about other things too much to the point where this car ride doesn't warrant its own conversation. Thoughts cross my mind, but the fear of not being able to properly articulate them stops me. The thought of revealing more about myself sparks fear in me too, and suddenly I feel my face burning red. I place a cold hand over my cheek, both to comfort myself and in the hopes it will make the redness go away. But then I think back to the foxes being unapologetically themselves, and drop my hand back down to my lap and turn my head to face Raine.

"So, what's the plan when we get there?"

Raine squints into the distance, searching for Spencer. "We're gonna try to put the fox into the crate then go to the vet, if all goes as planned."

I look out the windshield once again and nod my head before Raine pulls behind Spencer's car. The fox's cries propel me out of the van and over to Spencer, where he's leaning his lower back on his car as he keeps watch on the little fox cub. I squeeze the gloves I hold in my hands as Raine runs over with the crate at her side. She slows down as she approaches the fox, trying to come across as calm as possible. If I was this fox, I'm not sure how I would feel right now. Sure, I'd be happy that people are helping me. But I think I'd be nervous about what they were truly doing and where they'd be taking me. But, thankfully, this fox is in good hands.

I hand the gloves over to Raine after she sets the crate down and before she walks over to the small, orange body with black socks and a painful-to-look-at back leg. As Raine slowly approaches the fox, groans and clicks emanate from the animal's mouth. Raine brings her hands closer and closer to them, until the fox attempts to smack the top of Raine's glove.

"I know, buddy. But I'm just trying to help you."

With no defenses, the fox continues to cry out until Raine's hands make their way to the fox's back. Soon after, the fox's head snaps back and their teeth sink into one of the gloves. Raine winces and she pulls her arms away after the fox releases her from their grip. She looks over at me and points at the crate.

"Can you hand me the blanket that's in there?"

I crouch down and toss the blanket to her. The fox jumps slightly, causing me to reconsider what I have just done. As I wince at the fear I instilled in the fox, Raine walks behind the fox and places the blanket over their back. The fox continues yapping, but still looks forward, seemingly unaware of both the blanket and Raine's change of position. When Raine wraps her hands around the fox's torso, the fox attempts to lift their body off the ground, but falls back down while doing so. I let out a gasp, but Raine manages to maintain her grip and gently picks up the fox, careful not to touch the injured back leg.

Raine makes her way to the crate that is now placed vertically to the ground, the entrance pointed up at the sky.

"Spencer and Savannah, can you hold down the crate for me?" Raine looks down at the fox as they flap their front paws around. "Be careful, buddy."

I place my hands firmly on the plastic. The fox fidgets around as they're lowered into the crate, the blanket still slightly wrapped around their body. Spencer closes the metal door, as if the fox will be able to immediately escape, before he softly tilts the crate horizontally to the ground. Air exits my mouth and floats up to my forehead, calling attention to the sweat gathering on my face. Raine slides the animal handling gloves off as she takes the crate back to her van.

"Phew, we did it!" She wipes sweat from her brow. "Nice job, both of you. I really need to get them to the vet. I'm gonna give them a call."

Phew, we did it is right. Spencer's arms are crossed and he stands in front of the van's trunk, as if he is protecting any other car or animal from getting to the fox. I imagine Spencer in his vet tech classes before I ask, "Could we come with?"

Raine nods her head. "Sure! That would be good for the two of you."

I jump into the backseat of the van before Raine and Spencer sit in the front. From the backseat, I hear the fox yap. I cannot imagine what it must be like to go from walking in the grass, to getting injured, to suddenly being shoved into a plastic crate and taken away by strangers. So many changes within a short period of time. But the fox continues expressing themselves anyway through little cries, because what else is a fox to do?

The van's tires squeal as Raine pulls into a spot next to the vet's entrance. On the way over, a myriad of thoughts ran through my head as I looked out the windows and listened to the fox. Now, as Raine runs to grab the crate, Spencer and my's feet meet the parking lot pavement. I hope the fox will be okay. I hope the fox will be able to heal, then get back to the life they once lived. Back to their usual routine, family, friends, surroundings. Back to it all. At least that's what I would want for myself.

The three of us walk in and the receptionist's mouth stretches into a slight grimace, as if she feels the fox's pain. Raine sets the crate down on the floor, then begins to speak.

"Hi, I just called in about a fox emergency. Is Dr. Griff here?"

The receptionist points around the corner. "First room on the left."

We rush over to the room, my shoes squeaking against the tile. Raine sets the crate on the examination table.

Raine quickly shakes the vet's hand. "Nice to see you again."

The vet's eyes flash towards the table. "Nice to see you, too." The vet glances at Spencer and I standing behind Raine, then waves. "Hi, I'm Dr. Griff. Nice to meet you." Both Spencer and I smile slightly before Dr. Griff turns back to Raine and the fox. "I heard a bit about your situation. What exactly happened?"

Raine explains how Spencer found the fox. All I can hear is that the fox is no longer where they're supposed to be, where they *want* to be. Raine puts her gloves back on and takes the fox out of the crate, keeping a close eye on the legs. The fox, being the tiniest amount calmer than before, pants yet stays still while looking at me from behind Raine's arms. Dr. Griff examines the fox's hind leg, putting light pressure on it. The fox releases quick clicks of suffering, prompting the vet to pet them.

"I know it hurts, I'm sorry. It definitely looks like she was ran over, so we're gonna get her an x-ray immediately." She lifts the fox's gums up to reveal her teeth, then pokes at other areas of the fox's body with her hands and other instruments. "Other than her leg, she looks really healthy. Her teeth look good and her temperature is normal."

Raine, Spencer, and I collectively take a deep breath. Raine looks at Dr. Griff, eyebrows raised. "That's good to hear, at least. Will she have to stay here overnight?"

Dr. Griff looks up at all of us. "Yes, that would be for the best so she can rest."

I look at the fox laying on the table, being brave no matter how scary her situation is, and bring myself to ask a question despite doubting myself. "Could we bring her to our sanctuary after her stay here?"

Griff looks at the fox, then back up at me. "Yes, that would be fine."

Spencer's eyes widen and mouth drops open before nudging me slightly. "Ooo, what are you gonna name her?"

Dr. Griff looks in our direction and gazes at Spencer. “No, don’t get your hopes up. The goal is to release her back into the wild.”

My brain thinks back to the woods at the side of the road. I think of the fox roaming through leaves, stepping on branches until they snap, and tackling her siblings. I imagine her going from a small cub to a taller, majestic fox who has her own den for her own family. I imagine her sleeping peacefully on logs and grass, huddled up with her cubs for warmth. I imagine being taken away from my bedroom and being put into another house with nothing familiar in sight. My family gone. Bed gone. My routine scrapped, and my daily comforts nowhere to be found. Only me and my spiraling thoughts as I try to adjust to chaos.

Raine speaks, which jolts me back to reality. “So she’ll stay with us until she’s healed, then we’ll release her where we found her?”

My eyes squint from the intensity of the office’s fluorescent lighting, but I recenter my focus to the fox’s soft orange fur.

“That’s correct,” Dr. Griff replies. “As for now, we’ll take x-rays and put a cast on her leg. She’ll rest here until tomorrow, then we’ll call you in the morning.”

Spencer and I nod our heads while Raine thanks Dr. Griff. I go to pet the fox as we’re leaving, and she allows me to scratch her between her ears. She’s still panting, but her eyes shut and she rests her head on the metal table. I’m glad I can take care of her because, since I was a kid, I wanted someone to take better care of me.

When I’m on my shift the next morning watching the trail cams, I hear Raine’s van pull up. I see two of our foxes, Frederick and Fiona, fight over food. Frederick stands on all fours with his back slightly arched and a tense neck while he guards the food bowl. Fiona yips at him,

causing Fredrick to screech back. I begin to wonder how the fox we rescued would interact with our foxes. I imagine her little body running around the yard with Fiona and Fredrick, clumsily taking a dive head first into the ground, only to stand right back up.

The more I think about it, the less sure I am about whether I'd want to be released back into the wild in an attempt to find my family only to risk getting injured again, or if I'd want to stay at the sanctuary. I think about my own routine of getting to work and checking the trail cameras as I sip on my morning tea. I think about the consistency of the fox's daily routines. As Raine walks through the front door of the sanctuary's office, I fixate on a single sentence; *I think I don't want the fox to leave.*

Raine walks through the door with the crate at her side. "Turns out her leg is fractured. She has to spend most of her time resting, but she can be let out of her cage every so often. Dr. Griff said to check back in with her in a month."

My mouth twists in an attempt to hold back a frown. "I feel so bad for her." I run my hands through my hair and let out a sigh. "So, that means the fox will be staying with us for a while then?"

Raine nods, then takes the fox out of the crate. "Until she's healed, that's the plan."

Raine puts the fox in a bigger cage. She immediately lays down on top of the blankets that line the plastic bottom, grabbing a bone to chew on. Water hangs off the black wire walls next to a metal bowl that Raine put bits of chicken in. I sit next to the fox as she plays, running my fingers gently over the cage. The fox takes a break to look up at me, causing me to release a small giggle. She coos back at me. Regardless of everything, she seems to be going through the motions with ease. I wish I was more like that, able to more comfortably adapt and flow with sudden change.

I stick a finger through the gaps of the cage to pet the fox, and Raine plops down on the floor to sit next to me. She puts her hand over her heart. “Awe, she likes you.”

We sit in silence for a bit, keeping watch of the fox to make sure she is okay in her new environment. She goes from gnawing on a bone, to drinking some water, to finally eating the food Raine set out for her. But she lugs around a big, blue cast wherever she goes that serves as a reminder of her past. I finally break the silence.

“Does she have to go back out in the wild? What if going back out into the wild is dangerous and she never finds her family? What if she wants to stay here?”

Raine places a hand on my back and takes a deep breath. “Savannah, what if everything you’re worrying about turns out to go okay, or even great?”

I shake my head, closing my eyes in the hopes of holding back my tears. “Yes, but what if it doesn’t? What if she ends up in the exact same scenario down the line, or even worse? She’s just a little fox.”

“Yes, but little foxes eventually grow up to be strong creatures who are able to figure out what they need to do in order to survive.”

For a moment, I think back to my years in school and all the times I was made to feel ashamed of my intense emotions. All the times people told me I was being overdramatic for crying over loud noises, not being able to sit in the cafeteria because it was too cold and loud, and breaking off friendships because I felt like I was pretending to be someone else. But now Raine is here, not judging me for getting emotional and trying to comfort me, as a fox stares at us and reminds me it is okay to be myself.

Raine pats me on the back and looks me in the eyes. “But hey, who knows what’ll happen yet? She’s going to be here for a while.” Raine taps her pointer finger on her chin. “I know Dr. Griff said no naming her, but maybe you’d want to give her a name for the time being?”

I continue looking at the fox’s face as I scratch her ears. Her eyes begin to close. I let out a giggle, amazed at how gentle yet mighty she is. She’s such a little fighter. Soft clicks exit between her teeth and Raine unlocks the cage so our interaction isn’t confined to a small gap. I scoot over to the front of the cage and see her fox face sticking out like she’s looking for me, expecting me to come back. I tickle her between the ears. Then, it hits me. “Fifi.”

Raine nods her head, her messy bun also nodding up and down. “Fifi... I like it! How’d you come up with that?”

I continue petting Fifi’s soft fur between her ears. “F-I. The first two letters of the word ‘fighter’ put together twice make Fifi.”

Fifi opens her eyes, the morning light causing her brown eyes to sparkle with determination. My eyes sparkle from tears of uncertainty, not knowing where she will be after she’s healed.

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A few months go by of Fifi limping around the house before we visit Dr. Griff for the last time. While Fifi sits on the metal table, the vet shows us an updated x-ray of her leg and points just below the knee. “Good news, she’s all healed!” I clap my hands, but a heavy feeling sinks down to my stomach. “It may take her a little bit to get used to walking again, but it’s safe to take the cast off now.”

“That’s great! I’m excited to finally see her walk outside.” Suddenly, Raine looks over at me with pursed lips before looking back at Dr. Griff. “So, how much longer should we keep her for?”

The vet rests her hands on the chilly table right beside Fifi. “We’ll find that out after the cast gets taken off. We’ll see how she walks without it on, so I’ll get that taken care of right now. Be right back.” Dr. Griff picks up Fifi and walks her out of the room.

Raine pats me on the back. “How are you feeling?”

I inhale deeply, and let out a long breath. “I mean, this is all really good news! But you already know I’m upset at the idea of her leaving.”

There’s a brief moment of silence between us until a chuckle escapes Raine’s mouth. “Do you remember that time Fifi learned how to open up her cage and shred a bunch of Kleenex all over the office?”

I bury my face into my hands to quiet my laughter. “Oh no! And then I had to help you clean it up the next morning? But even after that we found little remnants of tissue when we had to watch Fifi.”

“Yeah, like that one time a long piece got stuck to the bottom of my shoe.”

I clutch my stomach. “And I didn’t tell you about it until right before I left for the day.”

Raine grasps onto the table. “You said, ‘By the way, a piece of toilet paper’s been stuck to your shoe all day!’”

I shake my head out of confusion. “How did you not notice it at all?”

She smiles and shrugs. “I don’t know, guess I’m used to having a bunch of random stuff cling onto me. Oh god, someone help me please.”

We hear a knock at the door and Fifi runs into the room. Dr. Griff pumps her fists. “Look at her go!”

My hand covers my mouth and my eyes are glued to her as if I’ve never seen an animal run. Raine steps forward. “That’s awesome. Zoom, zoom, zoom, zoom!”

Dr. Griff gives us the go ahead to release her as soon as we can. After a few minutes, Fifi calms down, she’s put back in her crate, and the three of us drive to the sanctuary again for what might be the last time.

A few hours later, Raine, Spencer, and I get in the van and drive back to where we found Fifi. I pet her soft head and she begins laughing, a few clicks released every now and then. Her tail pounds against the van’s door. This moment doesn’t feel real. I’m excited yet nervous to see if she runs back out into the woods. If she does, maybe I’ll never see her again. If she doesn’t, maybe she’ll change her mind while she’s at the sanctuary and attempt to flee by herself like an escape artist. Either way, I just want her to be happy regardless of how nervous this change makes me.

Spencer’s voice disrupts my thoughts. “Everything okay back there?”

“What?”

Spencer looks behind him. “I hear a bunch of thumping. It sounds like someone’s either trying to break in or trying desperately to get away.”

I shake my head side to side, as if I’m trying to wake myself up. “Oh, that’s just Fifi. No worries.” I stroke her back. The feel of soft fur underneath my fingertips grounds me, and so does staring at the black dot at the top of her spine.

Raine pulls to the side of the road, walks to the back of the van, and comes back with a crate. The greenery outside stares at me through the window, but Raine opening my door breaks the distance between us. Knowing what to do, Fifi steps into the crate before Raine moves her outside. My heart flutters when my feet meet the ground.

The four of us walk a bit deeper into the woods. Bird calls float through the air like pieces of dandelion someone blew off to make a wish. Spencer and I stare down at Fifi while Raine bends down to reach for the crate's metal latches. But instead of undoing them, she pauses. "Savannah, would you like to do the honors?"

Tears gather in my eyes as I nod and walk forward. I boop Fifi on the nose before taking hold of the first latch. And the second. Finally, Fifi is standing in the crate with the door completely open so she can either stay or go. Fifi's head peeks out to take a few sniffs. It reminds me of how I need to know where parking is before driving to a new place. How I need to know who will be at social gatherings. How I needed to acquaint myself with the layout of my highschool a few years prior.

The longer Fifi stands there, the more I find myself cheering her on. I want to tell her how often I feel the same way when it comes to change, no matter how big or small, but all that matters is that she is trying to push through her discomfort. If she finds she can't do something new, it is okay and she is brave for trying. But if she can, she should be so very proud of herself for pushing through. The experience might be overwhelming and take some time to recover from, but sometimes that is what it takes to grow.

Eventually, Fifi's paws met the grass. The sun's rays made her orange fur glow, which seemed to propel her forward and gave her the courage to go on.

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A couple years later, I'm camping in the woods and walking around to find twigs for a campfire. The ground crunches under the weight of my feet as I continue onward under the twinkling sky. My eyes capture a frame of a landscape that is vaguely familiar, despite how tall the grass has grown and the clearance of trees. With a stack of sticks hooked in my arms, I bend down to grab another. I take the twig, add it to my pile, but as I'm doing so I see an orange, furry body standing behind a tree. I squint to make sure I'm not imagining things and quietly shuffle forward.

As I sneak closer, a black dot at the top of the fox's spine makes everything click, much like the sound Fifi made when I pet her. The fox turns around to look at their surroundings. They don't run away upon seeing me.

"Are you Fifi?" I whisper while holding out my hand as she gently sniffs the air around it.

She clicks and coos before darting off into the woods. My heart sings knowing she is safe and sound.