

Epilogue

Yellow, orange, and red maple leaves slowly drifted to the forest floor. Rick made his way through the forest to where he had last seen Rose the previous spring. He crossed a small clearing, recognized her scent, and looked-up from the base of a large oak tree.

(chitterchit) “Are you around, Rose?” He called up. A chitter reply came back down. A gray squirrel quickly climbed down the trunk of the tree. It leapt onto Rick and made a couple circuits around his body before hugging his right arm. Rose chittered excitedly. Rick gently scratched her at the back of the neck.

“I’m very happy to see you too, little sister. I brought some grapes.”

“Grapes!” she squeaked excitedly as Rick pulled a small plastic container of green grapes out of his pack. He opened it and set it down. Rose quickly dug in.

Rick pulled out his old phone, the one his wife had purchased for him right after his transformation. It had long since been replaced, but the app he needed was no longer available, so he couldn’t download it to his current phone. Nor for some reason could he get it to transfer from the old to new phone due to a change in operating systems. The old phone took a moment to boot-up and finally beeped.

“There we go. How are you doing, Rose?”

“I’m alive and well. How long has it been?” She quickly finished the grape and dug into a second one. “I love grapes.”

“It’s been four years since you became a squirrel, Rose. And about six months since the last time I came to check on you. How are the pups?”

“My last litter scattered to live on their own mid-summer, brother.”

“That’s good, Rose. I wanted to make sure you weren’t trying to raise a late season litter before asking my next question. Would you be willing to let Dr. Canatori exam you this year? He’s worried as you didn’t agree last year. Now that your territory is well established, you can ‘go missing’ for several days and not worry about losing it.”

Rose hesitated a moment mid-way through her third grape. Her tail wigwagged back and forth in thought.

“Alternatively, I could give you more cat food you’d need to eat as your vaccine booster.”

Rose visibly shivered at the thought of having to eat that. The chicken flavor didn’t do a good job of disguising the nasty flavor of the vaccine itself.

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

“Would you agree to letting him examine you if when I bring you back, I also bring back three days’ worth of grapes?”

Rose’s face lit-up. “Three days!? That means I could store all the nuts and seeds I find those days for the winter instead of eating some. Okay, I’ll let him touch me and stick a needle in me. The cat food isn’t very tasty anyway.”

“Thank you, little sister. Do you want to ride on my back to the car?”

Rose finished the last grape and leapt onto the larger squirrel’s back.

Dr. Canatori gently scratched the gray squirrel on the back of the neck as she quivered under his touch. “Thank you for agreeing to come, Rose. You are healthy for a squirrel of your age. No fleas or ticks either.”

“You taught me a few tricks when I stayed here with you that first winter. Dr. Canatori, which I’ve put to good use. I line my nest with cedar boughs. Any nasty bugs that try to join me don’t stick around when I return to my nest.”

“Excellent. Will you agree to a distemper and rabies shot this year?”

Rose hesitated a moment weighing the needle against it mixed in cat food.

“Little sister, I’m due for my booster, too. I’ve also kept my dray in the display area in good shape. We can sleep it off together there just like in the past.”

Rose quickly agreed as it meant she could spend more time with her big brother.

“Pistachio, where are we going? This isn’t the way back to my territory.” She had to say it very carefully and slowly as Pistachio turned his phone off before starting the car.

“I know, Rose. We’re taking a slight detour. I have some friends who want to meet you, first.”

Rose wigwagged her tail nervously. “Humans?”

“Yes, but they’re good friends of mine. They won’t hurt you. They just want to meet you. You’ve become famous, you know, little sister. They understand they can’t swarm around you. And I’ll be there to protect you. You’ll be safe.”

Rose hesitated a moment before agreeing. She curled up on the seat to nap as watching the scenery go by made her nauseous. After what seemed to be no time at all, Rick gently nudged her.

“Wake-up, little sister. We’re there. Would you like to ride on my back again?”

Rose leapt up on Rick’s back. He exited his vehicle. Rose stared at the sign while mouthing the letters. Rick waited patiently.

“C...A...N...A...A...N..Cay-nan?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t had a need to read human in years, Pistachio.” Rose drooped her tail. “I’ve all but forgotten how.”

Rick pointed to the sign as he read it. “Canaan Bowl-o-Rama.”

Rose’s eyes shot wide enough that Rick could see her irises were blue. “But isn’t that where,” she hesitated, “where you...” she trailed off.

“Yes, this is where I had my accident five years ago. And if it weren’t for your nanites, I’d be dead, as I’ve tried to reassure you time and again. When we walk in, the humans might shout-out in greeting, but it’s not meant to be scary. Here we go.”

Rick entered the bowling center, pulled his phone out of his pocket and started the app. There was a large banner against the far wall proclaiming:

HAPPY FURTHDAY, PISTACHIO AND ROSE!

“Pistachio! You made it! I was getting a little worried. Is that who I hope it is with you?”

“Yes, Gloria, I brought Rose along, but I had to be a little tricky about it. If you want to hug, take it slow and easy so you don’t scare her.”

“Rose, this is Gloria. She is the current president of the White Mountain State University Furry Club.”

Rose leapt up onto Rick’s head as he gently hugged Gloria.

“Happy furthday, Pistachio,” she said and then looked at Rose. “Happy furthday, to you too, Ms. Rose. May I touch you?”

Rose wigwagged her tail nervously. “Hold out your hand first.”

“She needs to sniff you, Gloria.”

“Yes, I understand. Just as you had warned me and the others.”

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Gloria held her hand out to Rose, who grasped it and sniffed.

“Thank you. You may give me a quick pet. What’s a ‘furthday’?”

“It’s a term some of the furry club students made up for me four years ago. It’s to celebrate when I turned into a squirrel. And now to also celebrate when you did too, Rose.”

Gloria gently stroked Rose along her back. The squirrel quivered in delight under the gentle touch. “Thank you for coming, Rose. Your nanobot technique has given so many of us hope.”

Rose moved back to Rick’s back. What is she talking about, Pistachio?”

Rick (gigglechittered) “Little sister, do you remember one of our first conversations after my transformation, the one that gave you the idea to swap genders?”

Rose stared off blankly a moment. Rick patiently waited understanding what she was doing trying to call up the exact memory and sort of relive it. Her eyes came back into focus and shot wide. “Is that a whole plate of grapes!?” Forgetting the conversation and all the humans around her, the gray squirrel leapt from Rick’s back and landed next to the plate, she started to dig in, squeaking happily.

A young woman walked up to Rick and they hugged. She wagged her white-tipped orange tail. Other than the tail, she looked perfectly human. Rick turned to Rose, who was giving all her attention to the plate of grapes in front of her.

“Rose?” She continued to blissfully nibble on a grape ignoring him. Rick gently tapped her with one of his clawed fingers. “Little sister, why are you not scared all of a sudden.”

“Grapes! Lots and lots of grapes! Oh, and you’re with me, brother. You said I’d be safe.”

“Rose, do you remember what I asked you about before you saw all those grapes?”

Rose thought for a moment. “Yes. Five years ago, you explained how you wanted me to teach others about the nanobots ‘cause of how they quickly healed you. And if our techs could figure out how the nanobots did that without turning someone into a squirrel, we could make the world suck just a little bit less for others.”

“Exactly, Rose.” Rick replied. “This gathering is to thank you for making the world suck less, especially for many of those here who want to thank you personally as your nanobots have helped them.” He gestured to the plate of grapes. “Those are all for you, little sister. When we leave, we’ll bring the rest of them back to your territory. Take a good look as how many there are. It’s about three days’ worth, isn’t it? Just like I promised you, yesterday.”

Rose chittered in delight.

“Yes, as I was saying, many of those here want to personally thank you, Rose.” He gestured to the young woman who had just hugged him and was standing there, patiently waiting. “Starting with this woman. She’s the one who brought all those grapes for you.”

Before Rick could continue, Rose suddenly leapt at the young woman, landing on her left arm and hugged it tightly. “Thank you for the yummy grapes!” she squeaked. Her eyes suddenly shot wide a moment as she took in the woman’s scent. Her tail lashed back and forth rapidly and she jumped from the woman to Rick and scrambled onto his head, “Fox!!!” she squeaked and chattered a warning of the nearby predator. She looked about to see if there was some place higher and safer she could scramble to. Her screening triggered Rick, who had a hard time fighting down the urge to flee as his tail wigwagged in warning.

The young woman frowned and drooped her white-tipped orange tail. “I’m sorry if I scared you, Ms. Rose. I would never dream of harming you.”

Rick forced the fear down and gently reached up with his right forepaw and scratched Rose, trying to reassure her. “Remember, what I said, little sister before we came in? You’re safe with me. No one at this gathering will harm you. They’ve come here to meet and thank you, Rose. She brought all those grapes for you in thanks. Why would she do that if she wanted to have you as a snack?”

“Foxes are clever. She could have been using them for bait.” Rose looked straight at the woman and asked, “Who are you?” There was a nervous quiver in her voice, which Rick’s phone repeated. She whirled her tail over her head and body fearfully.

“My name is Nancy Gibbs, Ms. Rose. We spoke once on the phone five years ago, right after Pistachio was changed into a giant squirrel and you were still human. I was a very scared college student afraid you had tampered with the college mascot suit I wore at sport events. I was afraid I would change into a giant squirrel like Pistachio. You reassured me that you didn’t do anything to the Nutty mascot suit. Not too long after that, I suffered an accident that left me paralyzed.” Nancy chuckled. “After that accident, I had wished you had sabotaged the Nutty mascot suit. I even asked Pistachio if he was contagious and would bite me. Becoming a squirrel was preferable to me at the time compared to being paralyzed from the waist down.

“Pistachio put me in contact with the testing team at *Second Limb*. When they were ready for human test subjects last fall, I was part of the first group. The nanites technology you invented gave me the ability to walk again. As it turned out, they hadn’t worked all the bugs out yet. The initial attempt didn’t work. The nanites didn’t recognize my spinal cord injury and shut down without repairing the damage. So, they went to Plan B as I wasn’t leaving there unless I walked out on my own, even if it meant I’d have fur and a tail. I had been given a choice of animals.” She slid-up her shirt sleeve to show that mid-arm upward she had a light coat of ruddy orange fur. “I chose red fox. I had a fascination with them as a child. They were able to prevent me from changing any further other than the tail and a light coat of fur on my torso, back, upper arms and upper legs. But it worked. The nanites healed my spinal injury. A tail and some fur is a small price to pay to be able to walk again, Ms. Rose. And I can walk again on my own thanks to you.”

“Remember that conversation again from five years ago, little sister? Thanks to you sharing your knowledge with our techs, Ms. Gibbs’ life sucks a whole lot less. Our techs learned from her and the others in her test group. They can now heal such injuries as hers without the fur and tail. Our techs aren’t up to limb regeneration yet, but I don’t think we’re very far from that next step. Three others in her group wound-up in a similar situation with fur and tail. The rest opted to have the fur and tail reversed, but not Nancy.”

“I’ve passed on that offer. At this point they can only reverse the fur growth if I also give-up the tail. I want to keep my tail as a reminder of what happened. And I’ve enjoyed it more than I expected I would.” Nancy swished it back and forth a moment. “So, I guess I’m keeping the fur as I couldn’t dream of giving up my tail now. If I don’t want to attract attention, I just wear baggy pants and tuck my tail into one of the legs. At least here, I don’t need to worry about that.” She swished her tail again.

Rose looked at Nancy a moment and then leapt back on her. She hugged her left upper furry arm tightly again. “I’m sorry I’m so scared, Ms. Gibbs. I’m so happy my invention helped you. I know you mean me no harm. I’m doing my best to fight down the fear. Please pet me. It helps me calm the fears.” She was tense at first but was soon quivering under Nancy’s gentle touch. It wasn’t long before she was chitterpurring.

“I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for me, Ms. Rose.” Tears trickled down Nancy’s cheeks. “If you ever lose your territory, I’ll take you in.” She continued to gently stroke the squirrel’s back. “I’ll have my wildlife rehab license shortly. I have a huge yard with lots of trees. I’ve been training with Dr. Canatori at the Squam Lake Science Center. If you ever come live with me, I will make sure the set-up is similar to what you had at the Science Center. You’ll be able to come in and go out as you please. Food will never be an issue for you. It’s the least I can do for you after you gave me the ability to walk again.”

Rose turned around and grabbed two of Nancy’s fingers of the hand she had been petting her with. Rose looked up at Nancy while squeezing the fingers gently. “That’s a very generous offer, Ms. Gibbs. I’ll keep it in mind. Thank you, again for the yummy grapes.” She let go of Nancy’s fingers and leapt back onto Rick.

“There are many others here with stories like Nancy’s whose lives are better today thanks to you, Rose. Let’s go meet them.”

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