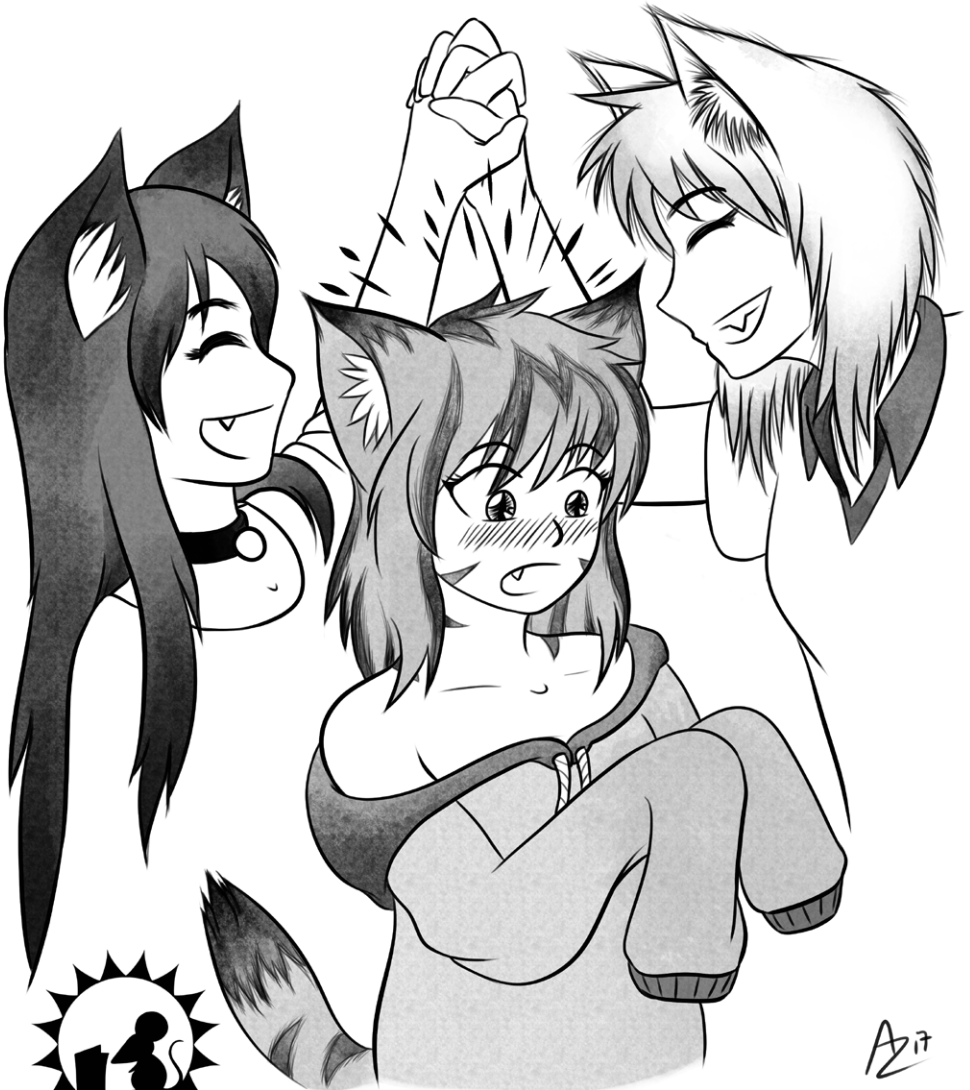


**MY FRIENDS AND I WERE GRANTED  
THREE WISHES BY A CAT GODDESS  
AND I SWEAR I GOT DISTRACTED  
WHEN MY TURN CAME AROUND**



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**BY ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN**



## **What would you wish for if you got a divine being out of a jam?**

Gods aren't exactly common, but there are a lot of them, it turns out. If a person sees a god, it usually means the latter is in trouble—the modern world has many mysteries the gods haven't completely figured out. But some charitable person is inevitably around to help out these flustered deities, who then invariably grant these kind souls a wish.

And if a lot of wishes are being granted at once, well, it's easy to lose track of what you want.

Cat Wishes is my second light novel, this time about a small group of friends, divine intervention, and the ups and downs of their day to day life as they adjust to some pretty dramatic changes. As always, it's full of personal growth, self-discovery, and a lot of gender feels.

Please enjoy, and let's keep making wonderful things together. ♥

—Alex Zandra

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# My Friends And I Were Granted Three Wishes By A Cat Goddess And I Swear I Got Distracted When My Turn Came Around

by Alex Zandra Van Chestein

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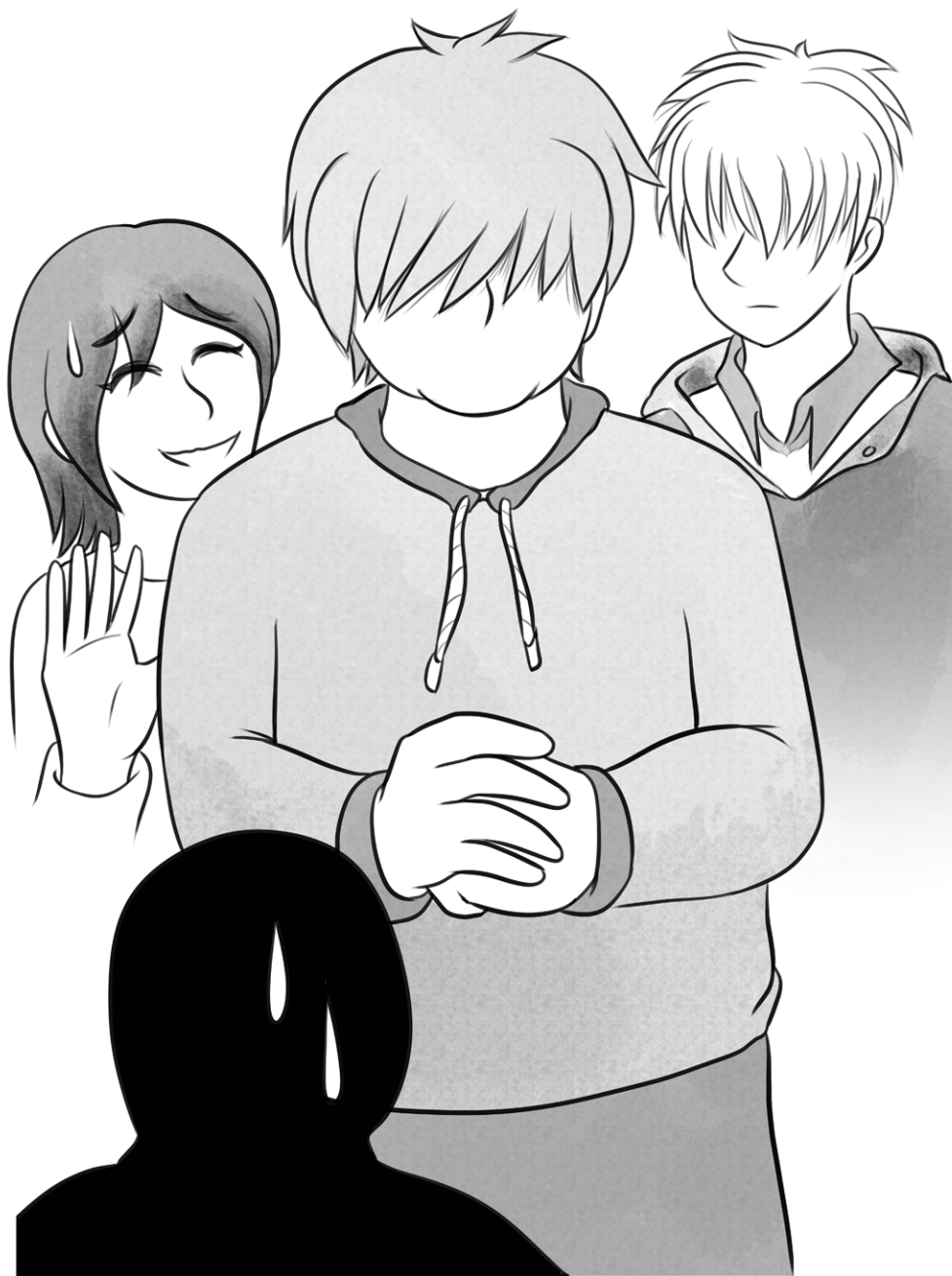
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# Catch A Tiger

Tora was part graduate student, part teaching assistant, and part tiger. She was known around campus for her diligence, her impeccable style, and for being able to intimidate anyone with a single look.

Well, okay, she was also known for the tiger thing.

Her shining academic record wasn't what got her the cat ears, the tail and the stripes though; they said that she'd gotten a tiger god out of a jam long ago and the grateful deity had rewarded her with a wish. What she'd asked for was a closely guarded secret, but the results of the god's boon spoke for themselves. No one messed with Tora.

Well, almost no one; there were a few disgruntled students who'd gotten on her bad side. They'd try to spread rumors about her, but Terence put a stop to those whenever he could. He was leaving his final class of the day when just such an opportunity presented itself. A student with square glasses was telling another lie to an impressionable freckled underclassman; he was gently sent packing.

Terence wasn't a fan of confrontation, but a person of his size and stature didn't need to be; he took up enough space that looming above someone with a disapproving look got the job done. He quickly put the record straight with the younger student. "She stands out, but she's a person just like us," Terence said with a soft smile, "and she's really nice once you get to know her."

The student thanked Terence and left, as Terence's friends finally got out of class. "Hey Terry!" the auburn-haired girl said as she ran ahead of her taller classmate, "out on rumor patrol again?"

Terence nodded. "Hey Evie, hey Oliver," he said. "Yeah, exams are coming up so folks are getting testy I guess."

Evie stuck her tongue out. "Ugh," she said, "I almost forgot about those. But that's okay! Once they're done, it's department picnic time!" She bounced excitedly at the prospect of what had now become a spring tradition.

Terry and Oliver gave her matching half-hearted smiles. Being outdoors and surrounded by lots of people was something neither had had much success with in the past.

"C'mon," Evie chided, "it'll be fun! My cousin's in town with her partner, I'm sure you'll get along! Oliver and I are getting them in."

Terry looked at Oliver as the latter nodded in acknowledgement. That's usually how invites went; the slender student didn't have many friends outside of him and Evie, letting them take the lead when it came to social stuff.

"Oh," Evie added, "did you figure out your plus one yet?"

Terry hesitated, then shook his head. "I don't really know anyone outside the department..."

Oliver turned to Terry, then gave a head tilt down the hall. Both he and Evie turned to see what their friend was pointing at; two rooms over, Tora was chatting with a student as class let out.

"What, Tora?" Terry asked nervously. "I... I mean we're on good terms, I guess, but... I'm not sure she'd be up for it, you know?"

Evie smirked. "Come on, you big dummy," she said, "you'd love to hang out, you're just afraid to ask. It took like a month of us pushing and prodding until you finally offered her a seat with us at lunch! I'm sure she'd be interested... in, uh..." Evie trailed off as her eyes went wide.

"What is it?" Terry asked, confused. "Is there something—"

"Interested in what?" Tora asked, standing behind the three of them.

Terry's heart dropped into his stomach and his face went pale. "Uh, um, uh," he stammered, turning around to face her. Tora had the height advantage on Evie (and even on Oliver), but she and Terry were on even ground—and as he squirmed, he reflected that didn't matter one bit.

The tiger girl grinned, flashing her fangs. "I couldn't help but overhear," she said, her cat ears twitching as if on cue. "What's this thing I may or may not be up for?"

Terry cleared his throat. "There's, uh," he began shakily, "there's the department picnic the weekend after the exams."

Tora's playful grin softened a bit. "Oh yeah," she said, "I think I've heard of it. Big thing in the park, some students of mine have a band that's going to play there."

There was a moment of silence. Tora looked at Terry expectantly, her smile not wavering.

"Uh," Terry began, but didn't continue.

Tora leaned in a tiny bit. "And...?" she asked.

Evie gave her large friend a nudge.

"Uh!" he said, "would you... would you like to come?"

Tora's grin returned in full. "Sure, that sounds fun." She took a step back, taking a slightly more serious tone behind her smile. "See? Sometimes it's worth asking for what you want." And with that, she turned around and headed back to her classroom.

Terry deflated as the tension left his body. Meanwhile, Evie did her best to contain her mirth and Oliver stepped back in, having faded into the background with practiced ease while all this had been going on. "I can't believe that worked out," Terry whispered, his heart still racing.

Oliver crooked a thumb down the hallway. "Diner?"

"Hell yes," Terry and Evie answered in unison. Half days were rare, and best celebrated with lunch at the group's favorite restaurant.

# What You Wish For

Gods weren't exactly common, but there were a lot of them, it turns out. If a person saw a god, it usually meant the latter was in trouble—the modern world had many mysteries the gods hadn't completely figured out. But some charitable person was inevitably around to help out these flustered deities, who then would invariably grant these kind souls a wish.

Science still hadn't quite figured wishes out (and not for lack of trying), but they were a thing gods could do. Meeting a god was a bit like winning the lottery; maybe not the jackpot, but something like the second or third prize, surely. Everyone knew someone who knew someone who'd gotten a wish.

Oliver had a neighbor back home who could always tell what was wrong with machines. Evie's childhood piano tutor could see in the dark. Terry's acting teacher in high school had hair that changed color based on her mood. And there were more public figures: the talk show host who could smell a lie, the hirsute wrestler with bull horns (who always filed the tips down before a show to avoid accidents)... You always wanted it to happen to you, but there were no sure-fire ways of increasing your odds. Like many things in life, it was something you had no control over.

But folks sure liked to talk about it.

"What would you wish for?" Evie asked as the three friends made their way to their favorite restaurant, a diner in the quiet part of town.

"Wings!" Oliver answered uncharacteristically fast.

"Ohh, like Dovetail?" Terry said, "that's a good one! Flying looks so fun! Reminds me, I should get around to listening to her latest album."

They crossed a small stream beyond the soccer field, followed it to the river it flowed into, and then started walking around the lot where a new mall was being built.

"What about you, Terry?" Evie asked.

Terry remained silent for a bit. "Shapeshifting," he finally answered, quickly adding, "it'd be really useful you know? And, uh, maybe I'd get back into acting. I could do a show by myself!"

Evie chuckled. "I don't think that's something you can wish for," she said.

"Why not?" Terry asked.

"Well," she continued, "wishes tend to be one-time things, right? Nobody gets, like, super powers. You can't ask for something you can just turn on; gods change something about you, and then that's how you are."

Terry looked a bit crestfallen. "Oh," he said. "I guess that makes sense."

They all walked in silence for a bit; sensing a bit of unease, Oliver looked back at Evie and asked, "you?"

Evie pondered. "Hmm... I'd wish to be small and cute!"

Terry snorted. "Whaaat?" he exclaimed, "but you're already small and cute!"

Evie smiled bashfully. "Well," she said, a little louder to be heard over the noise of the nearby construction work, "I'd just like to be... a bit more, you know? And, well, there's not much I can do about the height, but I'm still going to get cuter every year for a bit, so there's that!"

Terry nodded, looking off in the distance. There was a lot to envy about Evie.

Like her indomitable optimism. The three of them had been assigned as roommates at the start of their first year and had developed a fast friendship. Terry had trouble reconciling the Evie back then with the person in front of him today. She'd found herself early on in her studies, so to speak, and had changed dramatically. Gone was the shy, reserved student that Terry would reflexively try to protect. Today's Evie was full of confidence. She was their rock, the glue that kept their group together. That didn't stop Terry from being protective, though.

Evie walked to the front of the group, a little more spring in her step. Then she stopped. "Wait," she said, "do you hear that?" The other two stopped as well, listening intently. Every so often, during the gaps in construction noise, there was the distinct sound of an animal in distress. Oliver looked around for the source, then took off running.

"You know where it's coming from?" Terry asked, but got no answer. He and Evie ran off after their friend.

When they caught up with Oliver, they found the source of the odd noise Evie had heard; a cat was apparently stuck in a tree while a heavyset lady in protective headgear tore up some pavement with a jackhammer.

"Oh jeez, you think the noise scared them up there?" Terry asked.

"I'll go ask her to stop!" Evie said as she headed toward the construction worker.

Meanwhile, Oliver waved Terry over to the tree, where they both took a closer look at the scared animal. The white cat was definitely having a bad day, yowling and unsure how to get further away from this aggressive, overwhelming noise.

"Be strong, little kitty!" Terry said. "You'll be down in no time!"

The noise stopped a moment later; Evie had been successful in her efforts. The worker looked on with curiosity as Terry braced himself with his back to the tree. "Here," he said to Oliver, "I'll give you a boost. Can you get the cat down?"



Oliver nodded and gently climbed up, making soft cooing sounds in an attempt to gain the animal's trust. With the noise gone, the cat calmed down a bit, and tentatively allowed Oliver to pick it up and carry it down to the ground, unscathed. As soon as their little paws touched the ground, the cat ran off, leaving their benefactors alone with the bemused construction worker.

"Thank you!" Terry said, leaving her to her work as the three students headed back to the river.

"Hey we did a good thing!" Evie cheered as they resumed their walk to the diner. "We put our heads together and we helped a little animal in no time flat! Like, that was really impressive. I'm proud of us."

"Yeah," said Terry, "we kinda did, didn't we? We work pretty well together!"

Oliver nodded with a grin.

They all ran down a small incline and walked a bit closer to the water, hoping to sneak a peek at some fish that could be swimming close to the edge. As they climbed and crested the slope on the other side, they stopped in their tracks. There was someone there, sitting in the grass: a young lady with white hair, cat ears, and a tail. She rose to her feet, smiling gently.

"Thank you," she said, "that was very kind of you."

Terry felt goosebumps race over his skin. He looked at Oliver, then at Evie. They were transfixed. Was this really happening? Was the cat they saved... but before he could finish that thought, the figure took a step forward, and a deep calmness overtook him. Everything around the four of them seemed to slow to a stop; the construction noise, the sounds of the nearby river and the city around them... all went quiet. Blades of grass caught up in the wind hung suspended in midair. All was peaceful.

Then the cat goddess spoke. "You believed in me, you set me free, and that makes me happy." She walked forward as if on a cloud, her clothes a mesmerizing blur of shimmering fur. "I want to make you happy, too." Evie was still staring silently, mouth agape, but as the small deity stopped and looked up at her, she seemed to relax. "Is there something you wish for that I could give you?" the cat goddess asked.

"Um!" Evie yelped out as she suddenly realized what was happening. She began to smile despite herself, bouncing with anticipation. "I... I want to be small and cute," she said.

The divine feline tilted her head with a smile and seemed to wait for something more.

"...like you!" Evie added, her cheeks reddening and her eyes going wide in surprise at what she'd just admitted.

The cat goddess smiled warmly. "I can give you that," she said.

The deity lifted a hand and gently placed it on Evie's head; for a

second, nothing happened, and then the student gasped in surprise as the cat goddess began affectionately stroking her head. Evie put her hands to her temples as her hair flowed out—matching the length of the deity's haircut—and twin tufts of fur poked out on either side, blossoming out into cat ears that matched her auburn hair. Though the cat goddess didn't seem to be applying any pressure on her head at all, Evie was shrinking; first in short spurts, then in a long drawn-out motion as she settled down to a few inches taller than the being in front of her. Still the latter kept stroking her hair with the same care one would give a beloved pet, and the last few changes coursed throughout the young woman's body. Her figure shifted subtly under her clothes, gaining in curves. "H-hey," she began to say as the effects seemed to stop, "is... is it ovaaaaAAAAH!" Evie yelped in surprise as she doubled over, a long fluffy tail covered in auburn fur swishing out of her skirt. "Ahh... hahaha..." she laughed, out of breath, as she collapsed to her knees.

The cat goddess smiled, softly bringing her hand down to the student's chin and lifting it up so she could look into her eyes. "I hope this will bring you happiness," she said with all the warmth of the summer sun.

Evie smiled back, bursting into tears as emotions overwhelmed her.

Terry had been completely transfixed. He wasn't sure he could leave even if he wanted to; the energy around all of them was palpable. They were in the presence of something greater than them. Evie looked completely spent; she barely noticed her benefactor bouncing over, lighter than air, to the next student in line. Terry idly wondered how a cat goddess could grant Oliver's wish. She couldn't give someone wings, right? That's not a cat thing. Would she say no?

"What about you?" she asked the tall student. "What would make you happy?"

Oliver, who had been staring at Evie all this time, finally looked into the small deity's eyes and answered, "I want that too."

Terry blinked. He couldn't believe his ears. That made no sense! That's not the kind of person that... Had he misunderstood what Oliver had just said? Did his friend change his mind, just like that? Or were wings just a—

The cat goddess smiled. "I can give you that," she said, effortlessly leaping up to eye level and just... hanging there, in the air, like it was the most natural thing in the world. She reached up, put her hand on Oliver's head, and began petting gently. The student's short blond hair billowed out, getting paler and paler until it matched the pure white of the deity's locks. Unlike Evie, however, Oliver's hair stopped just shy of the shoulders. And as the telltale cat ears made their appearance—completely white, to match the hair—the cat goddess slowly began to drift back down to the ground, shrinking the student steadily in the

process. While Oliver's frame shifted and gained in softness like Evie's, the slenderness and (most of) the height remained. The goddess landed on her tiptoes, arm outstretched above her to maintain contact with the student's head, as the changes ran their course. Oliver had kept silent throughout it all, but finally let out a gasp and fell to one knee as a long tail covered in white fur signaled the end of the deity's work.

The cat goddess gently reached out with both hands and cupped the student's face. "I hope this will bring you happiness," she said lovingly.

Oliver smiled back, then softly slumped forward to sob into the deity's shoulder. The goddess held the student close, waiting until the moment's overwhelming emotions had run their course before letting go and making her way to the final person in line.

Terry's heart began to race again at the prospect of his impending choice, but the aura of tranquility that surrounded him quickly calmed him back down. Time was running out; he had to figure out what his wish would be. Still unable to look away, he stood by as Evie awkwardly got up on all fours and closed the short distance that separated her from Oliver. They both collapsed onto their side, utterly spent, and reached out to hold hands as they laughed blissfully.

They looked so happy. Terry had never seen Oliver show so much emotion, so much joy; it was like looking at a different person. He didn't think that was possible. He didn't think a lot of things were possible. And yet here it was, happening before his eyes as the cat goddess softly leapt up next to him.

"Do you want that?" she asked, following his gaze.

"Yeah," Terry answered. He wanted that happiness, more than anything. But a wish was so important! It had to be used for something meaningful. What should he ask for? What would be useful, what would let him help—

"Then I can give you that too," the cat goddess said, and placed her hand on Terry's head.

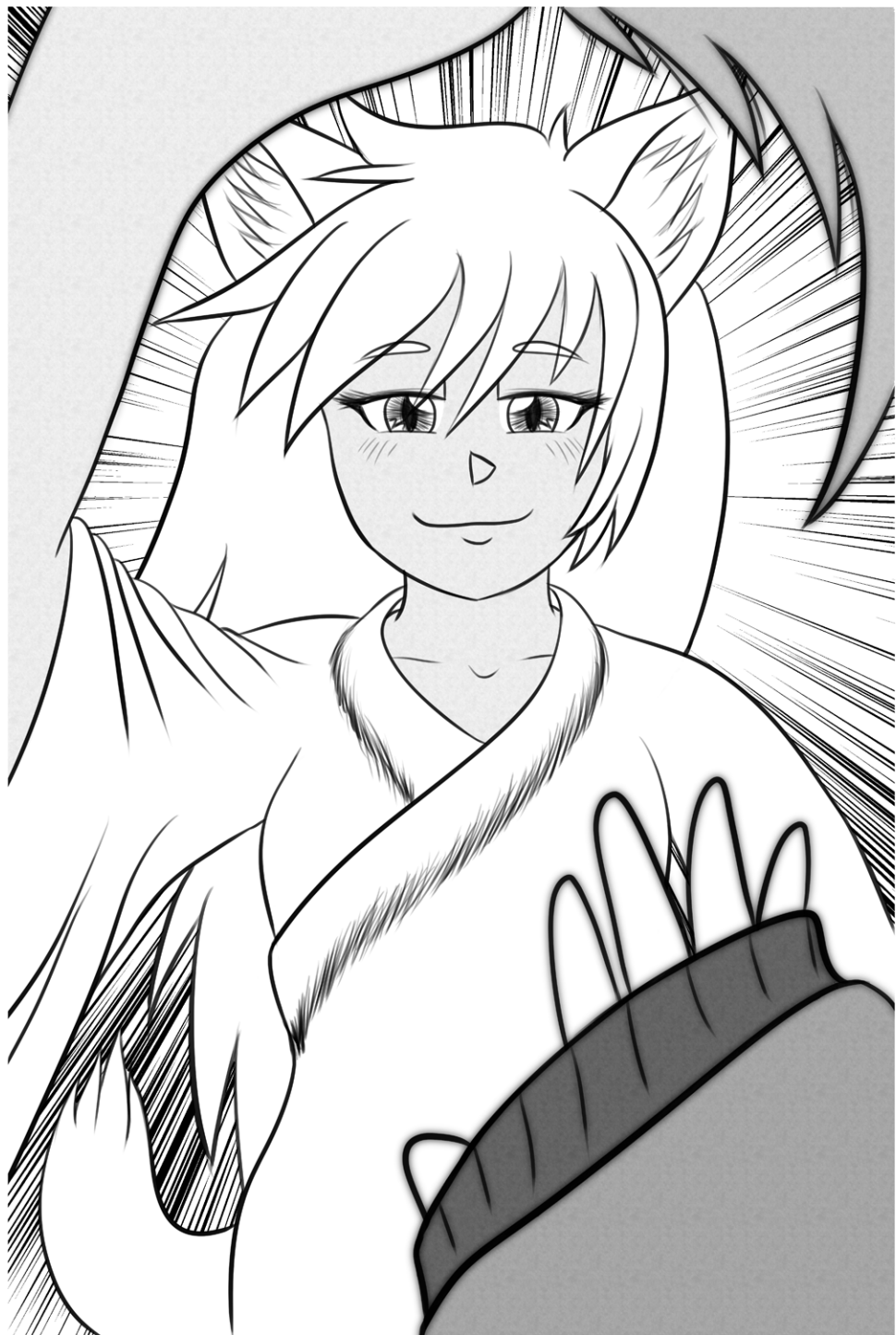
"Wait," Terry said, "what?" He hadn't given her his wish! He'd just answered her question, that didn't count! But the words wouldn't come out. He tried to reach up, to take the goddess' hand and move it away, but all his strength drained away. As the deity's hand gently stroked his hair, his body was overcome with a soothing energy he'd never felt before; his worries and fears were no match for it. He felt his skin tickle, his hair come to life, his ears burn; but it was a glorious heat, a warmth that permeated his head as an entire world of sound opened up to him. The energy flowed down and out into his entire body. There was so much of him, and it was all compressing and folding in on itself as the ground rose up to embrace him. The cat goddess, once so short, was rapidly becoming as tall as he was and showing no sign of stopping—or was it the other way around?

Terry felt like he was running a marathon while standing in place; there was so much pent up inside him and it was finally being let loose, changing everything in its path. His skin became liquid; his bones, jelly; and he could feel himself becoming so very different, and so very small. But none of it was scary. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. And throughout it all, the cat goddess gazed into his eyes with a look that wrapped his soul in a warm blanket. He felt loved, to an extent he had stopped believing was possible.

The last of the pent-up energy left his body in a final rush that made him cry out, in a voice he'd never heard before, until he was completely out of breath. The divine numbness left him and suddenly he could feel everything; the new addition to his body swaying to and fro behind him, the ears flicking as if testing new muscles, all the sights and sounds and smells that the world had held back all these years. He had changed so much that there was not a drop of energy left in him. Everything had been used up.

Terry collapsed into the cat goddess' arms, barely as big as her now. She cradled him gently, looking down with a serene smile.

"I hope this will bring you happiness," she whispered as he fell into an exhausted sleep, tears streaming down his face.



# The Diner

Terry woke up to the sound of laughter. He struggled to piece reality back together. Everything was suddenly so much; utensils clinking on plates, waffles, footsteps, maple syrup, whispers, freshly toasted bread, music from a jukebox, bacon just a little on the burned side, people, so many people... Something in his hair kept shifting and flicking. Something rhythmically thumped the bench he was lying on, and he could feel it every time it made contact. He opened his eyes.

Evie was sitting further down the circular booth, taking selfies with her phone and gushing about them. And she was shorter, and had cat ears, and suddenly everything came rushing back to Terry. The cat goddess. The wishes. The misunderstanding. He looked down. Someone must have carried him to the diner and dressed him in Oliver's hoodie; it felt cavernous. Despite this, his body was different. Very different. In ways he knew he wasn't ready to process yet. Oh, right, he also had a tail now, and it was swinging to and fro nervously, hitting the bench. He put a hand on it, trying to make it stop. It felt so soft. He tried to stop thinking about... everything, doing his best to sit up without making a mess of things. Everything was so much bigger now. It felt like waking up in a different world; a louder, brighter, overwhelming one.

"You're awake!" Evie said cheerfully, "oh thank goodness. The, uh, the goddess said you were fine, but that you'd be hungry when you woke up, so..."

Terry looked around. "Where's—" he began to say, then covered his mouth in a flustered hurry. Was that his voice? Is that what he sounded like now?

Evie smiled despite herself at the sound. She tilted her head to the side a bit unsure what Terry had meant, then realization dawned on her. "Oh! Ollie's, uh, in the restroom," she said, smiling. "She'll be right back."

Those words tugged painfully at something deep within Terry. But before he could determine the source of this pang, their friend came back to the booth, sitting across from Evie.

Ollie looked like a completely different person. Well, she was still recognizable, of course, but there was a shine where there hadn't been before. Yesterday she would've sat down with barely either of them noticing, but now... She had presence. And cat ears. And very red cheeks.

Evie looked quizzically. "Everything okay?" she asked.

Ollie nodded. "I, ah, I was just surprised by the, uh..." the tall cat said, trailing off. "It's a pretty big change," she added quietly.

Evie stifled a giggle as comprehension dawned on her. "Oh! That! Yeah! It is!" she said, blushing. "I guess that's gonna take some getting used to, haha!"

They both burst out giggling. "Oh wow," Evie continued, "I mean I was mentally preparing for it, just... like, in a year or two, not this afternoon. I'm going to have to call my doc. And tell the clinic to, like, give away my spot or something. Haha, who would've thought? What a day!"

Ollie grinned. "I'm gonna have to figure out how to announce this to my folks," she said, rolling the bottom end of her now-too-long t-shirt and tying it off at her waist.

Terry looked on, mouth agape.

Ollie looked down with a bashful smirk. "Hey Terry, sleep well?"

"You... you're talking," Terry said incredulously.

Ollie blinked. "Oh," she replied, "yeah! I guess I am! Well... I like my voice now." The tall student flashed her fangs as she grinned earnestly. "I'm still not tired of hearing it."

Evie bounced in her seat, bursting with joy. She looked at Ollie and Terry. "I'm so happy for you two," she said with a knowing smile.

The taller student gave an embarrassed laugh. "You knew, huh?" she asked.

"I wasn't going to push," Evie said with an appeasing gesture, "but... I had an inkling." She grinned.

Terry's heart was racing, unable to process what Evie was saying. He opened his mouth, but the words wouldn't come out. This was all a mistake. This wasn't who he was! He'd already gone through this! There were so many reasons... even though a lot of them were physical things he lacked, that the cat goddess had now given him. Still! This was a big misunderstanding. There had to be a way to clear things up, to fix it.

"Oh!" Evie said, suddenly realizing something. "Here, Ollie"—she scooted over to sit next to Terry in the booth—"group selfie!"

Ollie nodded and reached for her phone, using her height advantage to get a good angle.

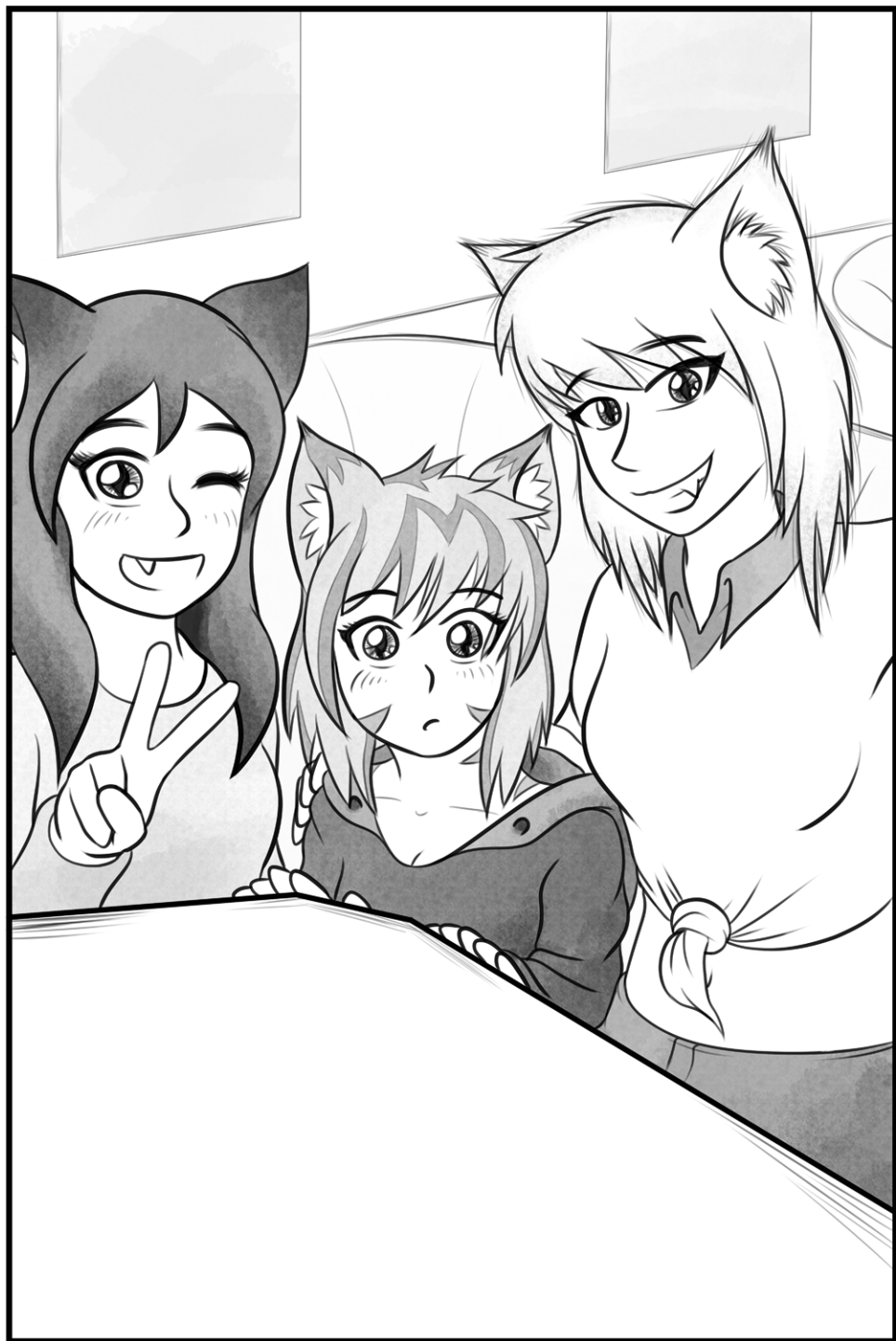
Terry looked up, unable to keep up, as his friend took a few pics and started scrolling through them.

"Oh!" Ollie said, showing the other two, "this is a good one! We look cute as heck."

Evie nodded. "Aaaah, we do! Send it!"

"NO!" Terry yelled out in a panic, flailing at the phone that, he now realized, was out of his reach. Ollie, Evie, and a number of the diner's other patrons stopped in their tracks. Evie's ears turned toward the rest of the diner, taking in the uncomfortable silence.

"Um, uh, sorry folks!" she said, standing up on the bench, "we're good! Just a misunderstanding!" She made appeasing hand gestures





until everyone else returned to what they were previously doing, and then she slumped back into her seat with a relieved sigh. Ollie, for her part, was still staring at Terry in shock. The latter shrank back into the booth, overcome with self-conscious embarrassment.

"I meant send it to us," Evie said meekly. "I'm sorry. I should've been clear."

"Are you okay?" Ollie asked, a look of concern growing on her face. "I mean, I know this is a lot to process, with us getting wishes and all."

Terry sat straight again, tears welling up. "It wasn't my wish!" he said, his voice shaking.

"It wasn't?" Evie paled as she asked, a look of concern on her face.

Terry shook his head. "She didn't ask me what my wish was! She asked you," he said, pointing at Evie, "then YOU changed your wish," pointing accusingly at Ollie, "and said 'me too' and and and when she came to me, I... I was trying to think of something! She just... asked a question, and I wasn't really paying attention, but she didn't say anything about a wish! She just..." Terry trailed off. Evie and Ollie's faces were inscrutable, but obviously uncomfortable. He was making a scene. They were so happy before, and laughing, and now he was ruining it. He wanted to be anywhere else.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, shrinking back into his little part of the booth. Tears had started flowing and he couldn't stop them; none of his usual techniques were working. He curled up, his head dipping below table level, and wished he could just disappear. There, that's something he could've asked the goddess for, he thought with bitter humor. He felt a hand stroke his back; it was remarkably soothing.

"Hey," Evie said softly, "I'm sorry to hear there was a misunderstanding. And I'm so sorry I made assumptions. We'll figure it out, okay? We just went through a lot. Let's eat, and drink some water, and we'll find a solution. I promise. We work really well together after all, right?"

Terry nodded a little. Evie was right. She often was. He sat up, wiping his eyes. Both Evie and Ollie scooped closer to give him a hug.

"We got this, yeah?" Ollie said.

Terry looked up just in time to see the waitress drop by to bring their food.

"We didn't know how long you'd be out so we got the usual," Evie said. "I hope that's okay."

Terry nodded. "Uh, yeah," he said as everyone returned to their spot. He looked at the giant plate of food. How was he ever going to finish it? He then glanced at Evie and Ollie; both of them had the exact same look on their face as they contemplated what the waitress had brought them.

Ollie raised her hand. "Doggy bags?" she asked.

Terry and Evie nodded in unison.

# Sorting Things Out

Terry had missed the initial commotion in the diner when the three of them had arrived. Now that they were all walking further into town, though, he couldn't help but feel like all eyes were on him and his friends. Was this how Tora felt whenever she went downtown? She probably wasn't the type of person to let that get to her, was she? Terry made a mental note to ask her—

"Aaah!" he yelped, then covered his mouth again in a flustered hurry. He still wasn't used to the new pitch of his voice.

Evie looked over. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Terry nodded. "Tora," he said. "She... she can't see me like this."

Evie walked a little bit closer, putting a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Hey," she said, "I know this is still a lot, but I really don't think you should worry about her, of all people. I'm sure she'll understand, especially considering the similarities."

Terry tilted his head. "What?" he said.

Evie looked up at their classmate. "Ollie, can you show Terry the picture?" she asked, but got no reply. "Ollie!" she repeated.

The tall student broke out of her reverie and fumbled a bit with her phone, shifting the restaurant leftovers to her other hand. She passed the phone over to Evie, who handed it to Terry while giving Ollie a concerned look. She walked over to the taller student, whispering something.

Terry held the phone up closer, looking at the picture. Those were his eyes—well, almost—and his nose, and the chin was mostly the same, but... he looked so different. His face was soft. Feminine. He quickly turned the phone off, but the same face looked back at him from the reflection in the glass. He turned the phone around. He didn't want to think about this. Didn't want to think about how very different his body felt under the large hoodie, how everything moved in ways it didn't before, how his tail—his tail, a concept he still had trouble processing—kept swishing back and forth, tickling his heels. He didn't want to get a closer look at anything. Maybe this misunderstanding would be fixed soon, and he wouldn't need to.

He looked back up at his friends. Ollie was now walking further ahead, hugging the wall. Did he cause a scene again? Was he being a burden? He quickly handed the phone back to Evie and kept walking, eyes down. They'd found flip-flops for him at a convenience store—his shoes, along with the rest of his clothes, were now in Evie's bag—but this was a temporary solution at best. They'd have to get something

else, and that meant shopping for clothes, and Terry didn't want to think about that, either. The other two had made do with some adjustments to their clothing, but he was the one who needed a whole new outfit. Everyone had to go out of their way because of him. He hated this so much. He slowly let Evie take the lead so she wouldn't see him cry.

After an interminable walk, they arrived at the city clerk's office, which was thankfully still open this late in the afternoon. As rare as wishes tended to be, everyone knew the procedure: if you met a god, you let the city know as soon as possible. Legal paperwork had done its best to catch up to divine intervention, but still had a lot of kinks to work out. In the meantime, though, the three of them could at least get some temporary papers to prove that they were who their now very outdated cards said they were. As they entered, Terry's gaze lingered on a little novelty plaque someone had put up near the front desk; it said "This is the Records Office, not the Courthouse—Here, No One Judges."

The clerk let them into her office after a short wait. "Goodness! Don't you all look lovely!" she exclaimed, as she sat down at her desk and started sifting through a folder full of forms. "Just sit down girls," she said, "make yourselves comfortable. I'll have this all sorted out in no time."

Terry slumped in the furthest seat, keeping his head down and hoping the exertion from the walk would mask the tears. He nabbed his tail as it swung past and held it close; that gave him a slight sense of comfort, somehow.

"Oh, if you could pass some of your IDs over, that'd help me out," the clerk added as she set down a small stack of papers and opened her laptop.

The three students rooted around—Terry had to fish out his pants from Evie's bag—and produced assorted identification. The sales clerk looked at the three cards for a long moment, then nodded and said "oh-kay. We'll get you all taken care of, no worries." She tappa-tapped on her laptop's keyboard for a bit, then slid one of the forms forward. "Evie?" she asked, looking at the correct student. The latter nodded and looked at the form. "Just fill this out, note down anything that's changed, and we'll be a-okay." She picked the next ID. "OI—"

"That's me," Ollie interjected, picking up her form. "So I can just... write anything in these fields?" the tall student asked. "Is this binding? Permanent at all?"

The clerk turned to her. "Until you fill out another form," she answered. "This sort of thing can be pretty unpredictable, so just keep us posted if anything changes. It just takes time to notify everyone each time." Ollie breathed a sigh of relief.

Terry, on the other hand, tensed up. The clerk slid over the last form, looking at the final ID. "So that makes you..." she said, pausing

as she compared the picture to the person in front of her. She looked at Evie and Ollie, who both nodded in corroboration. "Oh my," she added.

Terry winced audibly. "It was a mistake!" he blurted out, "a misunderstanding! This wasn't my wish!" Evie tentatively put a hand on her friend's shoulder; he looked down apologetically.

The clerk gave Terry a long look. "I see," she said. "Well, I'm sad to say I can't help with that. Local gods don't really listen to civil servants. But you have my word we're going to do all we can to make sure folks on the human side of things don't give you any trouble because of this. Okay?"

Terry nodded, sniffing quietly.

"Okay," the clerk said, handing pens to the three of them. "Just fill these out best you can, and then my colleague will take some pictures and we'll make you some temporary IDs."

Terry gave the clerk a dismayed look. "Do you have to notify everyone?" he asked softly.

"We do," she answered, "but when I say everyone, I mean other government agencies. We don't call anyone else. Okay?"

Terry nodded. He didn't want anyone else to know. Maybe he could sort this out, find the goddess again, get his wish. Maybe he could do this before anyone noticed anything had happened.

The forms were simple enough to fill out; once they had the finalized papers in hand, they were directed to another part of the building where a tall man was setting up a camera in front of a simple stool. "Alright then, just sit down over there and we'll be done lickety-split," he said, running over to roll a patterned tarp down over the back wall. Terry took a step back, letting Evie and Ollie go before him. He wanted to delay the process as much as possible, but there wasn't a lot to just taking a picture (though the photographer had to change to another patterned tarp so Ollie's hair would be easier to make out). Soon enough, but too soon for his tastes, it was Terry's turn.

He slowly walked up to the stool and gave a half-hearted attempt at climbing up on top of it before the photographer ran over to lower it. "Whoops," he said, "sorry about that! Should be good now." By the time he'd walked back to the camera, Terry was sitting down and sobbing uncontrollably.

This was it, he thought. Now there'd be a record, and it'd be official, and it'd mean one more thing to fix and everything felt insurmountable. All the clerk's reassurances suddenly didn't matter anymore. This was big and it was permanent and there was nothing he could do about it. Evie and Ollie rushed to his side, but there was no consoling him.

"What's wrong?" the photographer asked, concerned.

Evie discreetly stepped to his side, saying, "there was a... misunderstanding with the wish."

The photographer nodded, scratched his thick chevron mustache, and walked over to where Terry was sitting.

"Hey, hey," the photographer said, crouching down to be face-to-face with the upset student, "I know it's an emotional time right now what with the wishes and meeting a god and all, but this"—he held up a blank card template—"this is just paper and plastic, yeah? It don't have to mean anything big. And heck, if you don't like the picture, we can just take another. And if you wake up tomorrow and you want to change something on there, just drop on by. We can make time." He reached out to Terry's hand and put something in it; the short student looked down at the object. It was a lollipop. "Here," the photographer said, "don't matter if you're a grownup, sometimes we gotta treat ourselves. What say we take a picture real quick, then you can go chomp down and relax? How does that sound?"

Terry wiped his eyes, still staring down at the ground. After a few deep breaths, he nodded.

"Alright then," the photographer said as he quickly stepped back to his camera, "we'll get this done in a jiffy."

Evie and Ollie stepped back out of the shot. Both looked at the tall man incredulously as he took a couple pictures, gave Terry the thumbs-up, and turned on the card printer. Evie leaned in, speaking quietly so Terry wouldn't overhear, and said, "how did you do that?"

The photographer grinned at the two stunned students. "I take family photos and I do picture day at my husband's school," he said. "Pictures can stress out folks, big and small. I learned how to make 'em feel comfortable. Oh hey, cards are done." And with that, he handed the three students some temporary IDs.

Terry walked over, the lollipop's stick poking out of his mouth, and looked at his card. The picture was a bit blurry. A bit washed out, too, because of the flash. Nobody would argue it wasn't him, but it was kinda hard to make out the details.

It was perfect.

# Home Again

Through some sort of miracle, they had made it back to their dorm room. Terry dropped his bags on the floor and made a beeline for his bed. Evie, for her part, organized everyone's purchases while Ollie put the restaurant leftovers in the fridge. They had quickly rifled through whatever thrift stores were still open on the way back to get each of them an impromptu wardrobe. Well, a few outfits. Terry had had the most trouble picking things out, but Evie had been there to help. Despite this, he was still in Ollie's old hoodie, not willing to give it up just yet.

Part of him hoped that Evie and Ollie would go to bed so he could be alone with his thoughts. There was still so much tension in the air, and he'd been such a handful... He felt like he was walking on eggshells. He didn't want to say or do anything else and risk losing his friends.

"Hey," Evie said softly, "are you doing okay?"

Terry peeked an eye open. She was talking to Ollie.

"Yeah," Ollie said, slumping down on her futon. She turned on the TV, for background noise more than anything. The tall student sighed, running her hands through her hair, pausing a moment to get a better feel for her new ears. One of them flicked out of her grasp. "I was good there for a bit, but... that was a lot of people."

Evie stopped sorting clothes and went to sit next to her.

"I thought I'd just be over it, you know?" Ollie continued.

Terry's mind raced. Was that why she'd been aloof so often after the diner? Was Ollie not mad at him after all?

The tall student stretched. "Class is gonna be rough tomorrow."

Evie blinked in sudden realization. "Oh right! Class!" She shifted in her seat, looking at Terry, whose ears turned toward her.

After a long pause, he mumbled "m' not going" into the bed.

Evie sighed. "That's fair. But you can't miss too many classes, not with exams coming up. Promise us you'll still study?"

Another long pause. Terry managed something of a high-pitched grunt, and that was enough to satisfy his friend.

Ollie held a hand out to Evie. "Wanna go to morning class together?"

Evie took the hand and shook it, then gave the tall girl a hug. "We got this!" she said before returning to clothes sorting.

Ollie moved to the edge of the bed. "You okay?" she asked Terry.

The small student looked up meekly. Ollie had a concerned smile on her face. She wasn't mad. Terry gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"Hang in there," Ollie said, patting him on the shoulder. "We're gonna figure this out, okay? Let us know if you need anything."

He leaned into Ollie's hand a little. It felt so good; this brief moment of contact, of affection. Terry rolled over onto his side, very lightly pressing his back against the sitting girl with a "mmh."

Ollie smiled softly. "Aww," she said, shifting her position a little to gently stroke Terry's upper back. "It's going to be okay," she whispered.

Terry softened under her touch. He'd needed this so much. All his worries melted away in the face of closeness and comfort. Tears flowed silently, this time from the relief of the afternoon's pent-up stress and anguish slowly leaving his body, replaced by a rumbling warmth that radiated from deep inside him. It filled his world. He lost track of time.

At some point, Terry opened his eyes again. Ollie stopped, putting her hand back on the bed. Both she and Evie were looking at him with such sweet smiles that their eyes were practically sparkling. "...What?" he asked, after a moment of confusion.

"You..." Ollie began hesitatingly, "you were purring."

Terry sat up with a start. "What?!" he half-yelled in surprise.

"YOU WERE ADORABLE!" Evie squealed, "I'm sorry, you really were!"

Ollie grinned. "Yeah," she confirmed.

Terry scooted back on the bed a bit, completely flustered. Is that what that sensation had been? He didn't know how to deal with this.

As he recovered from that startling revelation, he began to realize just how tired he was. "Hey," he said, attempting to change the subject, "could I... Evie, could I have your bed tonight?" He looked up at her bunk bed, set up above his. It was smaller, no doubt cozier, but also had much more privacy, a thing he desperately wanted right now.

Evie paused for a moment, then nodded. "Sure, of course."

"Okay, thanks," Terry said, standing up on the mattress. He looked at the bunk bed, paused, then hopped up onto it, eliciting a loud gasp from Ollie and Evie. "What? What?" he asked, looking down. They had goofy smiles again and were pointing excitedly at the bunk bed.

"You jumped up!" Ollie said.

Terry's blush returned in force. "I..." he began, looking down and reliving the last few seconds. What had possessed him to do that?

Evie chimed in, saying "You jumped up like a c—"

"LIKE A CAT! I know!" Terry interrupted, diving under the covers. Part of him was glad that they were back to this level of social comfort with each other, but part of him also wanted to escape all this embarrassment.

His ears perked up, poking outside the covers. He peeked; Ollie was standing there, still looking quite amused. "What?" Terry asked quietly.

Ollie grinned. "You even did the butt wiggle," she said.

"Yes! Okay!" Terry yelled, turning around and pulling the covers over his head again. He curled up under the covers, waiting to hear Ollie and Evie walk away before settling down. Despite all the excitement, embarrassment steadily gave way to slumber.

# A Jungle of Books

By the time Terry poked his head out of bed, his roommates were gone, no doubt off to class. He was fine with missing it, and any other ones today. This was his first time alone since it had happened and part of him was worried where his thoughts would take him, so he got up, carefully climbed down from the upper bunk bed, and started his day.

He couldn't reach the cereal. Evie didn't eat any, so he and Ollie always kept it stored in the top cabinet of their tiny kitchen. No way to get to it without a booster seat now. He hopped up onto the counter, frustrated and embarrassed, and pulled down what he needed to put breakfast together before jumping back down to the floor.

He hadn't thought about reaching high things. He hadn't thought about being the shortest student in class (probably; he'd have to measure up against a few of them to be sure and there was no world in which he'd want to do that). He hadn't even thought about how he'd explain this to everyone outside this room. And right now he didn't want to think about any of it; he just wanted to sit down and have breakfast and watch TV and forget about everything.

Ollie had moved the futon.

Terry sighed, put his breakfast back on the counter, and went to push the futon back in front of the television. Ollie never moved it; why now? And up next to Terry's bed, of all places. He struggled mightily to move the couch-turned-bed back to where it was supposed to be; it had never been this hard. Job done, he stormed back to the kitchen, got his breakfast, and sat back down. The soothing voice of the narrator eagerly explaining how public transit systems were designed helped calm Terry down.

By the time he'd finished his bowl, he was back to feeling like a person. A cat person, his tail had decided to remind him. Now that he dared to take a closer look at it, he suddenly noticed that it was striped. Wait. Could it be...? He took a deep breath and walked up to the full-length mirror on the bathroom door.

Goodness, he really was adorable. There was a face, and he recognized it, and it was cute? He had to look away for a moment and gather up his courage again. He looked up at his ears; they had a vague stripe to them too, ending black at the tips. Even his hair wasn't all evenly brown; there were short strips of darker locks in nice symmetrical lines. He gingerly pulled his hair aside, staring as closely as he could at his face in the mirror. Even his skin had very faint—

Terry pulled away. How did she know? He hadn't said anything.



He hadn't told anyone... well, not in so many words, but some of his guildmates could probably have put two and two together. But then again, Ollie didn't ask for white hair; she just said "me too." And Evie's hair wasn't white.

Terry didn't want to think about that anymore. He looked at his neatly-folded pile of thrift store clothes. It was probably time to give Ollie back her hoodie. He turned his back to the mirror, gingerly took the garment off and, as fast as his little hands would allow, got dressed in the first outfit he could put together. Shorts, a t-shirt and a (this time only slightly oversize) hoodie. After taking a step, he realized just how uncomfortable it was to have his shorts so low; his tail didn't let him hike them up higher. Maybe he should cut a hole in the back or something.

Terry laughed. Just as he was thinking this, he spotted the sewing kit and scissors Evie had left on the table, obviously in a hurry. He hadn't been the only one to have this problem. Despite not being the sewing expert Evie was, he picked up the scissors. A few snips later and his shorts were now perfect. Well, maybe not perfect, but functional.

He let out a loud sigh. He really should study; exams were getting closer and while divine intervention did a lot, he was pretty sure it wouldn't get him out of having to take them. Terry walked over to his part of the communal desk and looked over his notes. "Oh no," he said out loud to no one. He re-read the assignment multiple times just to be sure, but the words didn't change. One of the books required was in the library; on-site consultation only. He had to leave this room. He had to risk running into people.

He looked at the time. Classes were still on; the next break wouldn't be for a while. He just had to run in, write down what he needed, and then run back. But he had to hurry. He stuffed some school supplies into a bag and headed out to the library, hoping against hope he wouldn't run into anyone.

But Terry was part cat now. He could hear other students coming and going! He could... smell them, even? That was weird. But his senses were good enough to let him know when the coast was clear (or when to duck into an empty stairwell). He felt like a ninja. It was pretty cool!

He stopped along the way to the library; the class he was skipping was still in session, right there. He debated taking a peek to see how Ollie and Evie were doing. Surely they were alright? Evie was a natural, everybody liked her. And Ollie was very good at avoiding attention. But that had probably changed, right? The temptation was too strong. Terry peeked into the room through the very bottom corner of the door's window, doing his best to stay hidden.

Evie and Ollie were alright. They were sitting next to each other in the back of the class, and they were... smiling? And getting attention from the nearby students too! Ollie was coping with it better than she

ever had. She looked so cool now.

Terry ducked out of view and continued on his way to the library. They looked so happy. And the other students didn't seem to be giving them any trouble. But what if one did? Terry's heart began beating rapidly. What if someone started spreading rumors about them? He couldn't help them now, not in the shape he was in. Literally.

It always came back to this. He could wallow in self-criticism about missing his chance for the perfect wish or he could focus on figuring out a way to resolve the misunderstanding with the cat goddess; right now, his mind was having a hard time picking between the two. Thankfully, he got to the library before he could delve any deeper into this.

The campus library was sprawling. What began as an engineering marvel had turned into a navigational nightmare. Its novel way of having individual bookshelves on multi-directional rail systems meant that reorganizing everything was theoretically much easier, but in practice, no one had been able to keep up with maintaining it.

As a result, the place was a maze. The shelves themselves were clearly identified so it wasn't that big of a problem, but students would keep shifting them like walls to make shortcuts, and that made it easy to get lost. For once, Terry was pleased that the campus library had such a wonderfully inefficient layout, because it made it easy for him to sneak around undetected. He pulled the hood over his ears, gently tucked his tail up into the hoodie and held it there with a hand, waited until the moment was right, and snuck inside.

This was a lot of fun. He could see and hear other students moving about with unprecedented precision. No one would know he was there; he ducked and weaved and slipped unnoticed around dozens of unsuspecting folks, making his way to the section where his book was ostensibly kept. Once there he hoped he'd find the specific shelf it was on without wasting too much time. One student was being annoyingly hard to avoid, however.

Terry frowned. They were probably going to the same place he was; he tried lengthening the gap between them, but they obviously knew their way around. He hated having someone putting pressure on him like that, even if they weren't aware of it. Better to move aside, let them pass, and then get back to it. He took a few detours and doubled back, his ears peeking around to keep tabs on the unseen student.

They turned in his direction. And then doubled back.

Terry gritted his teeth. He didn't need this right now! Where was this student even going? This part of the library didn't even have anyone in it except—

He let go of his tail, which began swishing to and fro. This was on purpose. The student could hear him, or see him through the gaps between the books. They were looking for him. But Terry wasn't about

to let himself be found, not now; he just wanted to get to that book, copy the passages he needed, and then get back to his room where no one would bother him. He took a deep breath, removed his shoes, put them in his bag, and took off.

He didn't risk climbing the bookshelves but he certainly thought about it numerous times. He felt like a ninja again; he dashed, skipped over the odd studying table, snuck through empty shelves, zig-zagged between book carts... He stopped to catch his breath near the audiobook section. That should do it. The book he was looking for was—wait. Footsteps. He hadn't shaken them off his trail; they were still coming for him. And what's more, they were close. What was going on? This was no ordinary student.

A chill ran down Terry's spine. He was being hunted.

He panicked and threw caution to the wind, running as fast as he could into parts of the library even the employees rarely visited. He didn't want to be seen! He didn't want anyone else on campus to know! His hood came loose, his breath ran ragged, and he finally had to stop. He leaned against a bookshelf, at the far end of a dead-end. Fitting, he thought, completely exhausted as despair welled up inside him. There was nothing he could do. The footsteps were still getting closer. And now they were right around the corner.

"No one's given me a chase like that in ages," a voice said. "That was great!"

Terry's heart sank. Oh no. Anyone but—

Tora peeked her head around the corner. The instant she saw Terry, her smile grew into a wide, earnest grin, and her eyes practically sparkled. "I don't believe it," she said eagerly as she took a few steps forward. "I thought I was the only cat on campus. I'm sorry; if I'd known ahead of time I would've prepared a proper welcome instead of chasing you halfway through the library like that."

Terry blinked in confusion. Wait, what did she mean by that? Did... did she think he was a new student? Did she not recognize him? A plan hatched rapidly in Terry's mind. This was his chance; everything could still be okay.

He stood up shakily and took a step forward, looking up at Tora. Goodness, she was so tall. "Uh, hi," he said, pausing for a moment to gather up some courage. "I'm... Tabitha."

Tora's grin softened into the biggest, warmest smile Terry had ever seen on her. "Hello Tabitha," she answered, "I'm so glad to meet you."

He breathed a sigh of relief. He just needed to keep this up, and then he could still fix everything. No one would have to know.

Tora crouched down in front of Terry, looking like she was about to explode from joy. "Hey. What's your god like?" she asked excitedly.

He blinked in surprise, not expecting her to ask this. But he was so



glad she did. "She's wonderful!" Terry answered, already smiling as he thought back to when they all met her yesterday. "She's cute, and small, and graceful, and she has the whitest hair that looks like it's always in the wind, and when she walks it's like she's bouncing on clouds, and her voice is so warm! And, and, when she holds you, it's like nothing else in the world matters, and you know she'll keep you safe. She's so good. She's so pure. And, and..."

Terry stopped; he'd started crying somewhere in the middle of describing the cat goddess and hadn't noticed it. "Ah," he said, wiping his eyes, "I'm sorry, I didn't..."

Tora gently dropped to one knee and, in one fluid motion, caught Terry in a big hug.

"Haha, it's okay," she said, patting his shoulder, "she sounds lovely." Terry's heart was beating so fast; the rush of emotion surprised him. "My god is big, and powerful," Tora said, still holding him, "and leaps like he's swimming through the air. Every move he makes is part of a dance with everything and everyone around him. And he keeps them all safe; nothing escapes his notice, and no one under his protection has to fear anything. His embrace fills you with fire. With him, anything is possible. He's unstoppable." She said that last bit in a whisper; every word after the first one had gotten quieter and quieter.

Tora pulled back, looking into Terry's eyes. Tears were streaming down her cheeks too. "We're very lucky," she said, smiling, "not many people get to meet someone so special." Terry smiled back. They both laughed happily.

Tora stood back up, taking a deep breath. "I should get back to it. But I'm so glad I ran into you. Let's talk again, yeah?"

Terry nodded. "Yeah!" he answered, heart rate getting back to normal. He'd forgotten about the book, and studying, and everything. But now he could just get back to it and everything would work out.

Tora walked back out of the aisle, then turned around. "And either way, I'll see you at the picnic."

Terry broke out in a cold sweat. "Wh... what?" he asked.

"The picnic," Tora answered. "You invited me, remember?"

Time froze. An eternity passed.

Finally, after what felt like hours but must only have been seconds, Terry nodded absently. "Oh! Uh, y-yeah," he answered, bracing himself on the bookshelf next to him.

Tora's warm smile returned. "Good! I can't wait. Take care, Tabbi," she said before walking away.

Terry collapsed onto the ground, eyes wide, pulse racing all over again. She knew it was him. She knew it was him from the beginning. He hadn't fooled her, not even for a second. And now, all the things he'd said... what was he going to do?

# Character Building

Terry was sprawled out on his bed, surrounded by open books and notes, when Evie and Ollie returned after the day's classes. That he had managed to study at all had been a miracle. He still couldn't get the encounter with Tora out of his mind. He kept replaying it over and over again, every time feeling a familiar twinge in his heart whenever the tiger girl called him—

"WE DID IT!" Evie exclaimed as she put away her bag, "we made it through the day!" She walked over as Terry buried his face in a pillow, his tail swinging agitatedly. "Hey, how was your day? You holding up okay?" she asked.

Ollie milled about in the background while Evie waited for a response.

Terry turned his head to look at his concerned friend. "I messed up," he said meekly. "Tora saw me."

Ollie was at Terry's side in a single bound. "Did she come in here?" she asked, concerned.

"No," Terry answered, shaking his head. "I had to go to the library, and..." He stopped for a moment, not wanting to relive the entire thing all over again, but at this point he couldn't stop. He told them everything.

"Gosh," Evie said after Terry was done. "...Tabitha's a really nice name," she said as she put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"It's the character Terry plays online," Ollie answered.

"Ohh," Evie said understandingly. "Which game?" she asked.

"All of them," Terry answered a little too quickly. He scratched his head and looked away, self-conscious.

"You should show Evie the one you have on Arcademy Online," Ollie said, "it's..." She paused, comprehension dawning on her face. She leaned a bit closer to Terry. "Ohh," she added. Terry's face went beet-red.

"What?" Evie asked, looking at the both of them. "What is it?"

"I'll show you," Ollie said, tapping at her phone. She handed it to Evie; it was open on a video game companion app, showing a character dressed in a glowing school uniform.

Evie looked at the character on the screen, then at Terry, then back again. She held the phone up to compare. "Oh my gosh," she said, "how did she know?"

Ollie shrugged. "I have no idea."

Evie looked at Terry. "Do gods play MMOs?" she asked.

"I DON'T KNOW!" Terry answered loudly. But there was no mistaking just how remarkably similar he and his online avatar were. "Now Tora's



going to tell everyone, and I don't know what to do, and—"

"No she won't," Evie said, gently interrupting her friend.

Terry looked up. "How do you know?" he asked.

"She won't," Evie maintained firmly, looking him in the eye for a long moment. "You can trust me on that. And you can trust her. Tora isn't the kind of person who'd betray your confidence like that. She knows that she needs to let you take the first step."

Terry pressed his face down onto the bed again. "What if I just stay here forever," he said. "What if I just never come out."

Ollie sighed. "You're going to need to go to class at some point," she said. "Exams are coming up, they're probably not going to let you skip them all. And I know this is hard, but we're here, yeah? No one's gonna get to you unless they go through us."

Evie nodded firmly. "Yeah!" she said, "we've got your back. You can do this. And after we make it through this week, I'll have a surprise for everyone."

Terry looked up again. He hated just how easy it was to buy his cooperation with presents. "Okay," he said nonetheless. "What do I tell everyone, though?"

Ollie shrugged. "I think they got most of the surprise out of their system today. They've probably figured out the gist of what's up with you. And it's not like you have to announce it to the whole class every time; you walk in, you've got ID, and thanks to Tora all the professors are pretty much over this sort of thing."

Evie chuckled. "Yeah, they got tired of all the attention we were getting real fast this morning!" she said. "Everyone pretty much stayed quiet after that; nobody wants to tick off the teacher with exams around the corner."

Ollie nodded. "Just tell folks what you're comfortable with," she said, "and it'll be okay. And if it's not, we'll make it okay." She cracked her knuckles for emphasis.

Terry chuckled. "Thanks," he said. Maybe it would be okay. His friends' relentless support was giving him so much hope.

The rest of the evening was rather relaxing in comparison. Terry ended up going to bed—in Evie's top bunk spot again—earlier than his friends again. He still hadn't gotten used to getting sleepy so easily. Maybe it was just the excitement of the last couple of days, but he had a hard time staying up as late as he used to. Actually getting to sleep was much easier, though, and he was thankful for that. He peeked down from his perch one last time. Ollie and Evie were watching videos on the TV, volume down, sitting on the futon, the tall girl's arm around the other's shoulder. That strange, familiar pang inside Terry's chest returned.

The three of them had always sat down together like this at the end



of the day. Well, not exactly like this; there had never been this much overt contact, despite how much of a hugger Evie was. He missed it, he missed it a lot, but there was something more to it, too. As Ollie moved her hand to stroke Evie's hair and the shorter girl rested her head against her friend's shoulder, he had to look away. His heart was racing again. Why couldn't he get over this? Why couldn't he just be happy for his friends?

He woke up in the middle of the night, not sure how he'd managed to fall asleep. He had to go to the restroom. That didn't mean he was going to, though. Of all the new aspects of his life, this was the one he had the most problem with. It brought up so many feelings that he just didn't want to deal with right now. He rolled over, trying to get back to sleep and having a hard time of it. He peeked down over the railing of his bed. Ollie had pushed the futon up against his old bed again, and now Terry saw why; it was so that she and Evie could hold hands while sleeping in their respective beds. He quickly ducked back under the covers. He wished he hadn't seen that. He wished he could just go to sleep, and forget everything. Wake up in a world where he still had an opportunity to think of the perfect wish, and have it come true.

A world where his friends still needed him.

# A Touch of Class

Evie and Ollie headed to their morning class, Terry close behind them. It was taking everything he had not to turn tail and run, or grab ahold of one of his friends' hands for safety. He held his tail close, hidden within the protective confines of his hoodie. This wouldn't hold up for very long, but it made his walk through campus a little more bearable. Baby steps.

Terry breathed a sigh of relief; they had thankfully arrived in the classroom early enough to secure back corner seats. He sat down, Ollie and Evie around him for protection. No one else would get to be too close to him, and that was a big reassurance. Nevertheless, as other students began to file in, he retreated within his hoodie. Maybe no one would notice. Maybe no one would say anything.

"Hey you two!" someone cheerfully said to Evie and Ollie, sitting down close to them. "So, how was your first day?" she asked eagerly. "Did you talk to the campus newspaper folks? I hear they're super interested in doing a piece!"

Ollie chuckled. "Not yet," she answered, "I guess we should be on the lookout for them, though."

Terry risked a peek, lifting up his head. This was one of Evie's friends, right? A brief glimpse confirmed it, but it was too late—the student made eye contact and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Is that... oh my gosh, Terry?!"

He immediately lowered his head again, blushing furiously. But he couldn't just ignore her. Could he? He lifted a hand and gently waved hello. "Hi," he said meekly. Why did he ever think he could fool anybody? Everyone instantly recognized him. Maybe it was easy to think you had a forgettable face if you never really looked at it.

"Oh my gosh I can't believe it," the student said, "you got a wish too? I'm so jealous! We all went to that spot last evening but couldn't find anything. You're so lucky!"

Ollie and Evie put up a good social barrier, but by the time Terry took another peek, more students had gathered. That was the disadvantage to showing up early, he realized only too late.

"It, uh," Terry said meekly as he took the risk of lowering his hood, "it wasn't my wish."

The other students paused for a moment, then broke out into charmed smiles and star-filled eyes. "Oh. My. Gosh. You're adorable!" they gushed, "and your voice! It's so cute!"

Terry shrank in his seat, unsure what to do. This wasn't his worse-



case scenario. This wasn't the kind of attention he thought he'd get at all, in fact.

"Wait," one of them said, "it wasn't your wish? Like, do gods just give everyone in a group the same wish? That kind of stinks!"

"No, no," Ollie said, doing her best to keep things under control, "it was a misunderstanding. We're trying to sort it out, that's all."

There was a general murmur of acknowledgement. "Wait," one of the students said, leaning a bit closer toward Terry. He looked at her nervously as she continued, "are you a—"

"OKAY FOLKS," Evie said, standing up, "can we please all go back to our seats and be responsible adults for a bit?"

Terry pulled his hood back up and retreated into his safe fabric cocoon. Everyone dispersed, even the one lone student who said "uh, I'm seventeen" as she went back to her seat. Ollie twisted around in her seat a little bit, reaching back to put her hand, palm up, on Terry's desk. He took it, and squeezed.

"You okay?" Evie asked softly.

He nodded. He could do this. Now everyone knew, and he just needed to keep going to class and... and he wasn't sure what would happen after that. He just had to keep going. For now, it had to be enough.

And it was enough, at least to get him through most of the day. The final class was one he didn't share with Evie and Ollie, but by then he felt ready. He could just walk out if it got too much, after all, couldn't he? He could do this. He could last one class without his friends shielding him. Still, they walked him to the classroom's door to wish him well, and that meant the world to him.

He found a seat in the back, taking cover behind his bag and under his hoodie. Hopefully nothing would happen aside from the lecture and it'd all be over soon. But even from the safety of these many layers, Terry's ears still worked. Someone was talking about him. He peeked up over his bag; across the room, as students were slowly walking to their seats, someone was saying disparaging things and throwing mean looks in his direction.

He recognized him immediately; it was the student with square glasses who'd been spreading rumors about Tora the other day, the one he'd muscled out of that conversation. There was no doing that now; everyone in this room was bigger than he was. He resolved to just look away and wait for it to pass, try not to listen to him. But he couldn't just turn it off; he heard every crystal-clear word. He put his hands over his ears, through the fabric of his hoodie, to try and drown it out.

"Hey!" someone said. Terry poked his head up over his bag again. The rumormonger was being accosted by someone else. "Why do you keep telling lies about good people? It's never going to make you look

cool, it just proves to everyone that you're an asshole." This seemed to rally others around the angry student, or at least give the one spreading rumors the impression that the silent majority wasn't on his side. He grumbled and turned away.

"Be a better person!" the angry student told him, turning away to walk to his seat. Terry recognized him, too; he was the other half of that conversation he'd put a stop to, days earlier. They made brief eye contact, exchanged slight smiles, and that was it.

Terry breathed a slow sigh of relief. He wasn't as alone as he thought. Maybe this would be okay.

After the lecture, Terry hightailed it to his room, avoiding anyone and everyone in his path. He scurried in, closed and locked the door, and was home and safe and everything would be all right now.

# Perceptions

Well, not exactly; there was no sign (be it sight, smell, or sound) of Evie, but Ollie seemed to be in the bathroom with the light on and the door open. Terry approached on tiptoes, not wanting to disturb her; she was staring in the mirror with a hair trimmer in her hand. "Hey," Terry said meekly. "Everything okay?"

Ollie took a couple steps back, leaning against the wall. "Yeah," she said, sighing. "Just thinking about things."

Terry nodded, sitting down on the clothes hamper. He needed closeness and contact, and it looked like Ollie wasn't super in the mood for it, so he picked the closest proximity he thought she'd be okay with. "Hey, um," he said, "can I ask you something?"

Ollie nodded absently. "Yeah, sure. Sorry, I'm a bit out of it tonight."

Terry swallowed. There was a question burning in the back of his mind and he still hadn't found a good time to ask it, so he figured it was either a bad time or never. "Why... why did you change your wish?" he asked.

Ollie blinked, raised her eyebrows, and then gave a light chuckle. "I didn't," she answered. "I never wanted wings."

Terry frowned, perplexed. "But why..." he began, before Ollie waved her hand.

"It's a popular answer that people are familiar with. They accept it and move on; they don't keep asking questions afterwards like they'd do if I told the truth."

Terry nodded apologetically. "Oh," he said. There was a long pause. "I thought we were the same," he added. He wanted to ask why she'd never told him the truth. But part of him understood how hard that sort of confession could be, even to friends. Still, his mind raced, pulling up every interaction with Ollie he could remember. Had he said anything hurtful? What else could he have misinterpreted all this time?

The tall cat looked back at Terry. "Hey," she said, waving a hand in front of him. He snapped out of it. "It's not that I didn't tell you the truth," she continued, "but that I didn't tell anyone the truth. For a long time, not even myself. It's hard to trust others when you don't even trust yourself, yeah? I figured everyone got these stray thoughts, that it didn't mean anything. It's not like I was wearing dresses in secret when I was a kid, like Evie talked about, right? But, well... when I got the opportunity, I jumped on it. I knew what I wanted, even if I hadn't been able to share it with anyone else."

Terry didn't say anything.

Ollie leaned on the sink, looking at the smaller student. "Sometimes it takes a while to figure things out," she said.

Terry's mind was in shambles, a jumble of thoughts and memories bouncing off of each other. He was close to something, but he didn't dare take too close a look. "I'm sorry," he finally said, "I didn't know you were a girl." Ollie reached over and ruffled his hair.

"I'm not," they said.

Terry looked up, surprised. "You're... not?" he asked, dumbfounded.

"Nah," they answered.

"But... why did you wish for..." he blurted out, struggling with how to finish his sentence.

Ollie chuckled. "Because I was at least sure I wasn't a boy," they answered, looking back in the mirror, "and I had a pretty good idea, but I needed to find out for sure."

The short student was getting agitated. "Wait, wait... you just took a chance?" he asked. "But you only get one wish!"

Ollie's smile didn't waver. "Yeah," they said, "and it got me closer to being me than I've ever been in my life."

Terry was somehow getting worked up a lot over this. He took a deep breath. "So, you... you like it?" he asked.

Ollie broke out into a big grin. "Heck yeah! I love my body," they answered. "Besides, you know how much I like cats. The goddess gave me exactly what I needed. I still have some stuff to figure out, but the rest of the way is clear. And I can get there by myself." They pushed off the wall and stepped up to the mirror again, leaning on the sink with one hand. "Can you give me a bit? There's something I want to try." they asked.

Terry nodded, walked out, and closed the door. His ears flicked as the trimmer buzzed to life inside the bathroom.

The young student went to sit on the futon. There was so much going through his mind right now. He briefly pondered turning on the TV, but then something caught his eye on the windowsill behind it. He got up to take a closer look; someone had set up a little picture frame with a bowl in front of it, surrounded by unlit votive candles. In the frame was a hand-drawn picture of the cat goddess. Someone had made her a shrine. Without really thinking about it, Terry picked up one of the nearby matches, struck it, and lit one of the candles. He focused on the dancing flame, becoming lost in thought.

She meant so much to him, more than words could describe. And he was upset, and maybe a little angry, about the whole wish thing. But angry at whom? The goddess only wanted to make him happy. He couldn't possibly be mad at her. And his friends only wanted to be happy. If he got mad at them, he'd risk losing them; besides, he used to be the strong one, and now he couldn't do a thing to help either of them.

Why were they even keeping him around? What right did he have to get angry? There was only himself left to be mad at. Right? He hadn't figured out a suitable wish in time. He hadn't understood what the goddess meant when she asked him that question. He kept replaying the moment in his head. If only he'd come up with the perfect wish, he could be happy, and still be there for Ollie and Evie, and everyone would be happy.

But... he wasn't happy, was he? He still didn't know what he needed for that; maybe that had been the problem. He kept looking at the flickering flame of the shrine candle. Wherever the goddess was, maybe she was listening. Maybe she could help him be happy, even now, after he'd messed everything up. After all, she could do anything.

Terry wiped his eyes. He couldn't think about the goddess without thinking about Tora, and what he'd told her, and how big her smile was, and then he was back in the loop of reliving that encounter over and over too. Why couldn't he get over it? His heart was beating so fast.

The bathroom door opened, and Ollie was soon at his side. "Oh hey, you found the shrine," they said. "Evie got inspired."

Terry looked up. Ollie had shaved one side of their head, and gave the rest of their hair a slight trim.

"Hi," they said, grinning.

"Hi," Terry answered. Then, after a slight bit of hesitation, he gave them a big hug and didn't let go.

They patted the small student's head gently. "Everything okay there?" they asked softly.

Terry didn't answer immediately, looking at Ollie's fluffy white tail, motionless aside from the odd twitch. "Did it help?" he quietly asked after a moment.

"I think so," they answered, "I'm gonna give it some time. But I feel a little better already. Sometimes it's more about the act of making a change than the change itself, you know? It's like a confirmation that you're doing something about it." They idly started scratching Terry behind the ears, causing the shorter cat to lean in and emit a muffled squeal. "Oops, haha!" they said. "Force of habit; Guacamole really liked that too."

Evie entered, humming cheerfully as she closed the door, kicked off her shoes and put the pizza boxes on the tiny counter. "Food's here!" she said in a sing-song voice, then stopped in her tracks once she realized she had just walked into something.

"Thanks Evie," Ollie said with a sheepish smile as Terry hid behind them. "Hey, uh... could we talk about some stuff for a bit first?"

Evie nodded. "Ah, sure," she replied, "er... sorry about interrupting?"

Ollie shook their head. "It's totally fine," they said with a chuckle.

Ollie motioned for Terry and Evie to sit down as they went over to





set the table. "After careful consideration," they said as they distributed plates, "I'm not a girl." They smiled at Evie.

"Oh," the latter said, "okay! Thanks for letting me know!" She smiled back, then had a slightly worried look on her face. "Oh no, is that what I interrupted?" she asked.

Terry smiled sheepishly. "They had just told me, yeah."

Evie let out a faint whimper. "Oh no!" she said, "I'm so sorry! I guess I didn't get a better, cat-related sense of timing."

Ollie laughed. "It's okay!" they said, "this kind of thing sneaks up on you, turns out. Thanks for getting food."

Evie smiled, and they all dug in.

As soon as he finished eating, Terry excused himself to go to the bathroom. He hadn't said a word during dinner, constantly thinking back to what Ollie had said before Evie came in. He stood in front of the mirror and stared at his reflection for a long while. This wasn't going away. He was still running in circles, getting nowhere, and most importantly, getting tired. He needed a little comfort; just a tiny bit of self-indulgent care. A small change, but big enough to get him through however long it'd take to fix things. He didn't know if the goddess was listening, after all, or how long she'd take to answer if she was. Maybe he could buy himself some time.

By the time he came out, Evie and Ollie had moved to the couch to watch some videos. The familiar pain somewhere deep inside returned; this time, he decided to act on it. Instead of going straight to bed like he had previous nights, he very gently walked up to the both of them. "Hey," he said.

Evie lifted her head from Ollie's shoulder. "What's up?" she asked.

Terry's heart began beating quickly; he took a deep breath. "Can I..." he began asking, "I mean... do you have room?" He motioned at the couch with his head.

Evie smiled sweetly. "C'mon," she said, scooting over to leave room between herself and Ollie.

Terry froze for a moment, then carefully climbed up onto the couch; as soon as he sat down, Ollie put an arm over his shoulder and Evie snuggled up against him. He sat there, blissfully overwhelmed, unable to speak for a long time. He never got to sit in the middle.

He waited for a break between two videos to speak up. "Why, uh," he said, hesitating, "why did you move the futon last night?"

Ollie looked at Terry. "Well—" they began, before Evie raised a hand.

"I asked them to," she said, taking a deep breath. "The past few days have been a lot, and... I don't know, I just really needed to feel safe, to stay in contact, or else I couldn't go to sleep."

Terry looked at her. "Oh," he said. He hadn't really noticed anything different in Evie; but then again, it had been awhile since she'd shown

any sign of being down. Had she been hiding it all this time because she didn't want Ollie and him to worry? Was that why— "Is that why you made the shrine?" Terry asked quietly.

Evie nodded. "I, ah... I needed someone to talk to. And I guess the goddess is a really good listener, haha. It helps a lot; you should try it."

Terry nodded. "I did, and... yeah, it does." He paused. "I'm sorry you have to take care of me."

Evie squeezed his shoulder. "Hey," she said firmly, "you and Ollie need support, and I'm here, and I have the energy and time to give it, so I'm giving it. Simple as that. Besides, you gave me a lot of support back when I needed it too, remember? I'll be fine. I just need a break once in awhile; sometimes a little bit of care goes a long way."

Terry gave her a hug, with Ollie following suit and embracing them both.

"We're here for each other, yeah?" the tall cat said.

Everyone nodded. They continued to relax, passing the time with videos and each other's company.

"Hey," Terry said again a while later, having calmed down and gotten more comfortable. "Could I ask you something?" Ollie and Evie turned to look in unison.

"Sure, what's up?" Evie asked.

Terry took a deep breath. "When it's just us three, and no one from school is around, could you..." He hesitated a long while.

"Could you call me Tabbi?"

They both smiled sweetly. "Absolutely," Ollie said, reaching up to gently stroke Tabbi's hair as Evie gave her the biggest hug.

Tabbi exhaled shakily, a giant weight lifted from her shoulders, even if only for a little while. Her mind was racing. This was all so much. But her worries quickly drifted away as Ollie's idle headpats shifted into ear scratches. Tabbi melted against them, her thoughts getting lost in the jumble of blissful emotions that Ollie's fingers sent swimming around her head. Her world was nothing but gentle softness and rumbling warmth; on some level she realized that Evie's quiet squeezes of delight meant that she had started purring again, but she was no longer embarrassed. She was surrounded by love and affection; nothing else mattered.

# One More Day

Tabbi woke up wrapped in warmth. At some point during the evening, Ollie had put the futon down into bed mode just like any other day. This time, however, Tabbi and Evie had decided to stay. The futon was a mess of pillows and covers, with the smaller girl in the middle, her head nestled under Evie's chin, Ollie embracing them both. It was heaven.

She closed her eyes, purring softly. Looking back on their first few days, it was remarkable how quickly the three of them had adapted to their more cat-related changes, at least on a subconscious level; perhaps that was some extra help from the cat goddess. Zero help on the... other changes, though. Maybe that was on the human side and therefore out of her jurisdiction? Still, they'd all adapted well enough, with Evie having the easiest time of it. She'd had a bit of a head start, after all.

Tabbi didn't want to think too much about her body. She didn't want to know where that train of thought would end up. She was here, now, in a good place, filling up on all the things she needed to give herself the energy to keep going. She was still working on reversing the misunderstanding about the wish. She had to remind herself of this now, lest she get distracted and forget about it.

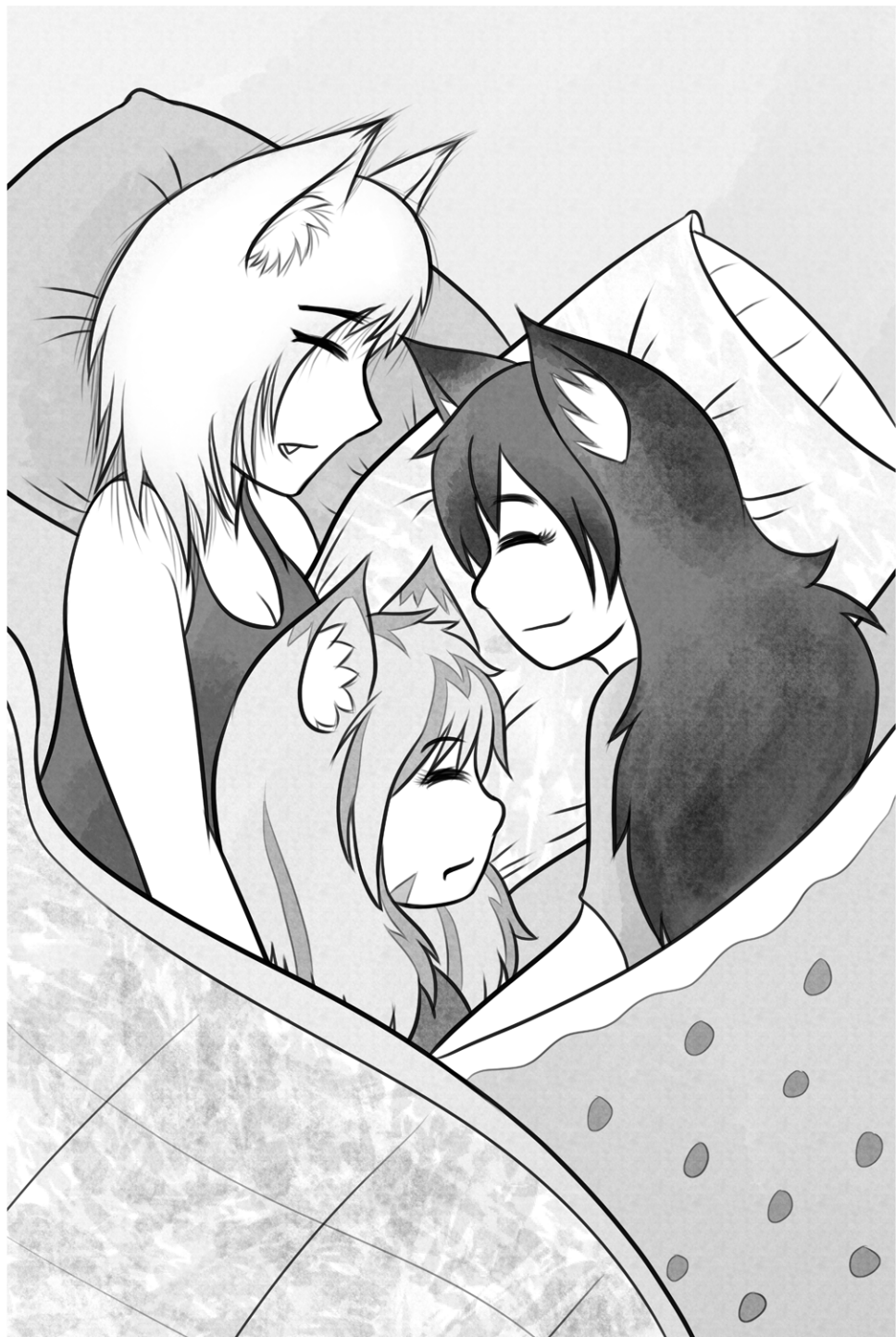
Evie's alarm went off; she reached over to get her phone, gently placing it on the pillow above Tabbi's head. Ollie was awake—Tabbi had heard their breathing change subtly—but was choosing to remain comfortable for now. Evie checked in on her online social circles like she often did, her fingers gently tapping away at the screen, sending little vibrations into the pillow which comfortingly reverberated in Tabbi's head. Sometimes the world became a lot, especially with her senses becoming so much sharper now, but it was the little things that made it all worth it. The short catgirl gasped as her friend gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead once she was done catching up. Evie grinned as she put her phone away, delighting in the stunned blushing on Tabbi's face.

Ollie gave the both of them a squeeze before releasing their embrace. "Morning," they said, stretching so thoroughly that they kicked the covers most of the way off the bed.

Evie followed suit, sitting up and observing the mess that was the futon. "Haha, so that happened, huh?" she said cheerfully.

Ollie grinned. "It was a pretty good night," they said, picking through their sparse clothing options. "We should really go do some proper shopping," they added.

"Let's do it tomorrow," Evie said, "we'll have plenty of time after the



surprise. Don't think I forgot about that! It's gonna be great!" With that, she skipped over to the bathroom and took it over.

Tabbi eventually managed to climb out of bed, get dressed and eat something sugary. Just one day left to the week. One more day, and then the weekend. Maybe she could find the goddess and fix everything then, before exams started. That'd be a load off her mind. But for now, though, she still had to be a student. The three of them got their bags and headed off together, holding hands. Tabbi was a little less shy about that now. They crossed the campus and made their way to a class that started absolutely too early.

Tora was waiting for her around the corner.

Before, Tabbi would have assumed this was a chance encounter, but now she knew better. Tora must have heard her coming and carefully planned to round the bend at the same time as she did; she was such a good hunter that she wouldn't be caught off-guard, especially not by her. But she didn't expect Tabbi to have friends with her.

"Hey there..." the tiger girl began, a split second before her eyes lit up and her smile turned into a giant grin. "OH MY GOODNESS THERE'S THREE OF YOU," she practically yelled out, fangs flashing.

Ollie and Evie smiled sheepishly as they waved.

"H-hi Tora," Tabbi stammered, still more than a little intimidated by the tall grad student.

"I'd heard some rumors earlier," Tora said, "but I didn't expect to confirm them myself right when I got back on campus." She walked up to the trio, looking at Ollie and Evie. "I know you," she said gleefully, her tail swishing high from side to side.

"Heheh, yeah," the tall white cat replied, "I mean, I didn't really change that much."

Evie nodded. "Yeah, same here," she added, "I guess aside from the ears and the tail and all, haha!"

"Among other things," Tora said with a sly grin.

Ollie blinked. "Oh," they said, "yeah! Right! Heh, I guess it's easy to overlook that part."

The tiger girl looked at the three of them. "Did you all meet the same god?"

Evie nodded. "Yeah!" she said, "we helped her out of a bind, and she was really grateful!"

"I bet she was," Tora said. "Hah, I guess I shouldn't be surprised; you all hang out together so often, it makes sense you'd all want the same thing."

Ollie smiled sheepishly. "For the most part, yeah," they said. "Evie got her wish, and then it sort of snowballed from there. There was a bit of a misunderstanding but we're working it out."

Tabbi's eyes grew wide; she frantically turned to Ollie as Tora tilted

her head to the side.

"Misunderstanding?" she asked.

Tabbi waved her hands in a panic. "No, no, it's fine!" she said loudly, tugging at Ollie and Evie's hands. "Uh, hey, we'll be late for class, it was good seeing you!" she added, dragging her friends along.

"Ah, okay," Tora said bemusedly as the three walked off in a hurry. "Take care, you three."

Tabbi slowed down once there was enough distance between Tora and the group. She didn't want her to overhear anything, and now she knew just how sensitive her ears were. She let go of her friends' hands and stopped, but couldn't bear looking them in the eyes right now. She knew she'd made a scene again, and hadn't explained anything, and had just dragged them halfway across campus and by now surely they were mad at her. She felt tears start to well up again but did her best to fight them back. She didn't want to cry in front of all the other students, not on top of everything that had already happened.

"Hey, are you okay?" Evie asked concernedly, gently putting her hand on Tabbi's shoulder.

The shorter student took a deep breath. "I don't..." she began with hesitation, "I don't want her to know about the... the wish thing. Not now." Her heart was beating so fast. Tora was happy for her. And despite others echoing that sentiment, this time it meant something special. She'd done the same thing, long before the two had met. She'd helped a god and gotten a wish, and hers was genuine. Tabbi didn't know what she'd wished for, exactly, but surely it must have been an honest, passionate one, right? This was Tora, after all. The thought of losing that special bond they had, of meeting a god and getting what they had always wanted... Tabbi wanted to avoid that at all costs, even temporarily. She just wished she could put that into words right then, so that her friends could understand.

Evie stood in front of her and gave her a big hug. Tabbi leaned in, buried her face in her shoulder, and sobbed quietly. She couldn't hold back the tears after all. But at least here her friend offered her a tiny bit of privacy. And comfort. "It's so hard," Tabbi whispered. "I just... I don't know how to explain. I'm sorry."

Evie stroked her back softly. "It's okay," she whispered back, "it gets easier. Trust me."

Ollie joined them in a quick group hug.

Tabbi took a deep breath. Her friends didn't hate her. At least, not right now. And that was enough to get through the rest of the day, and finally make it to the weekend safe and sound.

# Saturday Surprise

Evie skipped merrily along the sidewalk, humming to herself as Ollie walked beside her and Tabbi trailed behind. They had made it to the weekend; now, it was time for her to fulfill her promise. She was absolutely stoked.

Tabbi, on the other hand, was lost in thought. Yesterday had been rough, even after the Tora incident. Try as she might, she just hadn't been able to get back into her old Terry headspace. It was just... so hard to not be Tabbi anymore. Even for just a few hours.

She'd lovingly recreated this avatar time and time again in nearly every game she played; it just seemed like a good idea to let herself be Tabbi in the physical world now that she looked so much like her. Strangely enough, it required less work than being Terry did; she could just... say and do what came naturally. But this wasn't a game. She couldn't just save and quit. More than that; she didn't want to. Part of her wanted to be worried about this; at least, more than she was at the moment. But this was the weekend, and she was with her friends, and they were all headed toward the surprise Evie had in store for her and Ollie. She tried to forget about her inner turmoil. Or rather, she hoped the day's distractions would do it for her.

They turned a corner and headed down a street in a part of town they rarely visited. Evie was practically vibrating with excitement. "Okay, okay!" she said as she took them by the hand, "close your eyes, we're almost there!" The two complied, following their guide the last few steps of the way to their destination. She led them through one door, then another, and then their noses immediately told them where they were. "You can open your eyes!" Evie proclaimed.

"You brought us to a cat cafe," Ollie said in amused disbelief.

"And I'm treating you to brunch!" Evie said cheerfully. The sunny cafe was frequented by a number of patrons and an equal quantity of cats—and, appropriately, the three of them kept that ratio in place.

"Oh my gosh," the waitress said, approaching with a goofy smile.

"Hi!" Evie said, "reservation for three, under Evie?"

The waitress snapped back to reality. "Oh yes, of course!" she said, leading them to some bench seats near the front of the cafe. "Welcome to Egg Whiskers," she said, handing out menus, "it's an honor to have you here! Please let me know if you need anything!" And with that, she retreated to the counter, exchanging excited words with her coworker.

"I guess they don't often get, uh..." Tabbi said as she sat down, trailing off. Ollie and Evie put their bags down on the seats across the



table and sat on either side of the smaller student.

"What?" Evie asked.

Tabbi looked down. "You know," she whispered as she abstractly motioned to the three of them, "cat... folks."

Evie leaned in. "Why are you being all quiet?" she whispered.

Tabbi looked away.

Evie smirked. "Wait a minute," she said. "Tabbi. Tabbi. Look at me."

The shorter student hesitated, then did so.

"I'm a girl," Evie said, pointing at her head, "and I have cat ears and a tail. That means that I'm a..." She leaned in, letting her friend finish.

Instead, Tabbi turned away again, her face red.

"Oh my gosh," Evie said with a giant smirk, "you're embarrassed to say catgirl."

Tabbi covered her face.

Evie laughed merrily. "Oh my GOSH," she said, "there's nothing to be embarrassed about! I know it's, like, a thing, but that's what we are! I'm a catgirl! You're a catgirl! We're..." Evie paused, looking up at Ollie, who was having trouble keeping a straight face as every mention of the word was sending Tabbi further down into her seat. "Hey Ollie," she said, "are you okay with catgirl? Do you prefer something else?"

The tall cat tilted their head, pondering the question. "I like catfolks, but I'm fine with being part of the catgirls when we're together," they answered. "By myself though, I'm nyan-binary," Ollie added with a grin.

Evie's eyes lit up and she flashed her fangs with a big smile as Tabbi nearly sank under the table with a whimper. "You okay there?" she asked with a chuckle.

Tabbi looked up, beet-red. She carefully sat up again, hoping that would be the end of the conversation. For some reason the word felt taboo, despite how good it had felt to hear Evie call her that. She nodded.

"Good!" Evie said, satisfied. The three of them opened up their menus, looking at the weekend brunch specials.

"Hey Tabbi," Evie said, turning her head toward her slightly.

"What?" Tabbi asked, looking back.

Evie grinned. "Nyaaaaa!" she said as Tabbi became instantly flustered. She tried to plug her ears—but couldn't quite line up her hands due to force of habit—and turned away to bury her face in Ollie's side. "Oh my goodness you're so precious!" Evie said, petting Tabbi on the head. "Okay okay I'll stop, I promise. I'm sorry. You're so fun to tease!"

Try as she might to be angry at her, Tabbi still loved the attention. And the headpats. And she wasn't quite ready to move from her position quite yet. Sensing this, Ollie angled their menu so the shorter catgirl could read it from her position as Evie opened hers up.

All the commotion seemed to have attracted the attention of some of the cafe's cats, as a few of the more inquisitive ones gently padded

over to where the three were sitting. Evie bent down to talk to one of them. "Hi there!" she said with a cheerful yet soft voice, "how are you today?" The cat looked up at her and meowed; she meowed back.

Tabbi looked on, fascinated; could they really understand each other? She sort of got the sense of how they were relating to each other, but not much more than that. Maybe that's all there was to it?

"Aaaa!" Tabbi yelped as a cat brushed against her legs; she froze in place, not wanting to scare the animal away. By the time she looked over to Ollie, they already had a cat snoozing in their lap and a second one sitting next to them, delighting in the chin scratches they were getting. How did they do that?

The waitress eventually swung by to get their orders, and time flew by as the cafe's cadre of cats became acquainted with their visiting cousins. Evie was making progress in her efforts to communicate; it took some convincing to get her to leave the cat tree's side and rejoin the group when their food arrived. Tabbi hadn't ever been to a cat cafe that did brunch before, but by the look of things this place leaned into it with gusto. She did like the little cat face drawn on her eggs.

Evie was the first to clean her plate; she immediately returned to the front windows where all the cat toys and habitats were. Tabbi smiled. Her friend really seemed to be having a lot of fun here. The shorter student wondered what it would be like to have a cat as a pet. What were the chances that they'd actually be a cat god in disguise? Was there one in this cafe?

She was broken out of her reverie by a tabby cat jumping up and taking Evie's spot. Tabbi looked down at the kitty, offering her hand. "Hi," she said softly as the cat sniffed her fingers, "you're a tabby cat like me." She then reflexively looked around to check if anyone had heard her say that; thankfully, Evie was too far away and Ollie was concentrating on eating while making sure the growing number of cats around and on them were cared for. That was a relief. She turned back to her little friend, who was getting cozy with her hand; she returned the affection with a smile, sighing softly. This visit had been a good idea.

Evie yelped. Tabbi looked up as her friend held a small mouse-shaped toy up to a cat lying on a carpet-covered platform. "Haha, you dropped your toy on my nose!" she said as the cat tried to bat it out of her hands. She pulled it away, then gave the object a puzzled look. "Hm?" she said, smelling it closely. Her eyes grew wide. "Hah!" she exclaimed, holding it up to her nose as she rolled onto her back. "Hahaha!"

"Um, are you okay Evie?" Tabbi asked, slightly concerned as her friend began to excitedly play with the toy, laughing constantly.

Ollie turned to the approaching waitress—no doubt attracted by the commotion—and asked, "excuse me, what's that she's got there?"

The waitress looked over. "Oh, that's a..." she began, trailing off as

her eyes widened. "Uh," she added, raising a hand to her mouth, "it's a, uh, a toy mouse. It has, ah... catnip... in it."

Tabbi and Ollie exchanged worried looks. "Is that... a thing?" the shorter catgirl asked.

The waitress could only shrug. "I don't know!" she answered, "we've never had anyone here like, uh, like you!"

Her coworker chimed in from behind the counter. "Wait," she said, "isn't there that stylish lady who comes in regularly? Oh no, sorry, she's a tiger, not a cat."

The waitress looked at her, pondering. "Now that I think about it, tigers are cats, aren't they?" she asked.

Her coworker shrugged. "I guess? I mean she never got close to any of the toys, so I don't know!"

"I'll keep an eye on her," Ollie said as they walked to Evie's side. "If she's anything like Guacamole, it should wear off in like ten or twenty minutes maybe?" They carefully sat down on the floor next to Evie, who was by this point rolling around merrily.

She looked up at the white cat, greeting them with a happy meow.

"Hello to you too," they answered with a chuckle.

Evie meowed again, then abruptly sat up and pounced on the taller cat, using her full weight to make them roll onto their back.

"Oof! Hey, easy there!" Ollie said with a grin as the eager catgirl rubbed her head all over their face while making happy noises.

"I'm so sorry!" the waitress said, mortified.

Ollie laughed. "It's okay!" they replied, "she looks like she's having a pretty good time. And now we know, I guess! Haha!" They made sure to stay clear of the little fabric mouse, keeping Evie safe and in one place while the effects of the toy ran their course.

"Thanks for taking care of her," Tabbi said with relief. "I guess we should..." she added, then stopped.

Ollie looked back at their friend, whose eyes were suddenly as big as dinner plates, staring out the window. They followed her gaze... to Tora, standing outside, watching the whole thing. The tiger girl, realizing she'd been seen, gave an awkward little wave and quickly went on her way. Tabbi had blessedly forgotten about their awkward encounter yesterday, but now everything came back to her. She'd left Tora on such a strange note, and it was clear the tiger girl was still uncomfortable. Was it because of Tabbi's outburst before class?

Thoughts flooded into her head; she had to set things straight. She had to make sure things were still okay between them. She didn't care about the food left on her plate; she leapt to her feet and grabbed her bag. "I'll be right back I'm sorry!" she yelled as she headed for the door.

"It's okay, I got this!" Ollie replied as Tabbi took off on Tora's trail.

# Turnabout

Tabbi raced down the street. Surely Tora couldn't have gotten that far in the short amount of time it took her to leave the cafe? But she was nowhere in sight. Thankfully, the short catgirl had other senses now; it was weird to think about, but she recognized the tiger girl's smell. She crossed the street and ran down the nearest avenue. She was on the right track.

At some point, however, she began to doubt herself. Was she just retracing Tora's steps? How else could she explain how long this was taking? Surely the grad student wasn't trying to outrun her. Unless...

Tabbi stopped in her tracks halfway down an alley. It was a dead end. No one in sight. A chill ran down her spine and all the way to the tip of her tail as realization dawned on her. Was she being—

"Were you trying to chase me?" Tora asked coyly as Tabbi jumped up onto a nearby fence post with a startled yelp. The tiger girl was standing back at the alley's entrance, looking at the small student with a restrained grin.

Tabbi took a deep breath and slowly made her way down from her perch. Tora was joking around with her, and that meant she was in a good mood, and that was so reassuring. "H...hi Tora," the short catgirl said as she tried to regain her composure.

"Hi Tabbi," the tiger girl replied with a smile. "Looks like you were having some fun at the cat cafe."

"Uh, yeah," Tabbi said sheepishly, "I guess we found something we need to be careful with now, haha." She looked up at Tora, whose demeanor took on a more curious air.

"Is there a reason you ran after me?" the tiger girl asked. "More than just to give me a workout, I mean."

The small student looked down at the ground. "Uh, yeah," she began, "I wanted to, uh... I mean... sorry I ran out on you yesterday."

"Hey, don't worry about it," the tiger girl said, walking over and leaning against a nearby wall. "I didn't mean to pry like that. Wishes are a very personal thing."

Tabbi went to lean against the wall too, approaching the grad student carefully. "I... I'm not sure I got to ask for my wish," she said. She couldn't keep it to herself after all. She didn't want to keep anything from Tora. "I just... answered her question, and I wasn't paying attention, and... I'm trying to clear it up. This is important, and I wanted to make the best wish possible, so I could help my friends, you know?" Tabbi's heart was beating very fast again. She hadn't planned on blurting everything out.

"I see," Tora said as she put a hand on the catgirl's shoulder reassuringly. "You know one thing I learned? Gods aren't very good at asking questions. They don't talk to humans very often, and there's lots of things we do, especially recently, that they don't really understand. But we—you, me, your friends—we believe in them, and that means the world to them."

Tabbi looked up at the tiger girl.

Tora stared ahead pensively. "So the whole wish thing?" she said, "it's their one way of interacting with us in a meaningful way, and it's big and reality-bending, so it's sometimes a bit awkward. But they do it because they want us to be happy." The tiger girl stepped in front of Tabbi, crouching down to look at her eye to eye. "Gods aren't very good at asking questions, but they're really good at listening."

Tabbi looked at the ground again, but Tora brought her attention back by gently placing a hand on her cheek and tilting her head back up. She leaned in, making the catgirl's heart race as time seemed to slow down and oh my gosh was she really going to—

Tora booped Tabbi's nose with her own.

The tiger girl got up, leaving the smaller student flustered and beet-red. "I'm sure it's going to work out," she said as she started walking out of the alley, "because above all else, your goddess wants you to be happy." She turned back to Tabbi. "Not many people get to have a god grant their wish. Your friends did, and they seem to be happy. So this? This is one time when it's okay to be selfish. You probably won't get another one." She smiled at the smaller student, waved, and left.

It took a while for Tabbi to get back to her friends. She found Ollie back at their seat, Evie taking a nap in their lap. The white cat waved at her as she gently walked over and sat down.

"Hey," they said quietly, "she finally got tuckered out. I figure we'll see if she's still up for shopping when she wakes up. How'd things go with Tora?"

Tabbi looked down, deep in thought. "Okay," she whispered back.

She didn't like being selfish. She'd been afraid of it her whole life; it was something bad, something that led to losing friends and becoming an outcast. Why would anyone like you if you helped yourself instead of others? She didn't really want anything, anyway. At least, that's what she told herself; something that was getting harder and harder to do.

She still wasn't any closer to finding the perfect wish, the perfect thing to ask for. She hadn't even really thought about it. What would make her happy? She wanted to help others. She wanted her friends to be happy. But if, like Tora said, her friends already had what they needed... what else was there to want?

Maybe, just this once... she really, really wanted to be selfish.

# Communication

Tabbi went to drop off her shopping bags in the corner before making a beeline for the futon and unceremoniously flopping down onto it. Ollie and Evie followed soon after, the latter closing and locking the door behind her. "Oh my gosh we're here, we're finally here," she said, letting out a gargantuan sigh of relief. "I'm never going to live this down," she added quietly.

Ollie laughed. "Oh come on, you were adorable," they said as they put away their purchases, "and it looked like you were enjoying yourself."

"I mean I was," Evie said, a bit flustered, "but in front of everyone like that? I don't even want to think about it!" She sat down at Tabbi's feet, looking through her bags. "At least we got some good shopping done afterwards. I'll focus on that."

Ollie took off the jacket they'd decided to wear home. "We absolutely did," they said. "This is going to be the most stylish exam week I've had in my life. Are you going to show us what you got, Tabbi?"

Tabbi didn't move from her spot on the futon. "Maybe," she answered. She'd gotten a lot of clothes; maybe too many. She'd tried almost all of them on in secret, going to the changing rooms with piles at a time to throw the others off her tail. The truth was, she had two kinds of clothes in her bags; one of which she'd wear, and the other she'd return unworn. She just... hadn't made up her mind about which was which yet.

"Hey Evie," Tabbi asked quietly without opening her eyes, "how was it like?"

There was some hesitation. "Ah... it was something," she answered with an awkward chuckle. "It was... weird? Like, everything was very intense, and it felt like I was stuck on 'happy' for most of it. I'm, ah, kinda glad Ollie was there because I just focused on how they made me happy and, ah..." She stopped, the tall white cat already at her side, stroking her hair.

"You meowed at me a lot," they said with a big smile. "It was the cutest thing."

Evie leaned against them with a happy sigh. "It's like... I just couldn't get words out," she said, "but there was so much I wanted to say. And I wasn't worried about holding anything back. It's probably for the best I couldn't say everything I wanted to!"

Ollie grinned as Evie started to blush. "And then you took a nap," they added.

She made a general sound of agreement that turned into a happy sigh as the tall cat moved on to ear scratches with practiced ease.

"We should probably be a bit careful around the stuff from now on," the white cat mused. "As fun as it looks."

Tabbi remained on the futon as Evie and Ollie eventually got up to do other things that cat folks did when preparing for exam week. She didn't want to get up. Her mind was still replaying the day's events; specifically, her encounter with Tora. She did that a lot, didn't she? Sifting through moments that made her heart race, trying to make sense of all the feelings bouncing around inside. Her roommates finally joined her, wordlessly settling in around her for the cozy, affectionate warmth they'd all gotten used to so quickly.

This time, however, Tabbi was distant. She'd assumed the first night was a fluke, and the second was just fun recreation of it and nothing more. But now she couldn't deny this was a thing anymore, and it brought up so many questions and feelings she was afraid to confront. She wanted to push everything down as if nothing happened, like she'd done all her life, but somehow it wasn't so easy anymore. Nearly impossible, in fact. And it was noticeable.

"What's up?" Evie asked, shifting around on the futon to face her.

The shorter catgirl had a pained look on her face; words wanted to come out, but were taking their time. "What about Tora?" Tabbi finally asked, her voice shaking.

Evie blinked. "What about Tora?" she asked in turn.

"I just..." the smaller student began, "I... like her a lot." Her face was getting red despite the other pent-up emotions bubbling to the surface.

Evie smiled. "Then you should probably tell her," she said.

"Yeah, but," Tabbi replied, "what is she gonna think about, you know..."—she looked at Evie, then Ollie, then back again—"...us."

The tall cat gave the both of them a squeeze.

"I don't mean to presume anything," Evie said, "but I'm pretty sure she knows. She can probably smell us on you, haha! But, like... I don't think she's going to mind that you're cuddling with your friends."

Tabbi broke into tears. They were so sudden, she hadn't had any time to stop them or drive them back; they just came right out. Those words had cut so deeply. She gently pried herself from her roommates' embrace and sat up on the futon, sobbing. Evie and Ollie were visibly surprised and dismayed.

"What's wrong?" Evie asked as the rest of them sat up as well.

Tabbi turned to them both, unable to lift her head to look either of them in the eye. "I... I like you a lot too," she said, choking back tears.

Evie instantly softened. "Oh, sweetie... I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that at all," she said as she moved in to give her a big hug.

Ollie followed suit, embracing them both.

"I like you a lot too, you know," Evie said.

"Mm," the tall cat added in agreement.

They sat there for a while, waiting patiently for emotions to climb down from their peak. Tabbi calmed down at some point, leaning into the group hug.

"We should've had this talk sooner," Evie said, "it's easy to forget how important communication is. I'll do better."

Ollie nodded. "Me too," they added.

"Me too," Tabbi whispered. She then took a deep breath, adding, "does that mean we're, uh..."

Evie grinned and ruffled her hair. "Yes," she said. "Next time we all go into town, we'll make it a proper date." The smaller catgirl smiled bashfully.

"Do... do you think Tora will be okay with this?" Tabbi asked, her voice shaking again.

"Well, you'll have to ask her to find out for sure," Evie said. "The best we can do is be open and honest, and communicate a lot, and the rest, well... the rest happens."

Ollie gently stroked Tabbi's head. "And no matter what, we're here," they said.

The three of them settled down onto the futon, piling on the pillows and curling up under the covers. Tabbi's thoughts began to turn to the coming week and the gauntlet of tests. She wished she could just close her eyes, take a deep breath, and have all the exams be over.



# Divine Intervention

The exams were finally over. Tabbi closed her eyes, taking a deep breath.

It had been a heck of a week. A full Sunday of studying, practice tests every evening and every part of the day where there wasn't an exam. There had been practically no time for anything else but exhausted cuddling on the futon, waiting for (not enough) sleep to come. Tabbi had had practically no time to think about, or act upon, all of the thoughts still bouncing around in her mind.

Thankfully, the little shrine to the cat goddess that Evie had set up proved to be a great way to settle her anxious mind; every night, the dancing flame of the votive candles would help Tabbi calm down. She asked the goddess for answers or help, and the ensuing silence would comfort her a great deal. She didn't know if that did anything, but she felt better afterwards, so why question it? Just thinking about the goddess still made her heart skip a beat. She had left such an impression.

All of the studying and practicing had been worth it in the end. Now, pencils were down, and everyone could finally relax. Oh right; and prepare for the picnic, too. Tabbi still wasn't sure if she'd have the courage to wear what she'd bought for the occasion. She needed to talk to Tora. About the event, but also about—

Her ears flicked. There was something, a feeling, nearby, and every fiber of her being was screaming at her to go seek it out. She wordlessly grabbed her bag and ran out of the classroom. Ollie and Evie were in another class the three of them didn't share; could they feel it too, Tabbi wondered? She ran down the hallway, turning into a part of the building where classes had long since ended for the day.

The cat goddess sat on a windowsill, looking out at the campus with delighted fascination. "Oh," she said with a smile to the stunned Tabbi, "there you are. I heard there was a misunderstanding." The student froze. This was it. She had been listening, and there she was.

Tabbi ran.

She dashed down the hall, turning down corridors barely anyone visited anymore. But why? Why was she doing this? Thoughts bounced against each other in her mind, none of them able to find purchase. She burst into an empty classroom.

"I wouldn't want you to be unhappy," the cat goddess said, sitting on a desk. Tabbi turned around and sprinted out of the room, heading for the stairs. This was the chance she'd been waiting for: an opportunity to make the perfect wish she should've asked for in the first place. All she

had to do was ask. So why was she running away?

There was no escaping the deity. She was always there, sitting idly on whatever was close by, wherever Tabbi went. Wanting to make sure they understood one another. Wanting to clear things up. Yet still the catgirl ran, until she'd made it to the building's roof. She collapsed, out of breath, unable to think straight, her back against the railing.

"Is something wrong?" the goddess asked with a gentle smile from her perch just a few feet away. Tabbi meekly shuffled away. She needed more time. She still hadn't figured out the perfect wish yet. She just wanted to be strong, to be there for her friends, to be able to stand up for them, to protect them. But everything had gone wrong; she was the one who needed protection. She couldn't give anything in return. And now that she'd spent so much time like this, it was so hard to go back. If only she'd gotten a few more moments to think about it, to ask a proper wish, none of this would've happened.

The cat goddess tilted her head pensively as she looked at Tabbi. She gently hopped down and took a few steps toward her. "It's okay to be mad at me if you want," she said, "I won't stop loving you. Gods make mistakes sometimes, even when we want our faithful to be happy."

Tabbi couldn't find the words. But she didn't need to, did she? Surely the goddess could tell what she was thinking. Maybe she could read her mind. Maybe she could just read it all clearly on her face. The catgirl couldn't hide anything, not anymore. Especially not from her.

Ever since the first meeting with the cat goddess, Tabbi's life had changed immeasurably. There had been difficult moments, many things to adjust to, both physically and socially. But one thing was undeniable.

"I... I am happy," Tabbi said, overwhelmed. She would have never wished for this. She would've asked for something utilitarian, something she could use to put others above herself, something that would've served the greater good instead of her own desires. But the goddess had asked if she wanted what her friends had—happiness, fulfillment, all that came with it—and Tabbi had answered honestly. And she had gotten it. For the first time in her life, she was happy with who she was.

For the first time in her life, she didn't want to lose that.

She looked at the cat goddess pleadingly. She didn't want to go back. She'd been so hesitant to embrace being Tabbi because she knew just how painful it would be to let go. If she got another chance at a wish, she'd ask for something else: for others, for the greater good, something worthy of a goddess' boon. She was so afraid of everything she was being taken away from her because she didn't deserve it.

The cat goddess was standing next to her. "Why would I do that?" she asked gently. "You believe in me; I want you to be happy." Tabbi looked up at her. Tora's words played back in her mind, over and over again. This was her chance to be selfish. But it was so hard to ignore

all the voices in her mind telling her that she shouldn't be using this opportunity just for herself. Could she truly be happy knowing that she'd given up such a huge chance to help others? Wasn't selfishness bad?

The cat goddess softly placed a hand on Tabbi's cheek. "Why is it bad to want to be happy?" she asked.

Tears began streaming down the student's face; she wasn't sure if it was due to being close to the goddess, or all the feelings coming to a boil inside her, or both. She couldn't run anymore, couldn't keep blaming it on a misunderstanding; it had to be her decision. "I wish"—

"TABBI!" Evie screamed, running alongside Ollie as they approached.

Tabbi was still looking at the feline deity, crying.

The cat goddess smiled. "I can give you that," she said, moving her hand atop Tabbi's head.

"Tabbi!" Evie said frantically as she and Ollie kneeled down next to her, "Tabbi what did you wish for?"

The smaller catgirl looked at Evie as the goddess stroked her head. But nothing happened.

There was no magic; no transformation, no mystical powers at play. Just genuine, heartfelt affection, from a goddess to someone who believed in her with all her heart. "I wished I could stay like this," Tabbi said, smiling through the tears.

"Oh my gosh don't do this to us!" Evie said with a relieved laugh as she and Ollie hugged their friend tight.

"I hope this will bring you happiness," the cat goddess said, smiling at the reunited catfolks under her care.

"It already did," Tabbi replied, a mess of emotions—but a happy one. She turned to her friends. "I'm so sorry," she said, looking down. "I wanted to be strong, to be able to protect everyone... but in the end, I—"

"Tabbi," Evie said with a firm tone, "you can be all those things and still be you; that gives you a strength you won't find anywhere else."

Ollie nodded. "Changing the world for the better is pretty hard," they said, "but it's easier when you're doing it for the folks you love. And when one of them is yourself, well... that makes an even bigger difference." The tall cat smiled.

Tabbi hugged her friends tightly, overcome with a rush of emotion. She'd been so afraid of losing them. Now, at last, she was beginning to understand just how strong the bond between all of them was. She took her phone out for the first time in a while, switching to the camera. There was a face; a little frazzled, but... it was cute. And it was her. She smiled, wiping away the tears. The other two leaned in close.

Evie looked at her shorter friend's reaction. "Being yourself isn't selfish," she said. "It's okay to want it."

The cat goddess smiled. She hopped up onto the railing, pleased.

Evie blinked. "Wait!" she said, waving to the goddess. "Group selfie?"



# The Picnic

Ollie was lying down on the grass at the edge of the festivities, relaxing in the spot they'd saved for the group. This was a good day. The excited voices headed in their direction told them Evie and her cousin were catching up on the way there. "Ollie!" Evie said, "you're not gonna believe this." She walked into view... with another girl who had cat ears.

"Nyaa!" the second catgirl said playfully, making hand paw gestures.

"Whaaat?" Ollie said, sitting up.

"I KNOW!" Evie replied eagerly. "What are the odds, right? Rachel, meet Ollie; Ollie, this is my cousin Rachel. Her partner should be here soon," Evie laid out a large picnic blanket before sitting down.

"Vivi's being a dear and getting our things," Rachel said, sitting down with the rest of the group.

Evie gasped, pointing behind Ollie. "Oh my gosh she did it!" she said, her eyes wide and her grin even wider. They turned to look.

Tabbi and Tora were headed their way, holding hands. The tiger girl was in slacks and a rugged-looking—but stylish—jacket, which went perfectly with her companion's vintage summer dress. Tabbi couldn't stop smiling. Or blushing, for that matter. They waved to the group, taking a pit stop at a nearby tree before continuing.

"You really do look stunning," Tora said, flashing her fangs with a grin and making the shorter catgirl make happy little flustered noises.

"You... you look really good," Tabbi said, regaining her composure. She still wasn't quite convinced this was real and actually, positively happening. She leaned against the tree, taking refuge in the shade.

The tiger girl put a hand against the tree and leaned in toward the shorter girl. "You know," she said, "I always figured there was something you kept hidden all this time, but I had no idea just how important it was. It's real good to see you being you."

Tabbi smiled, her eyes practically sparkling. She opened her mouth, but couldn't find the words.

Tora leaned in a little, and then a little more. And then they kissed.

"Come on," the tiger girl said after a delightful pause, "let's not keep our friends waiting, hm?" And with that, she scooped Tabbi up into her arms and walked the rest of the way to the group's picnic spot.

The band hit the first notes, the park gradually filled with happy students, and everywhere—but especially in one particular spot, on the edge of the festivities—celebration truly began.

