

THERAPY CATGIRL TABBI



**A CAT
WISHES
SHORT
STORY**



ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN

Spoiler alert!
You should probably read the light novel first!



Hey hi! You're about to read a short story that takes place after the events of *Cat Wishes*, a light novel I wrote a few years ago. It's also about catgirls! You should probably read it before continuing further. You'll enjoy the following pages more, and understand the characters better too.

That said, it's entirely up to you. I just want my readers to have the best experience possible! ^^

(you can find both over at **books.zandravandra.com.**)

I hope you like it! Let's keep making wonderful things together. ♥

—Alex Zandra

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Therapy Catgirl Tabbi

A Cat Wishes Short Story

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Contents

1	5
2	7
3	8
4	11
5	14
6	17
7	20
8	22



1

Any hope she had of making a quiet entry was dashed when the community center's front door scraped across a slightly raised floor tile. The high-pitched noise rippled through Tabbi's entire body, from her toes all the way up to the tips of her triangular ears. She gritted her teeth and stepped inside, closing the door behind her before anyone came running. What a terrible first impression to make! And at her new job, too!

At least, that's what she initially thought. But as the seconds passed and her heartbeat went back to normal, the lobby remained deserted... save for the nervous catgirl by the entrance desk. Had no one really heard that ruckus? Maybe she'd have another chance, then! What a relief.

Tabbi gave herself a quick once-over in the mirror atop the nearby info kiosk. Or at least, she tried to; even on her tiptoes, the most she could see was the top of her orange striped head. With a tiny frustrated sigh, she dug her phone out of her shorts' back pocket. Okay! Nothing in her teeth, check! Polo collar nicely symmetrical, check! Hair... doing whatever it wants, check! She straightened out a stray lock in the vain hope it would behave, but she'd long since given up on trying to tame any of it. Well, not that long, admittedly; it had barely been a year since she'd met the cat goddess.

And what a full year it had been.

But no, now wasn't the time to go down memory lane! She had a job to do. All she needed was to find one of the folks in charge of the community center and she could get the ball rolling. She'd rehearsed her little speech that very morning; it was fresh in her mind, ready to go. But there was no one. She hadn't expected the lobby to be empty. And try as she might, Tabbi couldn't bring herself to just waltz down a random hallway. What if she wandered into a class? Or in the middle of some other gathering? What if she was thrust into the center of attention? She'd have to hightail it out of there. Literally.

So there she remained, standing expectantly, alone in front of the entrance desk. Eventually someone would come by. Right?

And sure enough, some twenty minutes later, someone did.

"Oh, hi," the lady said as she brought a small stack of papers to the desk. "Do you need anything?"

"Uh, hi!" the diminutive catgirl replied with an awkward grin desperately trying to be cheerful. "I'm Tabitha!"

There was an expectant pause. "...Well, hello Tabitha!" The older

woman finally said, following it up with a good-natured chuckle to defuse the tension. "I'm Claire, one of the organizers here. Can I help you with something? Oh! Maybe you have an appointment?" She walked around the desk and gave the computer mouse a wiggle, the screen reflecting off her glasses as it sprang to life.

Tabbi took a deep breath. "I'm here for the cat therapy."

Claire beamed with a mix of relief and genuine interest. "Oh! That's right, it starts today, doesn't it? Well, that's just wonderful! Our senior class is about to wrap up and I know a bunch of folks who'd love some company." She gave Tabbi a quick glance, tilting her head to look behind her, searching for something with her eyes. "Do you have the therapy cat with you, or...?"

Tabbi gave another goofy grin. "Well, about that. Actually, it's, uh..." She cleared her throat. "It's me."

Claire blinked, still smiling. "What?"

2

"A therapy cat?!" Tabbi asked, mouth agape.

"A therapy cat!" Evie replied smugly as she put the laundry basket down.

"But I'm not... I mean, I'm short, but I'm still person-sized! I can't just *be a cat!*" the smaller catgirl said. Then her eyes went wide. "Wait. Did you get in touch with that—"

"Not an actual cat, silly!" Evie said as she ruffled Tabbi's hair. "A friend of mine works at a place that does therapeutic animal visits and such. She was talking about how they've had to turn down some requests lately because they're out of the way, or none of their handlers can make it, and I thought... well, what if the handler *was* the cat?"

"Evie," Tabbi said with no small hint of disbelief. "Is this for real?"

"Yeah! I mean, why not?" The ever-so-slightly-taller catgirl reached over for a scrunchie and gathered up her long dark hair into a ponytail. "You're cute and friendly, you're very patient, you get that sparkly look of wonder in your eyes when you're having a good time and it's super infectious, you're really snuggly..."

Tabbi sputtered, her face turning red.

"And you make friends so easily! Honestly, if this kind of job exists, you're a natural for it. So why not give it a shot?"

The orange-haired catgirl looked down, swinging her legs over the side of the dryer. "You... you've got way more followers and subscribers than I do," she said quietly.

"Tabbi." Evie stood up, leaning in close. "Tabbi, look at me."

"Mm?"

"Those are just numbers. And it's not like I'm friends with *all* those people. But you," she gave the other catgirl's nose a little kiss, "you make lots of meaningful connections, and you make them from the heart. So don't sell yourself short, okay?"

Tabbi wiggled gently in place, her face beet-red. She nodded.

"Good!" Evie said, handing her a warm shirt and picking up one of her own to fold up and put away.

The orange catgirl eyed the dark-haired one, mimicking her movements as they both set out to transform the pile of clean laundry into neat stacks of fabric. "So, when does it start?" Tabbi asked.

"Later this week!" Evie replied. "Before Ollie gets back. I'll fill you in!"

3

Tabbi turned the larger of two laminated badges over in her hands. As the attached lanyard twisted itself into a corkscrew from the repeated motion, it flicked the smaller card around and around above its bigger counterpart. The emotional support animal usually got a little name card for its collar, while the handler got a badge—given the situation, the orange-haired catgirl had been given both.

"Everyone knows the drill," Claire assured Tabbi as she led her to the lounge where some elderly folks had gathered. "So ah, just get comfy, I suppose? I'm sure everyone will appreciate you being here." She pointed to a folding chair propped up behind the couch. "One of the regular handlers likes to use that to get a seat close to their buddy, so feel free to use it! But anywhere is fine, really. Everyone's got their favorite spots already picked out."

"O-okay!" Tabbi looked around the room, taking a deep breath. No one seemed to be paying the catgirl any mind, keeping mildly busy doing their own thing.

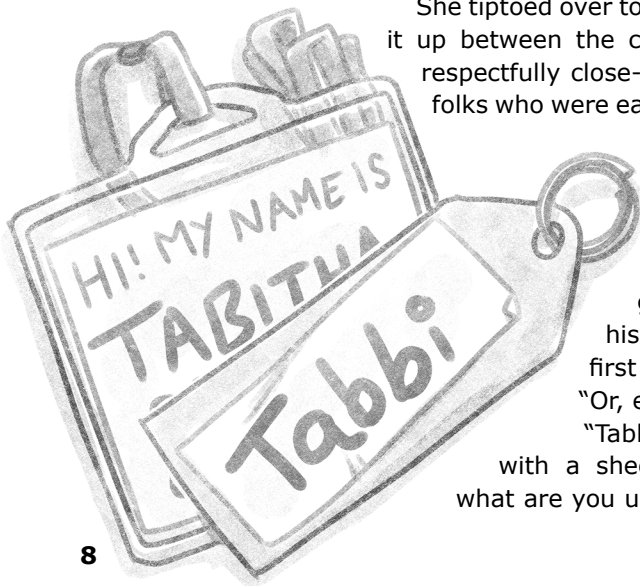
"You'll do fine!" Claire said with a smile as she made her way out of the room. "We all just need to do a tiny bit of adjusting. But then again, who doesn't?"

Tabbi nodded in the general direction of the departing organizer, her gaze quickly scouring the room for a socially safe spot to take a seat. It felt rude to just sit down next to someone unprompted. Maybe she should get the folding chair and pick a neutral place?

She tiptoed over to retrieve the seat, setting it up between the couch and a small table, respectfully close-yet-distant to two senior folks who were each by themselves. Maybe that would be enough to let them take the first step.

"Oh hello... Tabitha," said the septuagenarian gentleman at the table, his eyes focusing on the first badge, then the second. "Or, erm, is it Tabbi?"

"Tabbi is fine!" the catgirl said with a sheepish smile. "What, uh, what are you up to?" she quickly asked,



desperate to fill any gap in the burgeoning conversation.

"Oh, I'm just passing the time until my daughter gets here. We like to go on walks after class. Keeps us young, eh?" He winked.

"And it lets him get an eyeful of the baker down the street," piped in the older lady on the couch with a chuckle, her attention glued to the television across the room.

"It's our duty to appreciate hard-working local craftsmen!" he replied with a smirk as he adjusted his bow tie.

Tabbi smiled. She liked this. Friendly banter, feeling like she was part of the group... It warmed her heart. Maybe she'd been a bit too nervous about this after all. "What are you watching?" she asked, turning her attention to the TV set. Then her ears perked up as she sat upright in her chair. "Is that Dovetail?"

"Is that her name?" the lady asked, adjusting her glasses. "I don't keep up with the movies."

"She's a singer, actu—"

"She keeps up with the host!" the gentleman guffawed.

"Oh hush, you," she said with a dismissing wave. "He's going to do the thing!"

Tabbi took a closer look at the screen. She'd heard of this talk show but never watched it; she wasn't much for cable TV.

"Well, I couldn't pass up a chance to see you," the artist said as she raised an immaculately white wing to shield the lower half of her face. "I just flew in to visit a friend, you know?"

The camera zoomed in on the host as he gave the collar of his tailored vest a double-handed tug. His eyes narrowed. His nose twitched once, twice, three times.

The older lady on the couch nearly jumped out of her seat as she said the host's line in unison with him: "I NOAH LIE WHEN I SMELL ONE!"

The studio crowd erupted into cheers and applause as Tabbi found herself on the receiving end of a vigorous hair ruffle. "Oh! I'm so sorry," the lady said, catching herself after a moment. "I got caught up in the moment. I should have asked. Is touching okay?"

Tabbi blinked, then realized she'd recoiled into an arched crouch by reflex. She eased herself back down onto her chair, giving herself a moment to process. "Yeah," she finally replied, "touching is okay. Just, uh, please not so... enthusiastically?"

"Of course, of course! I'm sorry, dear."

"It's okay!" Tabbi replied, returning to the talk show. She didn't want to make the lady feel bad. But part of her was happy she'd actually had the wherewithal to set her boundaries. That's not something her old self would've done—maybe she was growing up after all.

Dovetail laughed sweetly as the audience calmed down. "There's no

getting anything past you! The truth is, I was in town for a photoshoot.”

“Is that so?” Noah asked, picking up one of the pens from the mug on his desk and twirling it around from finger to finger. “Setting some trends again?”

“I just can’t stay away from fashion for too long, you know? And it was so wonderful to get to meet some fresh new faces! There’s so much talent out there in the new generation, it puts wind in my sails.”

“Being around young people will do that to you!” Noah replied. “You should see the class I’m mentoring—kids are so smart these days, they keep you on your toes!”

“Ain’t that the truth!” the lady on the couch said, leaning back. She turned to Tabbi. “How about you? What are you studying?”

“I’m... not studying anymore, technically,” the catgirl replied with an awkward chuckle. “I graduated earlier this year. I’m still, uh...” She looked down with a sigh. “I’m still figuring stuff out, you know?”

4

Bonk!

Ollie cursed under their breath as they shook the twigs out of their close-cropped hair. They reached back with a hand and held the offending branch up as Tabbi followed them around the tree, narrowly avoiding a second head-on collision.

"Oh, thanks. Are you okay?"

Ollie gave a soft grunt of acknowledgement. Then the both of them took a furtive peek back at the crowded park. The festivities were in full swing as the band began to play.

"Thank goodness for Evie, right?" Tabbi said, amazed at how the third member of their little group was such a natural at making conversation. "I can't believe how quickly my folks warmed up to her. Yours too, from the looks of it."

Ollie nodded, leaning back against the tree with a sigh.

Tabbi did the same. "This is the last time I invite my family to the faculty picnic. At least they'll stop bugging me about it now."

"Same."

"I can't believe we thought this was a good idea. Hey, next year let's invite friends instead, alright?"

There was an awkward silence. Ollie looked aside, keeping their hands busy by fiddling with the collar of their polo shirt.

"I mean... I'm pretty sure we can make some more by then. New year, new us, right? Besides—"

"THEY'RE HOME!"

Tabbi poked her head up out of the covers with a start. She took a groggy moment to scan the room before reality slid back into place. She was in bed. Evie was at her desk, wrapping up a stream. But her eyes—and ears—were fixed on the apartment door.

Then the orange catgirl's ears did the same. Someone was climbing up the stairs. Walking along the hallway. Putting their key in the lock.

"You're back!!" Tabbi said as she sat up on all fours, Evie leaping to her feet and hopping across the corner of the bed to reach the entrance that little bit faster. No sooner had Ollie shut the door behind them than Evie pounced onto them affectionately.

"Ahaha, I am!" the tall cat person said, letting their suitcase flop onto the ground as they returned some of the smaller cat's boundless affection. "Hi, you two! Hi!"

"How was your trip?" Tabbi asked, looking up at Ollie as they gently let Evie back down onto the ground.

"It was so much." They kicked off their shoes and unceremoniously shed their jacket as they stepped over to the giant rectangle of covers and pillows dominating the room.

The extra large bed made the trio's apartment feel smaller than it actually was. Though living around it required a bit of maneuvering on all of their parts, the three of them agreed it was worth it. They had plenty of room to snuggle, and with some constructive use of pillows, they could make up for the lack of a couch. It was a concession Tabbi and Evie were happy to make to ensure Ollie could sleep soundly in a bed long enough to contain them.

Ollie put their shins up against the frame, paused, and then gently tilted their entire body down onto the mattress like a falling tree.

Whoomf!

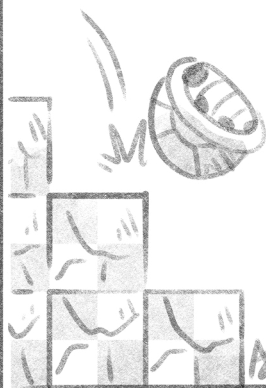
Tabbi bounced in place from the impact, then flopped over the prone cat and buried her face in their hair. She took a deep breath. Ahh, she'd missed this. The smell of a field full of flowers on a summer's day.

Evie was quick to join them. Soon enough, the three of them had worked out a comfortable combination of positions. "Wait," the dark-haired catgirl said as she idly ran her fingers through the longer side of Ollie's hair, finding some subtle shocks of color in the pure white mane. "Did you get it colored?"

"Oh! Yeah, they put in cyan and pink highlights for the cover."

Tabbi gasped. "The cover? You're on a cover?"

"WHAT?"



Ollie laughed. "Yeah! I still can't believe it myself, it was supposed to just be for one of the features, but one thing led to another and, well..." They dug their phone out of their pocket and flicked through some pictures. "Here, they sent me some of the mockups before I left."

Evie and Tabbi peeked at the phone from their respective positions on either side of the taller cat person. All eyes went wide.

"Is that—"

"YOU'RE ON A FASHION MAGAZINE COVER WITH DOVETAIL?!"

Ollie laughed softly in response. They moved as if to sheepishly scratch the back of their head, but both of their arms were pinned down by their girlfriends.

"Oh. My. Gosh." Evie said, borrowing the phone to get a closer look.

Tabbi turned to Ollie, propping her head up with an arm. "Dovetail was on TV today with the... the nosy guy? I think she mentioned you!"

The taller cat person's face went almost as white as their hair. "Dovetail... talked about me? On Noah's show?" They dramatically flopped their head back down onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. "Oh, no. I mean, that's great, but... oh, *no*."

"No, no, it's not like that!" Tabbi said in a frantic bid to reassure them. "I mean, she didn't mention you by name, just... that she was working with talented new people in fashion! I'm pretty sure she meant—"

The phone in Evie's hands buzzed, jolting her out of her deep dive into the fashion cover's every detail.

"Here they come!" Ollie said with a wince. "My mentions are *doomed*."

"You're fine, it's just a text message! Your mentions are safe." Evie handed the phone back. "Well, until the magazine comes out, I guess. Then readers are gonna be all over you."

Ollie checked the notification, then closed their eyes. They let the phone drop to their chest with a sigh.

"Everything okay?" Tabbi asked quietly.

"Yeah, it's just... It's my folks."

"Oh," Evie said. "Do they not know about the photoshoot?"

There was a long silence. Then Ollie gave a quiet chuckle. "I still haven't told them. About... any of it." They looked into Evie's eyes, then Tabbi's. Then back up at the ceiling. "Any of *this*."

"...Ohh," Tabbi said.

The three of them snuggled up a little closer.

The phone buzzed again. Ollie peeked at it. Sighed. "Not this again."

"Are they still bothering you about the family business?" Evie asked.

"All. The. Time. It's gotten worse since graduation. I figured I'd tell them everything at some point, but... There's so much. There's so much that they don't know. And they're, well..." Ollie sighed. "Some people just don't *want* to understand. You know?"

Tabbi hugged her partners tightly and nodded. "I know."

5

"How do you wear glasses?"

Tabbi's ears flicked. She slowly raised her head off the couch cushion and opened her eyes. There was a small child standing nearby, their little arms crossed over the armrest.

"Your ears are too high. Do you have to get special ones?"

The orange catgirl yawned, blinked a few times, then confirmed the kid was still there.

"Whoaaa, you have teef!"

"I, uh..." Tabbi began, getting her bearings back. "I don't need glasses. I was starting to think I might, but now my vision's a lot better. I think the goddess took care of that. Is your parent around, or—"

"She's in class," the child answered. They tilted their head. "What about sunglasses?"

The catgirl opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't come up with a reply. "Oh," she finally said, "I guess I hadn't thought about that. I just wear a hat when it's too sunny."

"Do they make special glasses?"

"I think they do?" Tabbi reached behind the couch for the sling bag she'd stowed there earlier and fished out a pair of around-the-ear headphones. "I got these from a wish-fulfillment site. They probably had glasses too? I didn't think to check."

"Wowww!" the child exclaimed as they inspected them. They looked back up at Tabbi. "You can get wishes from a website?"

"Oh! No, I mean, it's a store for folks who had a wish granted by a god. Or goddess. Or divine being."

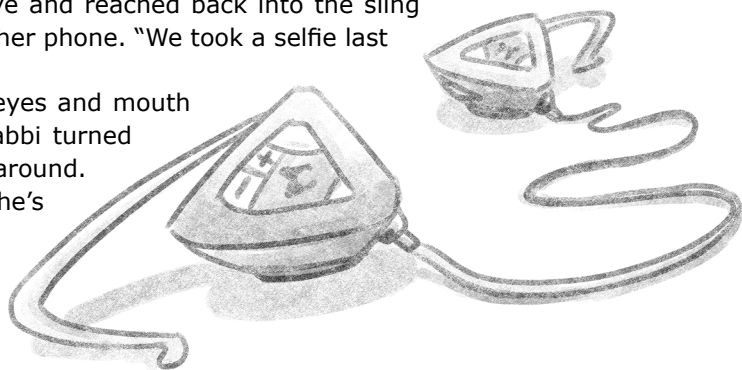
"What's your... divine being like?" the child asked, taking delight in sounding out the syllables of this new term.

Tabbi smiled. "She's incredible. She's so pure and sweet, and she wants the best for... oh! Oh right, I have a picture!" The catgirl wiped the corner of her eye and reached back into the sling bag, taking out her phone. "We took a selfie last time. Here!"

The child's eyes and mouth went wide as Tabbi turned the screen around.

"Whoaaaaa. She's beautiful!"

"She really is," Tabbi said



with a smile and a sigh. She looked around idly, having lost track of time since she curled up to take a nap. Some of the community center regulars had come and gone, leaving the room a bit quiet. Even good old Arthur had dozed off in his chair at some point. But if last week had been any indication, there'd be more folks visiting the lounge once the second afternoon class wrapped up. She had to admit, as daunting as the prospect of this job had been at first, this was nice. She could see—

"Can I pet you?"

Tabbi blinked at the child. "What?" Her mind raced through the classes her new employer had set her up with. She was still a bit nervous when it came to working with children, but the therapy and emotional support lessons had offered some good pointers. It was intimidating, but that part of the training had gone pretty well.

Better than the therapy cat evaluation, at least. What an embarrassing evening! She could handle *herself* around strangers, thank you very much.

They furrowed their brow, then brightened up. "Oh! Okay. *May* I pet you?"

The catgirl chuckled softly, then lowered her head back down onto the cushion. "I think that's fine. But gently, okay?"

"Okay!" the child replied, face brimming with excitement. They carefully reached over with their hand and began petting Tabbi's head with long, soft strokes.

She closed her eyes and lost track of time again. She drifted along in a warm haze of senses, just another heart beating in the midst of distant voices and little noises. A cozy rumble overtook her.

A different, much louder rumble brought her out of her reverie. Tabbi opened her eyes just in time to see Claire run around the corner, dropping one of the plastic buckets she was hurriedly carrying down the stairs. The catgirl's gaze followed it as it rolled to a stop in the center of the room.

"Is everything okay?" the child asked, walking over to the plastic container.

"I got it," Tabbi said as she quickly hopped off the couch and back into her shoes. She retrieved the bucket, taking a peek down the hall.

Behind her, the old gentleman—ever faithfully at his post at the small table—cleared his throat as he looked around. No doubt the commotion had awoken him from his nap as well.

"Hey Arthur, can you watch them for a bit?" Tabbi asked as she stepped back into the lounge and gently walked the child over to him. "I'm gonna see if Claire needs help."

"Hm? Oh, of course, I can do that." He met the youngster's eyes. "Well, hello there."

The kid stared back. "You don't have cat ears."

The septuagenarian adjusted his bow tie; a green one, today. "That is correct! And who m—"

"Did *you* meet a goddess too?"

Arthur blinked, rebuked. "No, not me." He then put his elbow on the table and leaned forward. "But my daughter did!"

The child's face lit up as the old gentleman began his story. Tabbi was equal parts thankful for the reprieve and worried about what Claire might have gotten herself into. She made her way down the stairs, keeping her head down.

"Is everything okay?" the catgirl asked as she rounded the corner, coming face-to-face with an exasperated Claire and the leaky water heater she was struggling to contain. "You uh, you dropped this," she added as she handed over the bucket.

"Oh, thank you, Tabitha. I was really hoping ol' faithful here would last until next season, but now I'll be happy if she can just hold together until the repairman comes. What a mess!" She quickly swapped the fresh container with one that was nearly overflowing.

"Oh gosh! Can I help?"

"I don't think there's much to do aside from minimizing the damage. The specialist should be here any minute, thank goodness."

"Specialist?" Tabbi asked, taking the bin full of excess water to the industrial sink in the corner of the room. She barely had time to catch her badge before it dangled directly into the flow of the emptying container; she stuck it inside her shirt to avoid any further accidents.

"Yeah, the community center was blessed with a rare model!" Claire said as she shook her head in exasperation. "They don't service these in town, so we had to call in a small repair company from across the river. Lucky for us they were open today! They've been doing this for a while, from the sound of it."

Tabbi stared blankly into the sink long after every last drop of water had drained away. There was something Claire said that she just couldn't get out of her mind. Granted, it was a small chance, but still... could it be? What were the odds? She turned back to the community center organizer. "Did you say it's a small maintenance company? From across the river? How many of those, uh, did you find?"

"Just the one! They were the only company that came up. But don't you worry now, I see where you're going. My gut tells me they're legit. Seemed like a nice family business, in fact."

6

"I need to be at the desk for the next group," Claire said as she took one step up the stairs. "I'll be back right away. Thank you so much for doing this, you're a lifesaver!"

"Yeah, of course! I'm happy to help," Tabbi said as she waved the organizer off.

"What's the reading now?" the repairman asked loudly from behind the water heater as he did whatever repairmen do.

"Oh! Uh, one moment," she replied, quickly stepping over the open toolbox to give some assistance.

No sooner had Mick arrived than he'd immediately set out to give the ailing machine a thorough checkup. Which made sense, given that was his job and all.

That said, this specific work order involved a lot of checking, a lot of testing, and a lot of waiting. Tabbi had let herself get caught up in the whole ordeal somehow, but she figured there was no way around it; Claire needed a hand, after all. Despite the events of the previous year, the orange-haired catgirl was not yet in a place where she could pass up a chance to be helpful.

And that meant being in a situation she hadn't had a lot of time to mentally prepare for. Her mind kept going back to school. More specifically, the faculty picnic every summer.

"So, what do you do here?" the pale-haired mountain of a man asked, eyes glued to the doodad he was messing with.

"I'm, uh..." Tabbi took a moment to turn the words over in her head. "I'm a therapy catgirl."

"A what?"

"A therapy catgirl!" she repeated, the words not feeling any less silly the second time around. "I... I keep folks company. The community center's pretty big, there are lots of people and lots of waiting, and, well... It's nice to have a friend to talk to." She debated whether or not to mention the cozier aspects of the job to him, but decided that she wasn't up to the challenge of explaining the emotional benefits of platonic hugs to Mick right now. And so, she moved on to something else. "I also help out here and there. Like now!"

"Huh," the repairman grunted. "Sounds like you got yourself a pretty cozy gig."

Tabbi tried to keep a straight face. "Yup! That's the right word for it."

"So what's the deal with the whole..." Mick asked, gesturing around his head. "You know?"

"The whole... oh!" Tabbi reached up and gave her cat ears a gentle squeeze. "Well, you see... My friends and I were granted three wishes by a cat goddess and I—"

"THERE we go!" the handyman shouted, having performed some sort of mechanical maneuver that made the water heater spring to life. At least, there was suddenly a lot more rumbling than there had been a moment ago, and it seemed like a good thing?

Tabbi stood there silently, not sure whether to continue or start over. Part of her figured Mick hadn't listened to her at all.

The repairman leaned back into a crouching position as he wiped his hands on a towel he kept nearby. He gave the catgirl a look that made her blood run cold; kind of an intense one, with a slight frown that pulled on one side of his lip, as if he was weighing what his next words would be. "You're..."

Tabbi's heartbeat became deafening.

"...one of those god people, yeah?" he finally asked.

Tabbi breathed a sigh of relief. "Something like that, yeah." That line of questioning she could handle. "I mean, we do have a little shrine to her at home, so I guess that counts."

"You said three wishes? Don't they usually just give one? Where'd you get that kinda deal?"

"Oh!" Tabbi waved her hands. "No no, I mean we all got one, and there were three of us so... Um. But I guess in the end we all asked for the same thing. So yeah."

"I getcha. So y'all got yourselves some cat ears?" he asked, scratching his cheek stubble.

"A-among other things," Tabbi replied with an awkward chuckle, trying to avoid eye contact.

"What are your friends like?" he asked, returning his attention to the plumbing.

Tabbi's breath caught in her throat. "Um, uh," she stammered, trying to very carefully choose her words. "Well, one of them, uh..." Then it hit her. "One of them has white hair and the other has dark hair," she answered, feeling especially clever.

"I see. Right, I think she's about good to go." He reached for one of the other tools on his belt and messed around with the piping some more. "Hold that here, I'll check the other side."

"Uh, okay," Tabbi said, snapping back to attention. She stepped around the water heater and under the hanging pipe, crouching down and putting a hand over her head as she did so.

The repairman gave her an odd look. "It's really not that low," he said, making a vertical motion with his hand to show the difference in height. "There's no risk you're gonna hit your head. Let us tall guys worry about that, eh?"

Tabbi looked up. "Oh," she said, sheepishly rising to her full height. "I uh... right."

Mick let her take over his spot as he maneuvered around the tank. "Now my son, he's gotta watch his head, just like me. He's about your age, just finished school here in town. You might know him."

"IT'S, UH, IT'S A BIG TOWN," Tabbi said, doing her darndest to focus on the task at hand.

"He's not a natural at this like you though. Always got his head in the clouds, his nose in those magazines. Hanging with the same two friends." Mick leaned over, shooting another look in Tabbi's direction.

She held her breath as her heart caught in her throat.

WHAM!

"Not a drop!" the repairman said as he slapped the side of the water heater.

"Pack it up, she's good to go!"



"You're pretty handy," Mick said as he slung the heavy toolbox into the back of his company van. "You ought to look into that."

"Oh, no, no, I'm good, haha!" Tabbi said, gesturing emphatically. "Thank you, though!"

"Heh, just as well! It's a family business after all." He gave the side panel a hearty smack. "That'll say '& SON' soon enough, god willing."

Tabbi sighed softly. "About that." She took a step closer.

"Yeah?"

"What if, uh," the catgirl began to say, her heart nearly beating out of her chest. "What if you..."

"What is it?" Mick asked blankly.

Tabbi took a deep breath to steady her nerves. Then nodded to herself. "What if you didn't have a son?"

The repairman frowned. "What??"

"What if you had a child," she said shakily, "who didn't really know who they were until they met a cat goddess, and wished to be like her?"

There it was: that look again. Except now, there was no hardness, no intensity; only dawning comprehension.

"It's easy to have your head in the clouds when you don't have a *you* to go back to, to help you stay grounded. So you try to find it elsewhere! In stories, in magazines, in friends who are looking for the same thing too! And sometimes you... you meet someone, who shows you all the parts of yourself you wish you had, and who helps you realize they were there all along." Tabbi reached up to wipe her eyes. "They were there! You just... you just needed some help to bring them out."

Mick just stared, stunned.

Tabbi spoke through the tears. "It's hard to explain what you're missing to someone who's always had it. But when you find it, when you finally find it, it leaves such a big impression. It can make the past look like a different person. And once you find yourself... sometimes, *only* once you find yourself... you can finally start looking for something more."

Mick leaned back against the side of the van, eyes up to the sky, as Tabbi looked down at the cobblestone path and the tiny droplets that had spattered at her feet.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

Tabbi's heart took its time to slow back down to a more manageable rate. She took some deep breaths; wiped her eyes with a tissue. Once, twice, three times.

"What..." the mountain of a man began to ask, taking his time to find the right words. "What did you say your name was?"

The catgirl reached up to her neck, pulling up the lanyard and holding out the badge at the end. "It's... it's Tabitha."

Mick nodded. "I see." He then held out his hand. "Thanks for the help, Tabitha."

Tabbi stepped forward and gave Mick the biggest hug she could.

"You're welcome, dad."

8

"Thanks for understanding," Tabbi spoke into her phone as she walked down the street. "Yeah. I'll be fine to come in again next week, for sure. Yeah, of course!"

She smiled, her gaze lingering on some tiger lilies in the flower shop window.

"You too, Claire. Bye."

She hadn't known what this job was going to entail, but she certainly hadn't expected... that. She would need some time to process it all. Thank goodness she could take some time off.

She thought back to school again. It may have been mere chance that she, Ollie and Evie had come to be dorm roommates, but there was a reason they'd become such fast friends. They saw a lot of themselves in each other. And while Tabbi still envied her partners' impressive personal growth, she was starting to realize that she, too, had made a lot of progress. It just happened to be in places she hadn't thought to look.

Maybe it would be easier to support Ollie now that Tabbi wasn't going through the same thing herself. Maybe she could even help her partner talk to their folks, if that was in the cards. Hopefully with less crying.

Then again, sometimes you just really need a good cry.

Today had been a lot, but Tabbi knew next week would be easier. She was looking forward to it. And though she didn't have the viewers Evie had or the admirers Ollie had, this orange-haired catgirl was slowly finding her place in the world. She was making connections that mattered to her, bit by bit, day by day. Unexplained coincidence by unexplained coincidence.

She sent a quick text message to Tora as she passed by the bakery, waving to Arthur out on the terrace. She hadn't realized the place had outdoor seating! It'd be perfect for a date.

Tabbi smiled to herself. It had been one year, give or take, since she'd met the cat goddess, and she wasn't any closer to figuring out what she wanted to do with her life. But she *was* closer to a cute catgirl, a nyan-binary dreamboat, and a handsome tiger lady who all made her heart skip a beat.

And that was a pretty good start.

Fin.

ISSUE #78

★ SOLSTICE SPECIAL ★



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VESTed interests
• Cat got your
tongue? Answer
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