

by nothingspecial



Nyandemic Story

It was just as well that the meeting ran for a typical minor eternity, because I hardly got a thing done for the remainder of my shift. I simply couldn't stay focused on work; my brain was too fogged, and I was so twitchy and addled that it was a wonder I didn't just bolt. Maybe adding caffeine to...*whatever* this was had been a mistake? But I felt so nice, and there was that wonderful energy coiled up inside of me, thrumming in my chest...

I didn't understand it, but I'd stopped worrying about that; there were so many other things to catch my attention, starting with the smells. Familiar odors had become heady aromas, telling me things I never knew could be discerned by scent before. It was like stepping out of the farmhouse and into Oz; I was smelling in three-strip Technicolor. God, imagine what it must be like *outside*...!

That was right, I needed to go out, didn't I? I'd demolished the other can of tuna already, I wanted cream, and I just...needed *contact*. I'd been isolated for so long...much longer than the month and a half the lockdown had dragged on for now. When was the last time I'd had real, honest-to-God *human contact* with anyone? I struggled to articulate it to myself, through the mental haze. I wanted...I wanted...

...I wanted someone to scratch me behind the ears. I wanted to nuzzle up against them and rub my head all over them until they smelled like me. I wanted us to be friends so we could groom each other. I wanted them to feel as nice as *I* felt right now. I...I wanted to help them be like me. And none of that seemed weird and all of it was totally normal - healthy, even! - no matter what the little voice said. If they were like me, they could accept me...

I had enough presence of mind to grab my keys and wallet. Part of me did want to just burst out the door and bound down the street - I had the energy for it - but it'd be so much easier to find people, to find *meat*, if I took the car instead; I couldn't focus on boring stuff, but I was sure I could drive just fine. I went out and quietly locked the door behind me. The smells were *indescribable*; I didn't even know what half of these scents *were*. How had I never noticed them before...?

It took me a moment just to come to my senses. The Indian guy who ran the corner store, I thought to myself, when I'd recovered. Older fellow, very friendly, kept a deli counter with lots of interesting meat. Did he stock fish? I couldn't remember. I'd get meat there, and then maybe...maybe I could get him to-

I was just about to hop in the Bug when Nicole caught me on her way back from the dumpster. "Well, look who it is!" she called, moseying on over. She was an olfactory *smörgåsbord*, carrying her own scent (a strange one, cat and yet not-cat,) each of her cats', various essential oils, and more around with her, suffusing her fur. "I *wonderrred* when nyew'd show your face again. What brrrings you back outside?"

I paused for a moment, reeling from the *smell* of her, then looked her in the eye. "I ran out of tunya fish."

She stopped and stared at me; her tail puffed out just a little. She smelled different, too; suddenly she was giving off vibes of serious concern. I wondered what was the matter; was it something I said? "You okay, man?" she said, her tone of voice as worried as her scent. "Nyew seem kinda out of it."

I was a little confused; why would she think that? I felt fine, didn't I? Sure, it was a little hard to focus right now, but that was only because I was surrounded by so many interesting new stimuli, and full of that pleasant energy that wanted to go out and *do things* instead of holing up inside all day. It wasn't like there was something *wrong* with me...

I regarded her warily, and I wasn't sure why. Maybe if I could show her that I felt fine, she'd let me go? I felt the energy thrumming in my chest again, and to my surprise I saw her ears twitch and re-orient towards me. Haha, wow, was it *audible*? I hadn't realized...!

She thought for a moment before speaking. "Hey, listen, Kit," she said. "You wannya come overrr to my place? I think it'd be good for you to hang out with me and the kitties for a while. Whaddya say?"

Even through the fog, I could tell that something wasn't right here. She wasn't a very good liar; she still smelled worried, and while she was smiling with her mouth, eyes, and tone, her ears and tail told a different story. I didn't understand why she'd prevaricate; everything was fine here. We were both fine. Was she up to something? Did she think *I* was...?

"I, uh...dunniaow," I said, trying to pull my thoughts together long enough to come up with a plausible alibi. "I've gotta pick up groceries, and, uh, I wanted..." I trailed off; it'd be *weird* to admit that I just wanted personal attention, wouldn't it? And then she'd get all suspicious...

Her smell got more nervous, and I saw her whiskers twitch and her ears go back slightly. "Nyo, listen," she said hurriedly, moving around so that she was right next to the car door with me, "you, uh...well, gonnya be honest, your hairrr's kind of a mess. We could get it all grrroomed out nice...?" She paused, seemingly waiting for a reaction: and I had to admit, that *did* sound kind of pleasant. Wasn't that what I'd wanted anyway...?

But something in my head said it'd be even nicer with other people, and I was still wary of her mixed messages. She must've read it in my face - or did I smell as uneasy as she did? I couldn't tell - because she nodded to herself, sighed, and continued. "And, well...I was gonnya make fish tonight."

"...Fish?" My ears perked at that, metaphorically, but my brain felt funny - like there should've been more of a physical response from them, and it didn't understand why there wasn't. I found myself strangely tantalized, but that something in my head was trying to remind me that I could get fish at the corner store, or from the meat counter at Safeway, or anywhere else I could interact with-

She took a deep breath. "Grrrilled tilapia in crrream sauce."

Any objections were obliterated as I processed that. To be honest, I couldn't remember if I'd even *had* tilapia, let alone what it tasted like, but the smells of grilled meat danced through my mind as I tried to extrapolate. If the muted scents in my memories were that good, then the real thing must...must...!

She nodded to herself again. "C'mon," she said with a fangy grin, extending a paw-hand to me. I didn't even say "okay;" it hardly seemed necessary. I simply took it - marvelling through the brain-fog at how strange it was to feel something so like a human hand, but covered in soft fur, lined with thick, squishy pads of bare skin, and tipped with velvety claws - and she led me into her apartment.

It wasn't the first time I'd been over to Nicole's, but it was like I'd walked into a whole other-side to the place that I'd never known about. I could discern so many individuals; Nicole and each of her four cats (were there traces left of the ill-fated number five, or was I imagining that?) plus a man and a boy; a woman and a girl who smelled suspiciously like them, but had that cat-yet-not scent; traces of deliverymen, tinged with cardboard and packing tape; a dead bird the cats must've brought in...

Something stirred in the corner of my vision. I whirled around to find one of the cats - a sleek blue-grey tabby, female by the scent - regarding me warily, as if she couldn't figure out what to make of me. I bent down and extended my hand, thinking that it'd be kinda nice if we got to know each other well enough that we could do that thing where a cat will try to groom you once they're done with themselves, but she drew up against the wall and hissed at me.

"*Snickerrrs!*" Nicole scolded, with just a hint of a hiss herself. "You be *nice*. Sorrry," she added to me, "they're not used to dealing with...um, people in your situation, yet. I kinda frreaked them out that firrrst coupla days."

I frowned, wondering what she meant by that, but it was hard to stay focused on it through the pleasant haze; plus, it was more interesting to think about how I could connect Snickers here with one of the scents I'd noticed on Nicole outside, and still more when I'd entered the apartment. In fact, I realized that I'd smelled her coming before I'd even glimpsed her.

Snickers slunk around me and slipped beneath the couch, eyeing me suspiciously from under it. Meanwhile, the other cats had assembled from elsewhere in the apartment to see what all the fuss was about, staking out their own vantage points at a safe distance with that typical feline air of affected-indifference-definitely-not-masking-curiosity. I didn't recall them showing much interest in me at all when I'd visited previously; I felt uncomfortably like I'd become some kind of spectacle to them, but I wasn't sure *why*.

"Mya, Kit?" Nicole said, as she locked the door behind us. Snickers darted out from under the couch and hid behind her leg. "What's your worrrk numberrr?"

Work? I frowned. *I thought there was gonna be...y'know, grooming and fish...!* "What forrr?" I said, the words coming out a little funny. Was there something the matter with my tongue? I ran it over my teeth; no, it felt normal...

"I was gonnya call you in sick." She twitched one ear back and glanced down at her skirt, which the cat was clawing at. *"Patience, Snickerrrs."*

"...I feel fine," I said, confused. *More* than fine, in fact; why would she think I was sick?

"Yeah, I know," she said, which puzzled me all the more. "Shouldn't be for long, anyway; just wannya make surrre you're coverrrred." She motioned to the couch. "Herrre, lemme see your phone; nyew can make yourself at home."

I was still confused, but somehow I didn't feel it was worth arguing over; I handed my phone over and settled in on the couch, wondering when we'd get to the fish. It was interesting to note that I could make out Nicole's old scent on it, but not so much her new scent; probably she was still working out how to get comfortable on furniture designed for people without tails. Was the difference between them what "human" smelled like...?

She went into the other room and shut the door; I heard her strike up a conversation with someone at the office, but I could only make out general speech cadence. She was acting so weird and suspicious; why was that? I wondered if I should be concerned, but I was distracted when one of the cats - a big black long-haired fellow with a handful of scars peppering his flank and under one eye - broke rank and moseyed over to the couch.

He took a moment to prepare and then heaved himself up onto the armrest next to me, settling in and giving me a look that quietly dared me to reclaim it. I was feeling too pleasantly hazy to get in a fight, however, so he settled for sitting there pointedly staring away from me and passively-aggressively flicking my arm with his tail. We were still at it when Nicole returned. "I see Rrrasputin's as frriently as everrr," she chuckled.

I cocked an eyebrow. "'Rasputin?'"

"He's taken birdshot a couple times, I think, and when I found him he'd been tied in a sack and tossed in the crrreek." She glowered darkly, ears pinned back and hackles raised. "And if I'd kniaown who did it," she added, with the most *alarming* growl, "they'dve ended up like the Rrromanovs."

Then she brightened again. "Plus, he's a fiend for trrrreats," she said, sitting down next to me. It took her a moment to get her tail situated so that it wasn't kinked against the back of the couch, and she ended up sitting cross-legged, turned to one side and hunched forward slightly; she was definitely still getting used to this. "The big-dark-'n-prrrrickly thing's a total frrront, don't let him fool you."

She got as comfy as she could and began tapping away at her phone; I watched, curious. She didn't seem to have any trouble with the touchscreen, but kept her palm and other fingers arched higher off the device than normal. I continued to stare in mild fascination, until she noticed. "Some of the gesturrres can get funky niaow," she explained.

I nodded, mulling it over; my brain was still fuzzy, but it didn't stop me from being curious. "Probably a, um, a capacitance thing. Are you, uh...?"

"Trrrying to find a rrrecipe," she said, the tip of her tail thumping against the couch cushions as she focused; one ear cocked towards me.

"For, uh, for what?" I asked, after a moment.

"Grrrilled tilapia in crrream sauce."

"Huh." That raised some question in the back of my mind, but I was too hazy to focus on it.