

by nothingspecial



Nyandemic Story

I hunched forward, tail lashing moodily, and heaved an aggravated sigh.

It was a little later in the morning. I'd gotten as far as bagging up my laundry, then got stuck in a loop, alternating between pacing around the living room, trying to figure out how to sit like this, puttering with my guitar, and meaning to go to the laundromat but avoiding actually doing so, cycling at an ever-accelerating rate and growing increasingly irritated with myself.

If only I'd sprung for a washer and dryer when I moved in...but I could just go to the laundromat, I'd told myself. If only I'd gone to the laundromat at the start of last week, I fumed...but I'd been worried about minimizing my exposure risk. If only I could make myself go now...but I felt weird and self-conscious *enough* about what I'd seen in the bathroom earlier, to say nothing of going out in just a jacket, boxers, and pajama shorts. If only I had *anything* else to wear...*but I couldn't go to the damn laundromat!*

Right now I was in the "sitting" phase of the cycle. It was less uncomfortable than when my tail was an immobile 8" stub, but still annoying; unlike my limbs, it bent one vertebra at a time rather than pivoting on a joint, and while my spine was more flexible, it couldn't turn 90° all at once. So if I sat cross-legged on the floor, I had to hunch forward just to avoid kinking it – and then it brushed across the carpet with every involuntary twitch, building up a static charge and picking up God-knows-what. (When was the last time I'd *cleaned* in here...?)

But, if I sat in the recliner, the back of the chair got in the way and it had to pass between my thighs, which felt all weird; and my agitation got the dumb thing to lashing back and forth, thwapping the inside of my knees. Ditto for the couch, though I could also hunch over like I did on the floor, as long as I turned sideways. I wondered if I'd ever be able to sit comfortably on anything besides a barstool again. I could try *seiza*, I guessed, if only I hated my knees and ankles...

That was the most obvious bit of musculoskeletal weirdness for today, I thought, going back to pacing, but it wasn't the only one. My gait was still weird; I wasn't developed enough in the bust to feel top-heavy, but I kept instinctively trying to rely on my diminutive tail as a counterbalance, and it was disorienting that neither end of me was quite what my brain expected. Was my proprioception adjusting to changes that hadn't happened yet? Did some part of me secretly *know* how I'd turn out...?

My hands were smaller, too, the fingers slenderer; not by a lot, but enough that it was throwing off what little I'd committed to muscle memory re: chord fingerings. I paused by where I'd set the guitar and ran my hand down the neck, seeing how far I could comfortably stretch and wondering if it wouldn't be different again tomorrow. I felt irritation prickle at the back of my neck; was there a *single* aspect of my life that this wasn't going to alter in some way?

The dull ache from this morning hadn't returned, but I still felt weird and out-of-sorts. Okay, things were less *off* than they'd been yesterday, as I gradually settled

into my new proportions...but they were still shifting, still throwing me off a game I'd never really been *on*, still making me feel awkward and self-conscious about what I was becoming, what I *used* to be, what I wasn't *yet*...

I glanced over my shoulder at the door, trying to summon up the momentum to force myself outside, into the car, and down the road...but it was no use; I was too uncomfortable at the thought of going out like...*this*. Worse, it added (minimal) injury to (self-assessed) insult, as craning my neck 'round scraped the edge of the embroidery patch across the top of my tender breast. I winced and lurched back the other way...and hissed as this dragged the cold brass zipper up against the edge of my nipple.

My shoulders tensed, and for a moment I just stood there fuming, incensed at everything this stupid disease was putting me through. I felt little pinprick tears at the corners of my eyes – from the physical discomfort, surely – and made a concerted effort to get ahold of my emotions. It wasn't even really *painful*, I told myself, things were just...*sensitive* right now. That'd pass, eventually, right...?

I was jolted out of my brooding by a knock at the door. It didn't make me jump like the doorbell had; in fact, it was strangely soft, as if the caller realized my hearing was sharp enough to catch it anyway. Better than yesterday, but I was still in no mood for visitors – not looking like this, not *dressed* like this. But I thought I knew who it was; with a sigh, I went to the entryway, moved the blinds aside, and peered out the little side window next to the door. Sure enough, it was Nicole. I was only just realizing that I hadn't seen her in a couple days; surprising, after she'd shanghaied me over to her place for the entire weekend. But I'd been all huggy and infectious then, hadn't I; of *course* she had to keep an eye on me. It was only responsible.

"*Omyagod* I'm sorry," she said, when I opened the door to let her inside. Her whiskers twitched and her tail lashed, and the smell of agitated cat-woman filled the apartment. "I *rrreally* meant to check on nyew, but I got tied up with work Tuesday and then Gillie got it into his head to eat some pantyhose. Got stuck at the vet all yesterday..."

"Eat...some...?" I stared at her, feeling like my ears should be flattening out. What did you even say to that?

"He gets all *frrreaky* about feet," she explained, the way pet owners do when they realize they're the only ones who think their animals' bizarro behavioral quirks are *normal*. "Dunniaow if you *rrremember*, but he about *buried* himself in nyewr shoes on Saturday." She shook her head. "Firrirst time he's done *that*, though. I'm gonnya have to toss the *rrrest* out; nyat like I have a use for 'em, niaow."

"Is...is he *alrrright*...?" I felt a weird mixture of embarrassment and relief at the sound of my voice; it'd settled firmly into a feminine register, but not overly high or breathy. I wondered if I still sounded kinda nasal outside of my own head.[°]

[°] (I never was sure if that was because I still had my adenoids.)

"*Bless his pointed little head, mya,*" she nodded, then turned her attention to me. "How 'bout you? Nya doin' okay...?"

There was a brief moment there, when I'd finished parsing the question but hadn't started *thinking* about it yet, where I still felt vaguely coherent; then my brain began to go over the files, recalling everything I'd been through, everything I'd *felt* in the last forty-eight hours, and I was suddenly struggling to keep from falling apart completely. I felt myself power-crete, trying to shrink into my own torso like a damn *turtle*. Was I okay, *hell!* I gritted my teeth and tried to keep from tearing up again. When had I gotten this emotionally unstable? It *must* be a hormone thing, damn it...

"*G-gotta do mya laundrrry,*" I sputtered, trying to make myself stabilize, to power through it. I could focus, I could *make* myself focus, if I could just find something to grab onto, to make myself work toward. I was an *adult*, dammit, not some awkward adolescent flying off the handle at the slightest provocation...

Nicole gave me a knowing look. I felt myself bristle at it; okay, she wasn't actually laughing at me, but some part of my brain brooded over the idea that she *could* be, that it wouldn't even be unreasonable, that I must seem *objectively* ridiculous right now. Cheeks aflush, I glanced pointedly away. "*Wh-what!?*"

"C'myan, nyew're nyat goin' to the laundromat like *that,*" she said. "I've got a washer 'n drrryer, nyakniaow. Let's go get your stuff running, and then we can talk."

Oh *joy*. I was *not* in a mood to have Big Important Conversations right now; not dressed like a hobo, not with my emotions jumbling up at the drop of a hat, not when I couldn't even figure out how to *sit* right, not while I was freaking *SORE* in the freaking *TITS*. But...God, this wasn't going away, was it. Even if this was the nadir, the most awkward it'd ever be, I'd still be stuck like this for...a good long while, if not *forever*. And if just thinking back on the last two *days* could mess me up like this...

"*Fine,*" I sighed, sounding all moody-teen-girl again and getting freshly irritated over *that*. I got my laundry together and threw on a pair of socks; it was warm enough out now, but it'd gotten plenty cold the other night. My shoes were already too big for me – yet *another* thing I'd have to replace – but it beat going barefoot on the concrete.

She said nothing while I put my clothes in the wash, and focused on keeping the inquiring cats at bay. Did I smell like *one of us* to them, now? I could pick up on their curiosity, at least, even if they hadn't been vocal about it. Gilligan seemed none the worse for wear, but I caught a whiff of sterile clinical air, other critters, and what was probably a general anæsthetic coming off him. What ridiculous little creatures they were...

When I stepped back into her apartment from the garage, I felt a furry pair of arms wrap me in a hug from behind, and long, stiff whiskers tickling at my cheek. Nicole stayed carefully clear of my bust; she must've known what I was going through, but then of *course* she would.

God, "my bust...!" I felt silly, flaky, *irrational* for letting it get to me, but even feeling all six of hers pressed softly against my back couldn't distract me from the weirdness of the thought. Everything was different now, so much of what I *thought* I knew was changing, the rug was being pulled out from under me and there was nothing I could even *do* but ride it out and hope to God that I'd somehow manage to land on my feet...

It was all pressing in on me, the memory of everything I'd been through. I felt blood rushing to my head and bit my lip almost hard enough for my goddamned cute-little-fangs to break the skin, trying to maintain control over my emotions. I didn't *want* to have a breakdown, damn it...but my eyes were already watering, and before I even knew what was happening I found myself crying hot, angry tears into Nicole's soft, fuzzy shoulder.

I don't know how long it went on; my mind was in total chaos, a snarl of pent-up emotions I'd hoped to deal with later – preferably, *never* – all crashing down on me at once. My tail lashed angrily, my ears felt like they should be pinned back, my fangs were bared. I'd felt paranoid about getting too close to others, scared of losing myself to whatever I might become, confused about what was happening to me, uncomfortable acknowledging the truth, indignant at losing to the virus, uncertain about how I'd end up, hideously awkward about facing the world like this, and now *mortified* about being a total basket case...

Through it all, she kept holding me – not saying anything, just gently stroking my hair, scratching at the base of my ears, rubbing my back. Eventually hot, angry tears gave way to soppy, maudlin ones and great, heaving sobs. I felt ridiculous, standing there bawling my eyes out, but there was no damming it back up *now*...and despite my embarrassment, I couldn't help but feel comforted by Nicole's touch. Finally, as the emotional turmoil began to subside and I was left *merely* a sheepish, snot-nosed mess, she asked: "Feeling better niaow?"

I glanced away, still embarrassed. "Feeling like an *idiot*, morrrre like," I sniffled, wiping my nose with the back of my hand and realizing to my annoyance that I didn't have anything to wipe *that* on. I settled for my hoodie; I could always run it through the wash, later.

She gave me a sympathetic look and a last pat on the back. "It's nyathing to be ashamed of, myakniaow," she said, padding over to the microwave to set something warming. "Sometimes we just *need* that, 's all."

I bristled a little, despite myself. "'We?'"

I could tell she was rolling her eyes, even from behind her; the ears flicked back briefly and her tail gave a lash. "*People*, I mean," she said. "Eveerrry niaow and then nya just gotta let it out, or you'll go crazy." She turned back to me and shrugged, smoothing down the damp, mussed fur on her shoulder. "Plus, I mean, nyew're prrrobably getting a big ol' dose of hormones you're nyat used to dealing with, rrrright? Nyo surprrrrise that it's takin' nyew a bit to adjust."

"Yeah, nyat thrilled about *that*," I groaned, feeling all self-conscious again, as she led me over to the couch. Rasputin was perched territorially on the armrest, as usual, but I pointedly ignored him and turned to face the other way; that let my stupid tail hang off the corner of the cushion, anyway. I hesitated for a minute, worried that I'd sound like a jackass, but I had to ask: "It, mya, it's...nyat *always* like that, is it...?"

She made a bemused little churr and gave me a Look. "You rreally think we're all hysterical wrrrecks?"

"Wh—!? N-nyo!" I sputtered defensively. I really didn't; it wasn't like the women in my family were, anyway, and if I'd met some girls who were total flakes in college, I'd known plenty of guys who were just as stupid and irrational. But there was so much about people I didn't *get*, and now I was being drop-kicked into a mirror-universe where I'd have to deal with things I'd always had the nagging feeling I'd never *really* understand...

"I-it's just, *mrr*..." I sighed, glancing away and feeling like my ears should be flicking back. "It's what *I* worry about," I said, my voice so small that it would've been completely under my breath if not for her enhanced hearing. Her sympathetic expression returned, and she reached over and gave me a gentle squeeze of the shoulder; her thick pink paw-pads felt so funny doing that...

"Mya, nyo offense, but is this, like, a boys-don't-cry thing...?" she asked. The microwave pinged, and she went to get it, handing me a mug of what turned out to be warm milk with honey and ginger, and sitting back down with her own.

"...Nyat really," I said, taking a long sip and feeling the warmth soothe my insides the way the shower'd soothed my aching frame. "I just...I don't *like* feeling like I'm nyat in contrrrrol of my own emotions, that's all." Was that really so abnormal? I stared into the mug, wishing it could soothe my *mind* as easily.

We sat there for a minute, saying nothing, as I tried to keep myself from thinking back over the decades, running through awkward memories I'd rather have forgotten. Nicole brought her mug up to her lips and lapped gently at it in cat-fashion; she looked like she wanted to ask, but she could tell I didn't want to talk about it. "Well," she said at last, "it's nyat 'always like that,' but what *is*? People're differrrent, and we're people, what can nya say?"

I took another long sip, sighed, and shook my head; that wasn't as reassuring as I'd've liked. She glanced back up at me from her mug. "Nyew're rreally worried about this, huh?"

"I dunniaow what I'm even gonnya *be* when this is done," I said, staring into my cup again. Rasputin pivoted on the armrest so as to thwap me in the small of the back with his tail; I ignored him. "I dunniaow what it'll be like trying to *live* as this. I don't even kniaow *what* I don't kniaow. Can I even *do* this? What if I *can't*!?"

She shrugged. "I mean, it's nyat some pass/fail thing, Kit; it's just *life*. Nya do the best you can, and if you scrrew up, you get up, dust yourself off, and try again. It's nyat like the Girrrl Police'll haul you off to the gulag or something." She scooched over and put an arm around my shoulder. "As far as what you're gonnya *be*, well... besides the obvious, that's for you to decide, isn't it?"

I drained my mug and took a deep breath. She probably wasn't *wrong*, not in the sense she meant it, but... "I meant more like, am I even gonnya be the same *perrrrson*? It's obviously doing stuff to my brrrain—" I frowned. "Like *that*," I sighed. "These dumb speech tics, I mean, and all the other instincts. And if it's re-wiring that, what *else* is it changing about me? Will I be able to *tell*?"

I shook my head. It was strange, trying to articulate this to someone else; I wondered if I sounded all crazy and paranoid, but it was a valid concern, wasn't it? Okay, I didn't think I felt *that* different, right now, but what if I couldn't even recognize it? I didn't normally break down crying when I was having a bad day, after all. But on the other hand, the circumstances *were* pretty exceptional, between the weeks of constant stress and fear and the raw fact of having my entire body overhauled – and, yes, the resulting changes to my brain chemistry. But how could I truly *know*!?

Nicole didn't look at me like I was crazy, at least. She frowned thoughtfully; then one ear flicked 'round to a rear-facing position. "*Snickerrrs, OFF the counter!*" she hissed. Surprised, I turned – sure enough, there was the grey tabby, caught just as off her guard as I was. She slunk back down to the floor, her body language indicating that, fine, she didn't really *want* to be up there, anyway. Nicole allowed herself a little self-satisfied smirk[°] before returning to her contemplation.

[°] (Which I was still kind of amazed I could *read* on her...)

"Well, nya don't seem like another perrrrson to *me*," she said, with a languid *streeetch* that began with her arms but rolled through her whole upper body. She gave me a sly grin. "Low-key strressed, like, *all* the time? Bottles it all up inside 'cause he's nyat comfortable admitting it? *Totally* the guy who's been my nyabor for, what, thrree years?"

"*Hey*," I said, glancing away and feeling like my ears should be flicking back in annoyance.

"*Sorry*," she chuckled, and began to gently scratch my ears again. Now that I wasn't out of my gourd on a virus-induced high, it felt weirder to be doing this...but it was calming, and I really did need it, and anyway it wasn't *remotely* the weirdest thing about my current situation. Slightly embarrassed but too emotionally spent to care, I sighed, closed my eyes, and let myself nudge into her touch.

"I *rrreally* do mean it, though." She adjusted herself on the couch, tugging the corner of her skirt out from under her so her tail could move more freely. "And...think about it this way: in nya sense, humans're just overgrrrown monkeys, rrright? Our social dynamics are *full* of it."

"I mean, nyeah..." She wasn't *wrong*, but I didn't like thinking of *myself* that way; I was a more-or-less reasonable person making mostly rational decisions, not a thrall to dumb instinct...present circumstances excepted. "But we're way more than *just* that," I said, though I found myself thinking of all the occasions people'd given me reason to doubt it.

"*Exactly*," she replied. "So if there's morrre to us than just the monkey-mind, and somethin' crazy comes along and swaps *that* out for a differrrent set of instincts, it's nyat like *everrything else* is just gonnya go away, is it?"

I could see what she was getting at, but I had a hard time believing it was as simple as all that. "I, mya...I don't think we're that *modular*," I said uneasily. "I mean, nyew can't just drop a house on a differrrent foundation and expect it to stay up. Even with, like, cars or computers, changing one part can nyaaffect a whole system, and they're *designed* for that."

"Surrre, I guess," she said, shrugging. "Like, I'm nyat tryin' to say *nyathing's* gonnya change; nyew got a taste of it yourself, alrrready. Heck, *I'm* still finding out how differrrent things are niaow, and I even kinda *liked* the idea goin' in. But, well..." She redoubled her efforts, gently rubbing at my scalp with the squishy pad in her palm as she scratched; it felt strange, but strangely nice.

"Nya didn't ask for this," she said, "it just *happened*. But just 'cause you're nyat the same as you used to be, it doesn't mean nyew're *someone else*. Cat-Kit isn't gonnya be exactly like prrrimate-Kit, but cat-Kit's still gonnya be *Kit*, nya get me?" She gave me a fangy grin. "And...I'd bet that goes for girrrl-Kit, too."