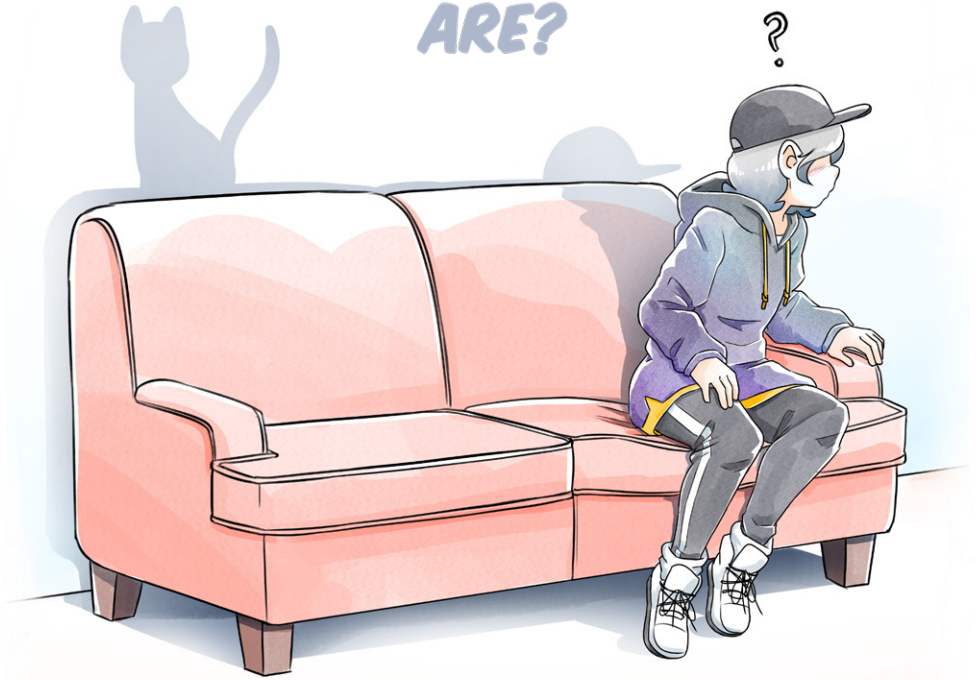


MY FRIEND TOOK ME TO A FELINE THERAPY PLACE FOR MY ANXIETY

AND I'M STARTING
TO WONDER
WHERE
THE CATS
ARE?



SATELLITE 9 — ALEX ZANDRA



Relaxing with a purring cat can make people feel better...

...but did you know purring makes the cat feel better too?

Some folks see the daily challenges we've made it a habit to overcome and can't stop themselves from trying to help. Surely there's a way. Surely there's something we haven't already tried. And sometimes we humor them, because even though their solution isn't for the right problem... what if this one works? What this is the one that helps?

What have we got to lose?

A first-person exploration of anxiety, Feline Therapy is my biggest departure yet; lighter on the gender feels, heavier on the ways we face our problems and the ways we escape them. It's my first full-color book, as well as my first collaboration with a professional illustrator. I hope you like it!

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

—Alex Zandra

[content warning: this story deals with altered states of sentience; the last half gets intense, so please give yourself time to read it in one go]

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My Friend Took Me To A Feline Therapy Place For My Anxiety And I'm Starting To Wonder Where The Cats Are?

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Getting There

I looked out the window, idly scratching at the armrest fabric. The clouds were here to stay, but thankfully it didn't seem like it would rain. That was a little comforting. I couldn't remember the last time I had good weather on my birthday, so a dry day was a small victory.

"Hey," Sasha said as they waited for the green light, "we're almost there."

"Mm," I replied. They could tell I was worried. They always could.

"It's going to be fine," they said. "You'll see. My friends swear by this place."

I nodded as we turned the corner into the touristy side-streets downtown. I didn't really know what to expect, so of course I was trying to expect *everything*. What was a cat therapy place even like? You just sat down, and... there were cats? Would that help? I did like hanging out with my aunt's cats whenever I used to visit. Would the cats at this place like me, though? Gosh, how embarrassing would it be to go to a cat place and have all the cats ignore you?

Still, it was really nice of Sasha to do this. They knew how rough the past few weeks had been; the wounds from everything falling apart at work were still fresh. Talking to my therapist was harder than ever. And as much as I wanted to run home and lock myself in my room, I didn't want to make Sasha sad. Who knows? Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

"...And we're here," Sasha said, pulling up along the sidewalk.

"Wait, this is all of it?" I asked. The place was a tiny storefront, barely standing out among the coffee shops and clothing stores. It had large window and looked more like a café than a bed and breakfast. How was anyone supposed to spend the weekend here?

"C'mon," Sasha said as they turned off the engine and opened their door. "It'll make more sense once we're inside."

"Have you stayed here?" I asked, getting out onto the sidewalk, careful not to get my backpack straps caught in the door when I closed it.

"Nah, but I dropped off a couple friends once. It'll be fine, trust me!" I went up to the front window, waiting until I was close enough to sneak a peek; I wanted to look *through* my reflection, not at it. Inside, mismatched seating as far as the eye could see. What kind of place was this? We took off our shoes in the tiny lobby before opening the door into the place proper.

"Welcome to Feeline Fine!" the lady behind the counter said with a smile. "Have you been here before?"

"I have, sort of," Sasha said, taking out their phone. "I took out a

gift weekend pass?"

"Let me look," the clerk said, tapping away on her screen.

I leaned to the side to get a better look, scratching at a piece of loose paint flaking off the counter. It was hard to see past the maze of bookshelves and couches jammed into the narrow space. The place felt cozy, at least. And ostensibly there was food somewhere? Or at least snacks, judging from the occasional empty cup or discarded plate. Maybe through one of the doors in the back. There certainly were enough of those.

"Ah, the birthday gift!" the lady said after a brief search. "For Sasha?"

"Yup! Well, not for me, technically," they said, crooking their thumb at me.

"I'm—I'm new!" I blurted out.

Sasha glanced in my direction.

But the clerk smiled with no hint of awkwardness. "Ah, gotcha!" she said. "Well you're in good hands. Just head on over to the back and make yourself comfortable! We'll get the business side out of the way and get you all set up."

I nodded and quickly made my way past the counter, over to where comfortable couches were set up in semi-private little nooks. I sat down in an isolated one and sunk into the cushions, letting out a quiet sigh. I set my backpack down between my legs, clipping and unclipping the straps together as I looked around through gaps in the bookshelves that gave me privacy. There was another person waiting, but no cats. Was it too early? Maybe the staff were waiting to bring them out all at once?

"Izzy?"

An employee with curly red hair opened one of the back doors.

I tentatively raised my hand. "Uh, yeah," I answered.

She smiled. "Ah, good! Please follow me!" she said, opening the door wide.

I gingerly got to my feet, slung my backpack on, and took a step forward. I looked back toward the front, where Sasha was still at the counter. "Um," I began, turning back to the lady, "my friend's still—"

"It's fine, they'll be here waiting for you," she said, her smile unflinching.

I hesitated.

Then I quickly followed her into the other room. I didn't want to make a scene. Maybe... Ahh. It all clicked into place. I was new. She was going to brief me on how to handle the cats. That made sense, right? No wonder they hadn't brought them out yet. This place was probably appointment-only anyway, so I was likely the only new person that—

"Right in here!" she said, making her way across the room. The floor was padded with colorful foam, which felt extra-mushy through my socks. Various cat beds and toys were strewn about; this was probably

where they hung out when they weren't out with the patrons. Not now, though. Where were they? Maybe this place really was bigger than I expected? I turned around and jumped at my own reflection. The whole wall was covered by a large mirror. I averted my eyes and quickly turned my back to it. What a way to start the day.

I didn't have time to get too far down that line of thought as the lady led me through one of the other doors, into what looked like a tiny meditation room. She closed up behind me and sat down. "Just put your things down in the corner," she said.

I sat down in front of her, for lack of a better thing to do. The padding on the floor felt much thicker than in the bigger room; softer, too.

"Now then," she said as she checked her tablet, "new customer, weekend pass... oh! Happy birthday." She smiled again.

"Thanks," I said quietly.

A few beeps later, music started playing. Soothing music.

"Have you heard about us?" she asked, putting the tablet aside.

I shook my head. "Not really."

Another smile. "Then you're in for a treat. What brings you here?"

I blinked. "Uh," I said, scratching the back of my head. "I mean, my friend Sasha got me a pass as a gift, and..."

She shook her head. "What brings *you* here?" she repeated.

I looked down at the floor for a while. All I could manage in the end was a shrug and a vague hand gesture. "Anxiety? I guess?"

"Anxiety about what?" she asked.

"Everything?" I answered, observing how the floor's padding flexed when I dug my fingers in. "Being with people... fitting in... being responsible for stuff... not messing up. Just, you know... existing." I took a deep breath. "It's like... it's a lot."

She held out her hand. I guess she wanted me to take it? That made sense, right?

I carefully reached for it, and she put her other hand over mine.

"You're in the right place. There aren't any worries here; you're going to leave them in the corner, along with your things. Just relax, and we'll take care of you. Does that sound good?"

"Yeah," I said. I'd tried meditation, exercises, yoga classes, and they helped, but... nothing ever made it go away. Not completely. Whatever this place was, Sasha swore by it, so it was worth a shot, right?

"Wonderful," she said. "Now just lie down onto your side and relax. We'll take it slow."

I hesitated. Had I completely misunderstood what this place was? Was this just guided meditation after all? Where were the cats? What was she doing? Was this just a preliminary step to get into the right frame of mind? I had so many questions.

"Uhh..." I began, not sure what to ask first, digging temporary little

grooves in the floor padding with the nails of my free hand.

"Hm?" she said, looking at me sweetly.

"Where, uh... where are the cats?" I asked.

"You're just a bit early, don't worry." She put a hand on my shoulder. "It's important to be in the right frame of mind first. In therapy with multiple participants, it helps when everyone can make an honest effort to meet each other halfway."

She looked like she knew what she was doing, and had clearly called me by my name and double-checked my pass, so clearly this wasn't a case of mistaken identity. Still, this felt unusual... but then again I'd never been to a cat therapy place. Maybe this was all part of it?

I lied down on my side, trying to get comfortable. That wasn't hard at all, considering just how cushy the padding on the floor was. I sunk into it like the couch pillows back in the main room, rocked by the music's low notes like they were waves. The lady moved her hand from my shoulder to my side, giving long, gentle, reassuring strokes.

I was so comfortable I couldn't move.

"There. Isn't this nice?" she said.

It seemed like the proper thing to do was respond, but I couldn't think of anything... and I didn't really want to, either. The music was getting louder; I could have sworn there were speakers in the floor itself. The rhythm and melody dissolved into a constant rumbling that made it hard to hear anything else. My eyelids got heavier. Was this part of it? Just take a nap to relax before hanging out with cats? It certainly seemed to be a good way to get rid of some excess anxiety. It was hard to have intrusive thoughts when it was hard to have thoughts at all.

Still the music got louder.

I opened my eyes; I must have closed them at some point. It couldn't have been more than a minute. But in that short amount of time, it was gotten much warmer in the small side room. Though it felt bigger on the inside, strangely enough; my legs—I had apparently stretched them out at some point—couldn't even touch the wall.

The music's gentle thrumming was everywhere now.

I opened my eyes again. The red-haired lady was still there; she hadn't stopped or moved from her position. Or had she? I had a blanket draped over me now. At least, that's what it felt like. I couldn't move my head to look. Maybe that's why it was so hot in here now. But not in an uncomfortable way?

My whole body felt so heavy.

"Relaxing with a purring cat can make people feel better," she said quietly. "Did you know purring makes the cat feel better too?"

I heard her speak in my dream, waking up by the time she got to the last word. I was dizzy beyond belief; the room felt gigantic, and so did the red-haired lady looming above me. Something was wrong.

I was the most comfortable I'd ever been, and I wasn't panicking at all—bafflingly—but surely something was wrong? I was starting to let my guard down, and that always sent alarm bells ringing. I tried to sit up, but all I ended up doing was turning my head slightly, giving me a fleeting look at myself.

The blanket was my own clothes. I'd gotten smaller. Somewhere under that hoodie was my body, and it shrank a little more with every careful touch from the red-haired woman. I wanted to move, but my limbs were halfway between ticklish and numb; signals were getting crossed, joints weren't moving like they were supposed to, new feelings manifested where there weren't any before. This wasn't the body I knew. And every time her hand came down, it took me one step further away from it. I was helpless to stop it. But did I want to stop it? It felt so calming; so wonderful, almost enough to quiet those alarms in the back of my mind. They hadn't stopped.

She gently stroked my side again; I was so small that her hand reached around to my back as well. Part of me knew what was happening, with every tiny shift of bone, every ripple of skin. Well, the rest of me knew too, but didn't want to accept it.

I was the closest I'd ever been to being at peace. I wasn't panicking. I was just riding the changes like waves rocking me through the cushioned floor. Was this a dream? That would explain a lot. But no dream had ever been this vivid.

The deep, comforting rumbling was everywhere now; it permeated every fiber of my being, massaging me from the inside out. But it wasn't tied to the music anymore.

It was me. I was doing it. And it felt so nice.

"Everyone who comes here has difficult things they're dealing with, in public or in private," the lady with red hair said, continuing her gentle strokes. "But for now there's no world outside these walls." She leaned in a bit closer, her voice almost a whisper now. "All you need to do is let go. We'll do the rest."

I opened my mouth, struggling to speak; a sound came out, but it wasn't like any I had ever made before. It was instantly recognizable, though. I'd heard many more like it whenever I visited my aunt.

I slumped back down and fell into a deep sleep.

Letting Go

The sound of cats woke me up.

I opened my eyes. I was in a dark, cozy corner of the back room; the bigger one, with all the cat beds and toys. Only this time, the cats were there. In all sizes and hues, exploring every corner, looking at themselves in the wall mirror, playing with every colorful little diversion... I could hear each little sound they made. Strangely enough, it was far from being overwhelming; I processed it all effortlessly.

It took me a moment to realize that what I was seeing in front of me were my arms. Well... legs, now. I gave them an experimental twitch; they moved. I was small, and covered in striped grey fur, and this shouldn't be happening and my heart was racing and I reflexively backed away as far into the corner as I could. Something long and fuzzy frantically darted back and forth behind me and even though on some level I could tell that it was mine, I couldn't tell it to calm down. I couldn't tell myself to calm down, either.

How was this even possible? People didn't just turn into cats.

Did they?

The time I spent with the red-haired lady in the small room slowly came back to me. The cushy floor, the rhythmic gestures, the music, the inescapable rumbling... The changes. That hadn't been a dream? That had really happened? This is what this place was?

I looked down again. It was so, so surreal to see a cat's body this close, let alone one that responded when I tried to move it. I couldn't process it. It was too much.

I hugged the back wall. It was soft, carpeted; I must have been inside one of the hollow boxes of the cat tree I saw the first time I came to this room. Had the red-haired lady put me here after I went to sleep?

Somewhere a door opened. Then, footsteps. I chanced a peek through the opening of the box. It was her, leading another person inside one of the smaller rooms. Was this how it all worked? Were all the other cats in this room—

She glanced in my direction, then motioned to the person in the room before stepping over towards me. I immediately backed myself into my comfy little corner again, out of view. I didn't want her to see me. I didn't want anyone to see me. I couldn't even begin to work out how I could interact with someone properly like this and my mind was too busy running in circles to make any meaningful progress.

I heard a hand press down on top of my little hideout as the red-haired woman bent down to my level. She thankfully didn't get too close

to the opening, leaving me my privacy.

"Hey there sleepyhead," she said; I could hear her smile. "You looked so comfortable I didn't want to wake you. The doors are open now, so feel free to go exploring the rest of the place and make some friends. This *is* group therapy, after all. But you can stay here as long as you need, too; there's no hurry."

I waited. I figured she was probably waiting, too, since she wasn't moving from her spot. My mind raced for the right thing to say, even though I knew I couldn't speak. I tried to make a sound; I didn't know if it was the right one, or the right way to do it, but it seemed to satisfy her.

"It's the first time for a lot of other people here too," she said, "so don't worry too much about it. Remember: the outside world doesn't have to matter right now. Just let go, and we'll do the rest." She stood back up, gave the box I was in a couple of comforting little taps, then walked off to rejoin the person she'd come in with.

That hadn't been as bad as I thought it'd be. My thoughts and feelings were still a great big mess and my heart was going a mile a minute, but it all felt... bearable, somehow.

Before, whenever my thoughts would start to spiral and Sasha was around, they'd take off their jacket and put it over my shoulders, like an extra protective layer. I always liked it because the inside was fuzzy (because Sasha was a softie) and warm (because they'd just been wearing it). It was my little cocoon of safety. Maybe that's what the interior of this cat tree reminded me of, with its extra-thick carpeting and the way it bottled in the heat. It helped calm me down a lot. As calm as I could be considering what was happening.

I waited a long while before peeking out again.

Most of the other cats—the *other* cats, a thought that came so easily it sent a shiver down my spine —had gone now. That's when I noticed it: a small cat door was open in the wall, leading back to the large main room. I'd only been there for a few moments, but the large couches and haphazard bookshelves must have made tons of little hidden nooks. I could probably hide easily. Take it slow.

I shook my head. I was really considering going out there.

I still didn't want anyone to see me like this. It was already bad enough for anyone to see me on a good day, when I looked as best as I could (considering the circumstances). But now? I had no idea what I looked like. I had no clothes to hide in, no Sasha to hide behind. I could already feel the stares. It was so hard to look like a person who knew what they were doing. How did you achieve that when you were a cat? I'd only been one for what, a few minutes?

But despite all these ruminations... my heart wasn't beating as fast anymore. Maybe I was getting used to this. I remembered my time in the little room, felt the music and the red-haired lady's attention all over

again, and it soothed me. Maybe this could actually work?

I carefully stepped out of my little alcove, surprised by how natural it felt to put one foot in front of the other. I still didn't know how any of this was possible, but... it was happening, right? So what could I do about it?

I stopped in my tracks. That realization had felt so good. Gosh, if only every other problem in my life could be handled that easily. I wanted to bottle this feeling and save it for later.

I made sure to avoid the big mirror—one giant hurdle at a time, please—and peeked through the cat door that led to the main part of the place. The narrow room felt so gigantic now; a tiny city, with couches and bookcases as buildings. There were people here; more than when we'd first gotten there that morning. And cats; exploring, chilling, mingling. Everyone seemed so happy.

But I couldn't dare to step out into the open. I stayed close to the nearest couch, slipping between it and the wall. I poked my nose around; I could've also slipped under the sofa, or snuck over between the bookcases, or even through the gap in the books... The paths you could take were so different when you were this small. When the world wasn't made for you.

I dwelled on that familiar thought for a little while.

Meow!

Another cat startled me out of my ruminations. They were peeking their head around the corner, intent on catching my attention. Maybe they wanted to play?

I took a gentle step forward, and they took off running. Okay. Maybe I could play along.

I bounded after them, still not quite over how easily all this moving around came to me. The way I ducked into tiny spaces, turned corners on a dime... it was second nature. But I clearly wasn't as experienced as the other cat because I lost their trail in moments. So much for playing around. I could tell they'd jumped up, though; maybe they were on the couch above? But how did I even know that?

It took me a moment to realize I was sniffing the air, tracking them. Without giving it a second thought, I jumped up and into the light, leaving the little network of hidden passages that ran under and between all the furniture. I looked to and fro, but there was no sign of them. I pondered my next move, idly scratching the couch cushion.

"Izzy?"

I froze. I'd completely forgotten about Sasha. They were still here? We hadn't spoken since I walked away from the counter... however long ago that had been. Was it even the same day? It was still light out. Overcast. Had it been just minutes? Hours, at most? Had Sasha been waiting here all this time? Had they been worried? Did they know about the whole... cat thing? How could they not; their friends had recommended

this place, after all. And they'd just called out to me. But how did they even recognize me? Was it the nervous tics? The fur color?

I finally looked behind me.

"Hey," Sasha said with a warm smile. They were sitting on the next couch over.

I wasn't ready to see them. I super wasn't ready for *them* to see me. But here they were, and here I was out in the open with nowhere to hide and my little heart started racing again and I just backed away and made myself as small as possible and let out a pitiful whimper because I didn't know what to do and—

The way Sasha's face fell broke my heart. "Oh no I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," they said, leaning back.

There. I'd done it. I'd made the person I care about the most feel bad. All because I couldn't just be happy for a single second. My head was filled with things to be scared of and dangers to look out for and reasons why everything would go wrong and I was so tired of it. I was so tired. I curled up into a tiny ball and just tried not to exist for a while. Maybe that'd make things better.

Then something warm and fuzzy gently fell over me.

Sasha had put their jacket on top of me. How did they know? Did I still act the same way even as a cat? That train of thought didn't go very far because the warmth and the softness began to work their magic. There was something else, too; Sasha's smell was all around me. I'd never paid attention to it before, but now it was inescapable and wonderful. I calmed down.

The sofa shifted; Sasha must have moved over and sat down next to me.

I poked my head out once I felt whole enough again. They were right there, patiently waiting, looking down at me. I wasn't sure what to do; I felt too embarrassed to try and say something. But I wanted to apologize. Let them know I was okay, and they were okay, and we were okay. So I did what came naturally; I took a step forward and bumped the side of their leg with my head.

"Aww," Sasha said, carefully reaching over to give me a tentative pat on the head.

And then it was all over; I flopped onto my side and pressed my back against them and they took it as permission to keep petting and suddenly everything was okay and nothing else mattered because at that moment this is what I needed the most in the entire world.

"I'm sorry, I should've told you more," Sasha said after a while. "But to be honest I wasn't sure I believed it myself, you know? Maybe my friends had been using it as a figure of speech when they described how good this place was for them. And I didn't want you to get worked up and worried about something that, you know... sounds really weird when



you've never experienced it."

"But also," Sasha continued, "when I picked my friends up afterwards, they looked so much happier. Like a weight had been lifted, you know? And it felt like you needed that too. So we can take our time, alright? I'm not going anywhere. We can do this for as long as you need."

I still wasn't sure how I felt about Sasha not telling me everything, but I didn't want to think about that right now. They were right about the rest; I absolutely would have gotten worked up and it would've made all this much harder.

Why did I keep seeing the worst outcome possible? Why did I always believe everything would go bad for me? Why was it so hard to just... exist? It had stopped me from enjoying so much.

I wanted to take all these impulses and worries and fears and catapult them into the sun. I never wanted this to happen again; to be the obstacle between myself and what could make me happy. All I needed to do was let go, right? I wanted to let go. I wanted it so much.

Sasha chuckled. "You're like a little motor," they said, scritching me behind the ears as I kept purring up a storm. I hadn't even realized I'd started doing it.

I wasn't sure how to let go, but I knew I had to. I'd tried everything else; this was maybe my last chance. I wanted to take it. And every moment with Sasha brought me closer to understanding how. I just focused on them, their touch, their voice, their smell, and let it all drown out the alarm bells ringing in the back of my mind. I lost myself in the closeness of Sasha's presence... and I drifted away.

Further than I ever thought possible.

Unfettered

Fleeting images collided in my head. Sasha walking away, and me chasing them through shelves and over couches in a room that kept getting longer. A leafy sky overhead as I ran through the brush, discovering the world that lived along the roots of trees. The world standing still, and no indication that it would ever change. Hands picking me up, taking me backwards through everything I'd seen.

I woke up in my sleeping spot, safe and warm; the morning sun was hitting the opening just right. I stretched.

The red-haired lady was standing in the center of the room, calling out to the other cats who were crowding in front of her. I slipped out of my little nook and padded over to the food, taking advantage of the distraction. I could slip by without anyone seeing me, and that felt so reassuring. Besides, I hadn't eaten yesterday, and now I—

"Izzy," she said, walking over. Before I could react she picked me up, in full view of everyone, then continued calling out to the others.

I let out a plaintive yowl. This was unfair and embarrassing and I was hungry! I tried to wriggle out of her grasp, but it was no use. Thankfully, she let me down soon enough, just as everyone headed over to where the food was. I dashed in to eat what I could, and ran away before it got too crowded.

There was almost no one in the big room yet, so I headed over to the front. The raised wooden bench along the window had enough sun to relax in, and a broad enough view to watch people walk by. I was waiting for someone, but I wasn't in a hurry.

Some of the other cats came by, following my example. The first hesitated, but the wood was warm to the touch and no one could resist that for long. I bristled a little bit at their approach, but... things turned out okay. They approached carefully and lay down. There was nothing to be afraid of. We had just met, but we were all alike in many ways, and so we got along. We followed the sun as it lazily traced its way forward, shifting and lying down in the comfy spots. As close to each other as we felt like being.

And then the door opened and I leapt to my feet because Sasha was there and the whole world opened up and I ran over and rubbed up against their legs as they walked in.

"Izzy!" Sasha bent down to pet me. I loved hearing their voice; each and every high note and low rumble warmed me up like a sunbeam. They helped me up into their arms and walked somewhere, anywhere, it didn't matter. I could hear their heart beating and I answered back with

a thrumming of my own.

Time flew by.

We relaxed together, and I slept, and we got up to play, and they tried to follow me as I lost myself into the little passages that were too big for them, and I curled up on their lap, and they rocked me to sleep again with the comforting hum of their voice. The rest of the world stopped existing.

The sun was getting low when the red-haired lady came by to pick me up again. I wanted to resist, but Sasha put me in her arms, so... it had to be okay, right? She took me back into the other room. There were fewer cats now, and more people. I hopped down once we got to the small cushioned space, and went over to examine the pile of things in the corner. They smelled like me, so they were definitely mine, but something felt odd about them.

Music started playing. The red-haired lady sat down, calling out to me.

I looked up. She was holding her hands up above me in a beckoning manner, wiggling her fingers. I wanted to catch them. So I got up on my hind legs and started pawing at them, but at the last second she swooped down and caught my paws with her hands. She gently led me one way, then the other, making me sway as she vocalized. I started losing myself in the experience.

But then I snapped out of it with a jolt, like I had caught myself almost falling asleep. Somehow I knew there'd be bad dreams on the other side. I continued to dance along with the red-haired lady, making sure not to get lost in it again. It didn't last much longer; she got a weird look on her face and let me go. Had I done something wrong?

She started over. She picked up my paws, stood me up, and made me sway again. And again. And again. It was getting uncomfortable fast; I was about to wriggle out when she made a frustrated face and let me go. I didn't understand what was going on, she was upset, I didn't like this small room... I just wanted to run away and hide. As she stood up and headed out, I got up to follow her, but she shut the door between us.

Why would she do that? I scratched at it and yowled. I wanted out!

The door opened soon after, but not for me; someone caught me and put me back further inside. This was a different lady. The red-haired woman walked in and closed the door, staying behind. The new woman then tried swaying with me again in the same way, but I didn't want to play anymore. I wanted to go back where I knew it was safe.

She called out to me.

I responded.

She called out again, and didn't stop, and at that point I wanted to leave so badly. I scratched at the door until she opened it. And she did. So I ran.

I ran and ran and slipped through the little door and dashed through the shelves and jumped on the couch and hopped back into Sasha's lap, startling them. It took a few moments; I didn't know if they were uncomfortable or just surprised. But before I could worry about that too much they tentatively started to pet me, and everything was okay again.

The red-haired lady came by again, along with the other woman. I was ready to dig in a little, but they thankfully left me where I was. I tried to ignore them and just lose myself in Sasha's voice for as long as I could.

At some point I woke up, not knowing when I'd fallen asleep.

It was dark. The place was empty. Well, save for the two women, who were trying to stay out of sight near the back of the room. But I could tell they were still there, looking. Sasha had carefully set me on the couch and was walking toward the door. Were they leaving? I quickly got up and ran up to them, calling out to them. They stopped and crouched down to pet me, a little awkwardly this time. They were stressed. Or something close to that. But before I started feeling it too, they took off their jacket and wrapped it around me.

I was confused, but it didn't last long; I was in a soft and warm place, surrounded by Sasha's smell, and that was enough for me. They gently ran their fingers along the top of my head and stayed close to me for as long as I needed, until I felt safe again.

Until I fell asleep again.

Extended Stay

I woke up back in my sleeping spot again, only I was still wrapped in Sasha's jacket. It made for a wonderful extra layer of comfort; I felt at home like nowhere else.

The rest of the room was empty, save for discarded toys and unused beds. The usual door was closed, too, muffling some otherworldly noises I was thankful to be shielded from. Something loud was happening there and I wanted none of it.

Hunger brought me out of my little hiding place. I crossed the empty room, passing through the smells of those who'd been here before. I wondered if Sasha would be in other room when it opened. I could wait in the sun again. I'd have all the warmth to myself this time.

I spotted some movement off to the side and it made me jump.

It was another cat. Small and striped and grey. And also startled. We both approached each other cautiously. But there was a window between us, and they weren't getting their smell on my side of it, so deep down I understood that there was no reason to worry. We both walked off to the side until the other was out of sight.

I had calmed down surprisingly fast.

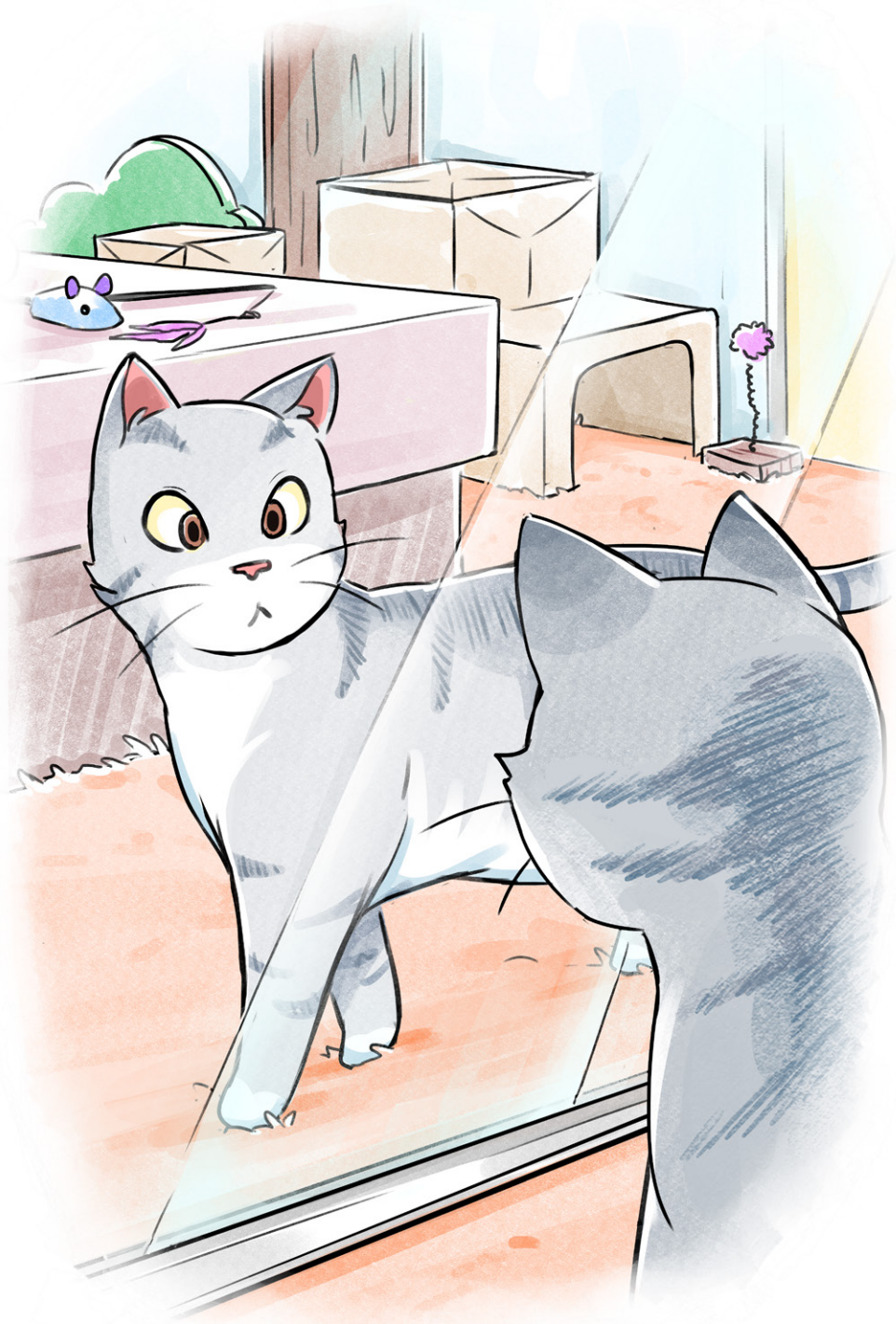
It took some time before the noises stopped, but I was there and ready when someone opened the door to the front room. It wasn't the red-haired lady, or the other woman who had been with her yesterday; this was a new person. She paused for a moment, staring at me.

I took one step, then another. She didn't move. Maybe she was just cautious; I know I was. I gave her a wide berth and quickly slipped past her, heading to the sunny spot. Despite all the noise, everything was the way it had always been, albeit noticeably less dusty. The wooden beams on the windowsill were waiting for me, basking in the sun. I hopped up and did the same.

People filtered in and other cats came by to romp around, some joining me at the window. I stayed put, moving with the sun, saving my energy for someone in particular. Waiting for Sasha. And when the sun dropped low and the other cats left, Sasha would walk in the door and time would just fly by. Until they left again. Always too early. And when it looked like they wouldn't return, I went back in my little sleeping spot for the night.

We did this every day.

Some days the red-haired lady would bring me into the back room again to play. Sometimes, it was someone else. I didn't like their game; it was fun at first, but sooner or later I would feel myself being pulled in



a direction I didn't want to go. It took a lot of effort to keep playing until the ladies would stop.

They were always upset with me afterwards.

But I would always be back up front by the time Sasha arrived. It became a comforting routine; the morning walk to my food (always followed by the little grey cat, sticking to me like a shadow from the other side of the window), the lazy day spent in the sun, the evenings—inevitably short—at Sasha's side. Sometimes they'd talk with the red-haired lady, which made napping difficult, but I took it in stride. They always ended up leaving, but their reassuring smell would wait for me when I went back to sleep.

One day Sasha talked to the red-haired lady for a long time; there was barely room in their visit for us to play. It was hard to watch them leave; I contemplated sleeping at the window, just in case they came back, but that place was too open to feel safe spending the night there.

When I got back to my usual spot, something had changed. The box was different; a bit longer, with no tree attached to it... but Sasha's jacket was still in it, and that made it home enough for me. I fell asleep just as easily.

Nearby footsteps woke me up; by the time I got my bearings back, I noticed that the opening in the box had been covered up in criss-crossing bars. I tried to scratch at them, but they wouldn't budge. I heard hands clasp the side walls.

Then my whole world was shaken, lifted up, and carried off.

Coming Home

It took me a long time to peek out from under Sasha's jacket, even after all the noise and shaking had died down. There had been a flurry of sounds and voices, some of which I recognized; I was too overwhelmed to find comfort in them. But they had eventually stopped, and for a long enough time that I no longer feared they'd come back.

The box was open again. Beyond, the floor was another texture; the light hit it differently than it used to. Even the air was a little cooler. I took one careful step, then another, and took a look outside.

This was a different place. Much more open and bright, with plenty of room around the familiar-looking landmarks. I carefully padded along the walls, getting a feel for it all; on my guard, in case the hurricane of noise came back. There were large windows here too, but the view was so much greener than before. I kept exploring, jumping up to new heights of smooth wood and soft cushion, taking in the smells; some new, others very... comforting. I could tell who had been here.

"Izzy!"

My ears perked up. I turned to look as Sasha cautiously entered the room from the back hallway. They barely had time to raise their hands and catch me as I leapt atop the couch and into their arms. Everything was alright again. I was close to them, surrounded by their warmth and smell, answering their voice with my own.

They began to walk around, and we explored together. There were a few more rooms; some brighter, some darker, each one a unique blend of odors. But I could always tell Sasha had been there. And now everyone would know I'd been there, too, as every time I leaned out toward the closest corner, Sasha would obligingly bring us close so I could rub a little bit of my scent onto it.

At the end of the tour, they let me down onto the bed and flopped down next to me. I nestled in close. Things were quiet again, but a comforting sort of quietude that I hadn't felt in so long. Sasha reached out to scratch my ears and pet my head and that was it took to drift away.

Almost.

Their movements had a shakiness to them. Something was off with their breathing. They were upset, and I didn't know why. And because they were upset, I was upset too.

It was dark by the time Sasha sat up and rubbed their eyes. We must have both fallen asleep at some point. They were about to get up and leave, but I called out to them and got a ride in their arms. I wasn't sure

where to, but if they were going somewhere, I wanted to be there too.

They set me down on the counter and started getting food. At least I figured it was food; it smelled good, and only got better as they played around with it. I kept wanting to get close enough to examine it, but Sasha picked me up and set me down further and further away every time. They eventually gave me some of it. I hadn't realized how hungry I'd gotten.

We settled down on the couch, a gentle show of lights and sounds from the far wall captivating Sasha and bathing the room in shifting colors. We forgot our worries for a little bit; I would call out, they would call back, I would nudge their hand, and they'd give me a tiny bit of food from the bowl in their lap. The cycle continued until, at some point, I drifted off again.

The red-haired lady was back the next day.

It was in a new place, but the motions were familiar; she'd pick me up, bring me to a quiet spot, and do the little play-dance with me. It would get scary, I'd mess it up somehow, we'd both get frustrated, and she'd leave. And a few days later, she'd be back again.

Sometimes it was someone different, playing the same game. One time another cat came along, too; big, jet-black, and very talkative. She didn't try to play the game, but she seemed fascinated by it. Having the pressure of a spectator certainly didn't help me, despite the fact that I still had no clue what I was supposed to do, or how I could make it to the end without that dreadful feeling creeping in again. The person playing with me always ended up getting upset and stopping abruptly.

Thankfully, Sasha was there. They'd go away for part of the day, but would always return; sometimes with a new thing to explore, or eat from, or drink out of, or sleep on. None of the latter ever felt as good or smelled as nice as their jacket, but they'd started wearing it again most of the time, despite my pleading. So I made do with other comfy spots. Until the night came, that is, and I'd join them in their giant fluffy bed. They stopped trying to get me to sleep elsewhere after only a couple days.

Sometimes I'd get up and be by myself for a little bit. The place got very quiet at night. One time, when the soft blue-white light was particularly bright, I got to wandering and stopped by the spot where the visiting ladies liked to play the dancing game with me. I could still smell the large black cat despite the fact she'd only visited once.

Why had I felt awkward when she watched me play?

Here, the memory was still fresh, but the feelings in it made no sense. She wasn't a threat or a competitor; she left right after. What had I been worried about? I laid down where she'd been sitting and gently rubbed the nearest corner. What a weird emotion; it served no purpose other than to make me feel bad. I pushed it away and decided not to

worry about it anymore.

And I didn't.

The play sessions didn't get any easier to figure out, but at least I stopped feeling worse when others were watching. The lady playing with me would still get frustrated, but it began to dawn on me that maybe it wasn't necessarily because of me. After all, the abrupt ending to our sessions weren't followed by gentle scolding like the kind Sasha would give when I stepped in or curled up on the wrong things. I still didn't know which ones they didn't want me near; another thing that made no sense.

Different ladies visited to play with me, alternating between each other. But one of them came by only once. Tall and dark and smelling strangely familiar, she kept calling out to me the whole time we played, and she played the longest. For some reason, it wasn't as scary with her. I still felt myself slipping away in the middle of it, but... the dread of falling back into a nightmare wasn't as intense. Like what was on the other side wasn't necessarily bad. But it was still scary. Eventually, she stopped, and let me go. She talked for a long time after that, Sasha responding every so often as I relaxed in their lap. It was dark by the time the lady left.

We stayed on the couch until morning, Sasha lying down, holding me tightly against their chest. Making sad noises. They started and I followed suit; I couldn't help it. I didn't know what to do, or what I was doing to make them upset, or how I could stop it. I had no big jacket to drape around them to make them feel safe and warm; the best I could do was comfort myself with a practiced little rumbling from deep inside, and make it loud enough to reach Sasha. Maybe make them feel better, too.

The following morning, large people brought in a familiar structure: the angular hollow tree I liked to sleep in back in the other place. It smelled a bit off, but it felt like home.

The ladies stopped visiting after that.

A Beautiful Day

The day Sasha opened the big door for me, everything outside was covered in a layer of white.

They stayed close, their voice a beacon of warmth in the cold air. I tentatively touched the ground, hearing the satisfying crunch as my paw sunk in a tiny bit. A moment later I was jumping as high and as far as I could, tiny clouds of sparkling dust swirling around me wherever I landed. It was magical.

I found the biggest hill I could and dove in, carving a tunnel along the way. I could hear Sasha laughing. I remembered the times when we played in the other place, with them trying to chase me as I dove under couches and ran into tiny places that were too big for them. That felt like so long ago.

I went back inside in search of warmth. Sasha chased after me very quickly, insisting on wiping my paws down before they set me loose again. I didn't have time to get annoyed; a loud noise came from the door. We had visitors again. Sasha went over to the door, putting their jacket up on the hanger before greeting them.

This wasn't the first time the grey-haired couple had dropped by. As they sat down on one of the couches, I hopped up in search of affection. They always gave the best ear scratches.

They talked with Sasha a bit, like they did every visit. It had taken a while for us to warm up to each other, but now we'd all become fast friends. I still wondered why I'd felt uneasy around them at first; they spoke softly, their touch was gentle, their smell was familiar... somehow I knew I was safe with them. Being standoffish made no sense. So I stopped worrying about it. Another opportunity to stop making myself feel bad for no reason, and embrace something that made me happy.

Sometimes the grey-haired visitors were upset; the day we met had been the worst. But today they were in good spirits. And that made it easier to just curl up and drift away as they took turns letting me nap in their lap, or giving me little bits of food. They always brought treats.

They visited again when the colors outside turned back to green, and once more during one of the brightest days I'd ever seen, when every sunbeam sparkled with every color imaginable. They almost stayed the whole day that time; they'd brought a *lot* of food.

That night, Sasha brought me up to the table. Despite all the treats, I still felt a little peckish; which was a good thing, it turned out. They called out to me gently and melodically, bringing out a small block of something and setting it down in front of me. It smelled delicious and...

it was on fire?

I lost myself in both Sasha's voice and the dancing flame. It felt important. I inched closer and closer to it, feeling the heat it radiated, drawn to it. I knew I had to do something, but I wasn't sure how. Without thinking, I raised a paw, and struck out at it.

The flame winked out of existence, leaving one last burst of heat and smoke behind it.

Sasha clapped their hands, cheering softly. I dug in as they came closer and gently rubbed my back. All this attention had been a bit confusing, but it did make me very happy. I couldn't stop myself from rumbling with delight.

They went to lie down on the couch shortly after, but I felt like wandering around a bit more before sleeping. Outside, even the sky seemed to sparkle, bathing everything in the softest light. It had been such a beautiful day, in a way that felt strangely unusual.

Then I heard Sasha. I turned around, padding over to check on them. They were crying. I did what always seemed to work; I hopped up and nestled in close. But this time, nothing I did helped. They called out to me between sobs, in a shaky voice that gave me no comfort. For a moment, I wondered what I had done to make them this upset.

Wait.

What good did that do? It had been a nice day. I had done my best. Maybe it wasn't me. Maybe I didn't need to make myself feel bad. One of us being like this was enough. It all felt so familiar. I was hurting myself again for nothing; it made no sense. It didn't do Sasha any good, either.

So I stopped. At least for a moment. This felt too big to get rid of entirely, but maybe I could keep it away long enough to be able to do something now.

I hopped down. Maybe it was me, maybe not. Either way, I wanted to help; I wanted Sasha to feel better. What could help? What would Sasha do? I looked around until I saw it: Sasha's jacket, hanging up on the wall near the door. It always helped me; maybe it could help them too.

I quickly rushed over. From up close, the jacket was much too high for me to reach. Hm. I sat up, trying to figure it out. I pawed at the air. Maybe there was a way.

I got up on my hind legs, leaning up against the wall, trying to keep my balance, closing some of the distance. If only I could grab it. I tried swiping with one paw, then the other, stretching as high as I could go. I was so close! I kept trying; left, right, left, every time getting a bit closer.

Then I hit it. I barely brushed the bottom of the jacket with the tip of my paw, but it was enough to make it sway a bit. Maybe I could knock it down. I kept it up, finding a more stable position, climbing onto the tips of my toes, swinging back and forth, left and right, swaying with the motion of Sasha's jacket as it swung on the hook... I started losing myself



in the motion.

But then I snapped out of it with a jolt.

That familiar feeling was back, of almost falling asleep. I'd been here before. Going through these motions. Getting scared and running away. I knew I could make it if I just kept going, but... I was so scared of what was on the other side. And the most frustrating thing is that this was keeping me from helping Sasha.

I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't leave them like this. I had to keep it up, no matter what. And besides... the other side, whatever it was, hadn't seemed as scary the last time. Maybe it wasn't so bad. Maybe...

Maybe this was another way I was keeping myself from getting better, for no reason. Maybe that made no sense. Maybe I could push past it, like I had so many times before. I had a purpose this time; I couldn't let Sasha keep crying like this. I had to do something. And I had to do it soon, before I started feeling upset at Sasha being upset and lose myself in this sadness all over again. I had to help; I owed it to them.

I focused on the jacket. I had a goal, a purpose this time. Maybe it could guide my way forward, past the line I'd been so scared to cross. I took a deep breath, stretched forward with everything I had, and swung at it again. And again. And again. I could touch it, just barely; every time, it felt like I got closer. Maybe I could do this. I kept at it, kept leaning left, leaning right, became one with the rhythm, slowly but surely closing the distance between myself and the jacket, until it slipped low enough for me to grab ahold of it with a single claw.

This time, I wouldn't let go.

I held on, swinging my other arm up at it, clutching at the fabric, giving myself the purchase I needed to get higher and higher, inch by inch, until I reached a pocket, then a sleeve, then a shoulder, and then I grabbed the top of the collar with my outstretched hand and pulled the jacket off the wall in one fluid motion.

I'd done it. I'd done it! I set out to do something important, and I'd done it. I made it to the other side. I could help Sasha now.

I brought the jacket up to my face and breathed in. I had missed this; that all-encompassing blanket of Sasha's scent. I gently walked over to the couch, circling around to the back so I wouldn't disturb them. I peeked over to check on them; they'd gone silent. Maybe they'd fallen asleep. But even if they had, they'd need comfort when they woke up next. I carefully leaned over and draped Sasha's jacket over them, hoping the love and warmth contained inside would help make them feel better soon. I pulled the collar up to give them just a tiny bit more cover, and then carefully drew my hands back. My... hands?

I gasped.

Sasha shifted at the sound, looking up at me. Then their eyes went wide.

Waking Up

"Izzy?!" they said, scrambling to sit up.

"Sasha!" I blurted out, torn between staring at my hands and looking at Sasha. "I, uh..."

"Izzy, you're back! You're back!" they shouted, practically leaping over the couch and wrapping their arms around me, holding me tightly. "You're back," they repeated shakily, struggling to hold back tears.

I buried my head under their chin, crying despite myself. Everything was rushing back to me; the forgotten memories, the time spent since that day at the cat therapy place, the days turning into weeks turning into... "How, uh..." I struggled to say, "how long was I, uh...?" I looked back at the table, at the half-eaten cupcake with the candle still sticking out of it.

"Happy birthday," Sasha said, rubbing their cheek against the top of my head.

I leaned into them some more, my ear flicking and twitching as it brushed up against their nose.

...

"Uh," I said, blinking away the tears.

Sasha pulled away a bit, giving me enough room to reach up and carefully run my fingers along the top of my head.

"Do I, uh," I began to ask as I felt the shape of something triangular and fuzzy, "are my ears...?"

"I'll... go and turn on the lights," they said, quickly running over to hit the switch.

The living room was suddenly bathed in light; it took my eyes a moment to adjust. For a second I thought I saw someone in the patio door, but... no, it was my reflection. This was me. For some reason I didn't shy away or instinctively cover myself up like I always did. I was... comfortable. Is this what everyone else felt like when they looked at themselves in the mirror? I took a step closer. Somehow I had kept the ears. And the tail, I realized, as I saw—and felt—it sway behind me.

Sasha quickly rushed over to their jacket and draped it over my shoulders. Oh, right.

Sasha's jacket felt a few sizes too big, just like always. But before covering up, I'd gotten enough of a glimpse to spot more changes. Some subtle, some not. Curves where straight lines had been; straight lines where I didn't like curves. Nothing there that I didn't want to be there. Well...

I tried to move my ears, and after a few tries, they flicked. I smiled.

You know what? Yeah. Nothing I didn't want to be there.

"I'm so sorry," Sasha said, drawing me in again and holding me tight. "They told me that we'd done everything necessary, that all that was left was to give you the time you needed, that you'd come back on your own, but... at some point, I feel like... I gave up."

I put my hands around theirs. "No you didn't," I said. "You've been here for me every day, haven't you?"

Sasha sighed shakily. "I should've told you everything. I thought it'd just be a fun weekend thing, I didn't mean for this to... I didn't know this could happen." They pressed their cheek against the top of my head. "I didn't know it had gotten this bad. I'm so sorry."

I thought for a while about what to say. "I had a lot of stuff to process," I replied, finally. "I guess... I guess that took a long time." I gave their hand a squeeze. "But yeah. Please tell me next time. I'm an adult, I'll understand."

"I promise," they said, squeezing back.

Group Therapy

I watched the people walking outside in front of the window as the sun started to set. I was in my favorite seat, with my favorite drink, and... oh. My cup was empty. But I shrugged it off. There'd be time to get another one next time I got up. There was a cat in my lap, and I wasn't going to disturb them if I could help it. I gave their ears some more scratches, which was quick to make them purr—and I purred in return.

I stopped by here every day after work now, and it helped a lot. There was a lot to catch up on, and my colleagues had a ton of adjusting to do. But it wasn't so bad. We were finally getting the chance to know each other, after all, now that so many walls had come crashing down. Still, it took a lot of energy, and spending time here as often as I needed made a big difference.

The folks from Feeline Fine had apologized profusely. They'd offered to make it up to me, but I already had most of what I needed. The rest, I wanted to figure out myself. So I asked them to pay it forward instead, and be upfront. No more being coy, no more surprises—even good-natured ones. No one having an experience they weren't ready to have.

They did have a few theories as to what had happened with me; no one had seen anything like it before, or since. Maybe I reacted strangely to... whatever it is they did. Maybe I took "letting go" to heart a little too intensely. Maybe we'd all underestimated how much time I really needed to heal, and how hard it'd be to go back before I got better. But after many long discussions about the last year, they now understood the path I'd taken a little better, and would make sure everyone involved did, too. If it ever happened again with anyone else, they'd know how to make their journey home easier.

And just in case someone ever needed help finding themselves, I'd be close by, too. Maybe I could save them some time.

I ended up staying over at Sasha's place a lot still. We'd really grown attached. We still spent most evenings on the couch, them watching or listening or playing or working, and me curled up next to them, head on their lap, purring up a storm. I was glad I could still do that; it did make me feel better.

Opening up to my therapist made me feel better, too. I never would have guessed this is what would give me the courage to call her again.

It had taken a while to work things out. But Sasha and I had talked through a *lot* of stuff, and now... I felt safe there, I felt safe with them, and the more time we got to spend with each other, the better we understood one another. After all, they'd just spent a lot of time being there for me;

now that I was in a better place, I wanted to be there for them too. At some point I'd bring up the idea of making our rooming arrangement a bit more permanent. But not now. There was no hurry.

Emily waved at me from the front desk.

"Oh, is it time already?" I asked.

She nodded, smiling sweetly. "Fraid so."

"Alright, thank you!"

I'd turned down *most* of the Feeline Fine folks' offers of compensation for the whole incident. I had said yes to one thing: a lifetime membership. I stretched in my seat, causing the cat on my lap to do the same. I looked down at them. "Ready to change and get going?"

Sasha meowed at me and hopped down to the ground, heading for the back room.

Well. *Two* lifetime memberships.

I looked outside, then leaned back in my seat, bringing my legs up and coiling my tail around them in a hug. This time of day, the sun was hitting this part of the room just right. I had a few more minutes, after all; I could enjoy the view a little longer.

Fin.

