



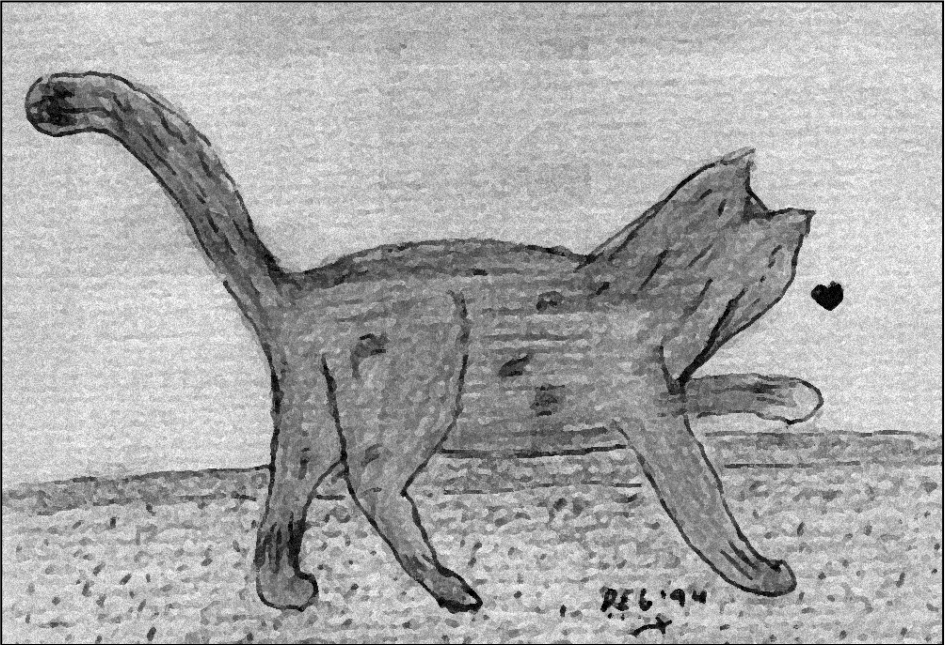
Melody Ayres-Griffiths Presents:

A Friend In Need...

...And Other Furry Slumber-Time Tales

Illustrated by Phyllis Griffiths

A Friend In Need...



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Phyllis Elizabeth Griffiths.

Country of first publication: Canada.

The author can be contacted at:
melodyayresgriffiths@gmail.com

The illustrator can be contacted at:
wo286@victoria.tc.ca

About the Illustrator

PHYLLIS GRIFFITHS RESIDES in the community of Langford, British Columbia, Canada, on lower Vancouver Island.



Having been disabled in 1990 by Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in the USA), she was no longer able to pursue her career in Heritage Resource Management. She has since developed her skills with colored pencil, ink, and water color markers to capture images of a wide variety of subject matter.

Phyllis is a cat person, owned by several fine furry felines who provide much inspiration for her artwork.

About the Author

BORN ON JANUARY 14TH, 1975 in Alberta Canada, Melody Christina Ayres-Griffiths briefly studied music before she was stricken with numerous chronic immune-related conditions.



In 2006 she met the love of her life April, an Australian, on-line; briefly, Melody went to meet her and, after evaluating their futures on either continent, the couple elected to settle in Melbourne.

When not writing, Ms. Ayres-Griffiths occupies her time practicing jazz piano, and tending to her guinea pig, Gig.

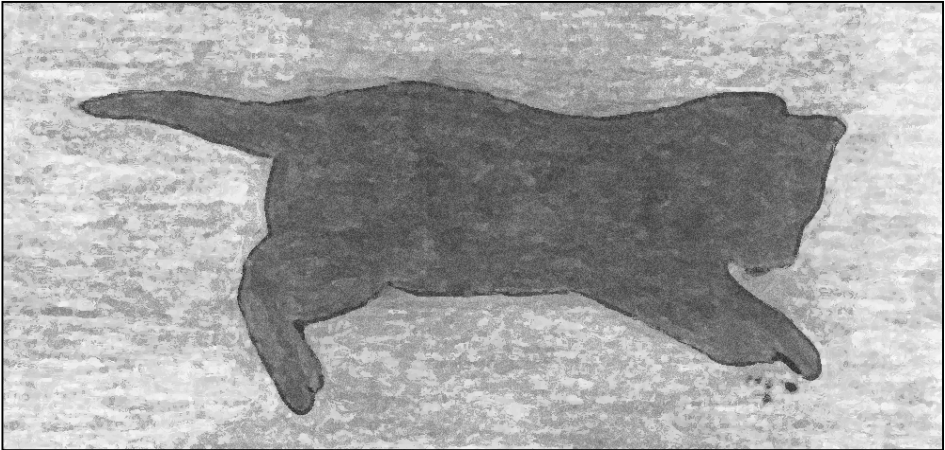
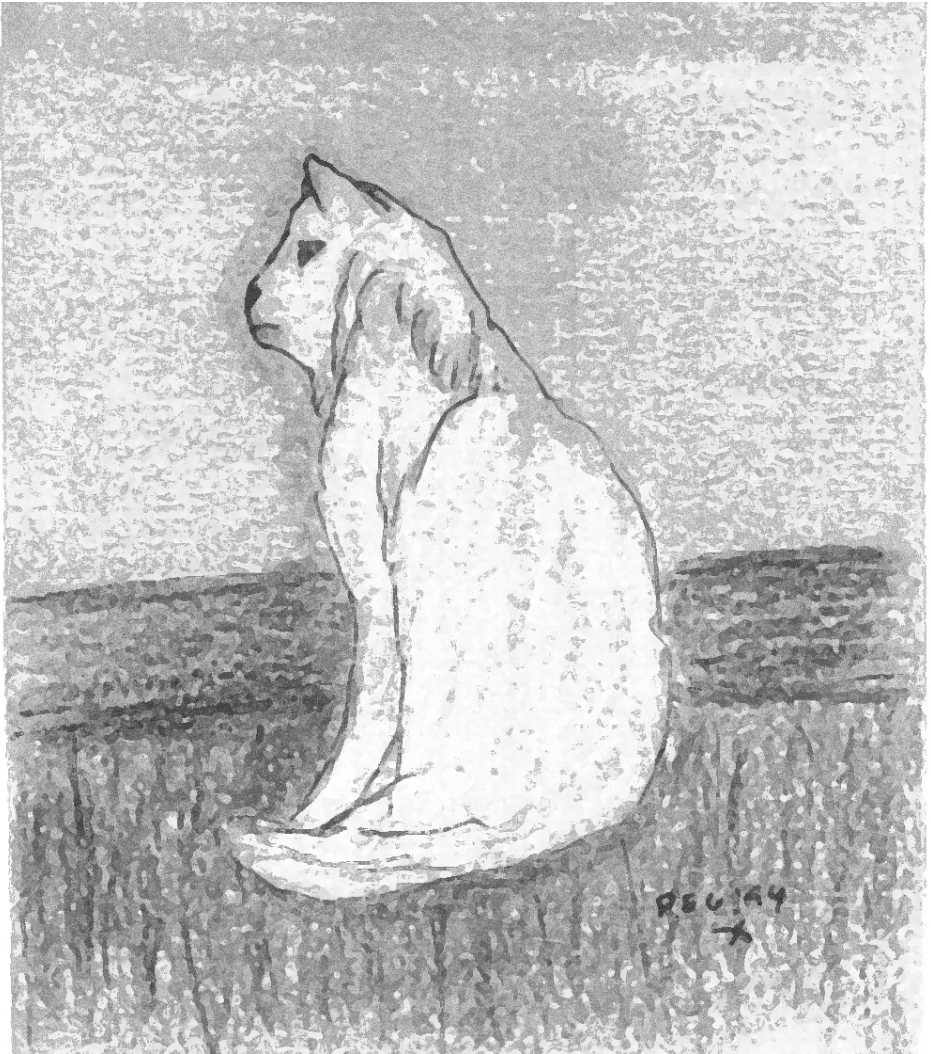


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...And Other Furry Slumber-Time Tales



Dedicated to lost friends...

- First -

The Queen, the Beast and the Fireplace

IF SHE HAD ONLY PAID ATTENTION, and heeded that sixth sense she was born with, perhaps things would have been different; as it was, the situation was rather grim.

She poked her nose out from under a branch, the one beneath which she hid, and took in a cold winter breath. There seemed to be no sign of her pursuer; the air only smelt crisp, and was clean of any predators. She sighed, and allowed herself, for a brief moment, to relax.

It was cold and wet; the winter snows were beginning to give way to spring. The melting ice, on the trees of fir and pine high above, released a rain as if a summer storm; it had turned the once fine powder blanketing the ground into a wasteland of puddles and slush.

She, too, was chilly and damp; her fur, as a result of the chase, was soaked through. The poor creature had become too closely acquainted with one of those frigid pools of water, and was almost lost in the quagmire; just as the trailing beast was upon her, she scrambled to safety. She had then scurried through a neighbouring thicket, and

arrived there; security had been found in browned blackberry branches, the remnants of a previous autumn.

A drop of errant melt-water landed squarely upon the tip of her nose. She sneezed in response, and then froze in fear; her hearing leapt to full attention, her senses searching for any sign that her reckless act had betrayed her position.

While a perceived eternity passed, her instincts remained in constant readiness, in preparation for her to either fight or flee; in the end, there was need for neither. She hunkered down, and waited for the daylight to confirm that she had indeed evaded that which chased her.

Her mind drifted back through the events of the previous evening; she recalled her bold escape from the confines of the cabin, out into the freedom of the forest around it. She remembered the triumph that she had felt when she hunted down a woodland rodent, then prepared to claim the prize and, as a token of her gratitude, return it to her hosts.

Instead, there had only been her downfall since, in her moment of glory, *it* came. Forced to flee from her enterprise, she had run like the mouse before her, helpless, afraid and alone.

She shivered and, while the meltwater continued to pool about her in the hollow beneath the branches, shifted about uncomfortably. A sudden sound, a snap of a branch as it submitted to the burden upon it, and she was alert once more, breathless, waiting for the inevitable as her heart strove to thrash its way free from her chest.

Time passed, everlasting and ponderous; again, no threat appeared.

The rain, produced by the snow melting high in the trees above, transfixed her; her thoughts drifted. By her

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mind, the noise was altered to resemble the roaring crackle of a blazing fire, particularly the one within the hearth of the cabin wherein she guested.

In her memory, she wandered to the previous evening, and found herself curled up on the lap of her host, warm and safe.

Perhaps, she had felt too secure, for her animal instincts had urged her to venture out into the night, to prove herself and demonstrate her worth.

Her lap had arisen, arms carefully setting her down, and departed for the kitchen; it was possible they meant to prepare an offering for her, but it was more likely that the intent was to cook a dish for her other, promptly returning host, his presence betrayed by the growls of the beast on which he rode.

The cat then had the option of escaping from her gilded cage and, given this chance opportunity, she chose to do so, concealing herself in the ramshackle collection of boots that resided beside the door that led to the outside world.

The gateway opened; she leapt, dodging between the legs of the incoming human and, her wriggling haunches successfully clearing the gap, squeezed through the rapidly reducing fissure. A shout of surprise emerged from her host, followed by an order to return, but she was having none of it and she ran, with a cry of exuberance, out into the night.

Crawling under a bush, she had then sat surveying her hostel, satisfying her ego on a diet of the concern expressed by her hosts, scouring the area with beams of light as they called out for her.

The cat was not to be exposed; eventually they relented, and returned to the security of the world inside.

She was then free to do her will, and impose her dominance on that which resided outdoors -- it was a kingdom that would recognize her royalty, and pay tribute to it.

However, her regal excursion had not proceeded in quite the manner she had anticipated. This world possessed a demon, a horror that she could never have imagined. Thusly, the feline longed for the protection of her prison, the warmth of the hearth and the kind attention of her jailers.

The present was revisited when her bright, blue eyes alerted her that the sun was beginning to make its return. Her surroundings brightened but a minute amount, although that was sufficient to show that the beast was not in attendance, and provide a ray of hope that the feline's dismal position may soon take a turn for the better.

That gleaming was sadly short lived for, right above her, a branch promptly declared its defeat with a deafening splinter and, becoming a streak of white fur across a landscape dimly lit by the coming dawn, she fled her accordingly compromised sanctuary.

The cat ran in no particular direction, desperately hunting for a new waypoint, another place to rest until the full onset of daylight that, she was certain, would vanquish the night-creature that pursued her.

She found one, finally, a hollow under the roots of some great tree just large enough for her pampered girth to settle into, and the cat resumed vigilantly watching, carefully listening, and patiently waiting to discover if her recent escapade had betrayed her to the beast that lurked within the forested world about her.

Her mind drifted back to the fireplace; its remembered warmth filled her soul and, while she lay in her memory cosily stretched out in front of it, brought a moment of peace.

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The fire crackled, the flames slowly consuming the log -- the cat let out a contented sigh, comfortable in the safety of her recollection.

There was a loud snap, when the fire breached a pocket of sap in the log of her fantasies, followed by the shocking realization that the sound was present not merely in the feline's imaginings, but in her reality.

She quickly returned to the forest, and listened intently. Her fear made a rapid rise as she recognized the laboured breaths of her predator, the beast snorting and panting. It was searching for her, hunting for its prey, striving to locate the scent that would reveal his quarry.

Her impulse begged the cat to flee, pleaded with the feline to make a dash for her life, but she knew that this would be futile against such a monster, and discarded the petition. Motionless and silent, she persisted to wait.

Her nightmare, still probing for its misplaced breakfast, steadily advanced towards her; the beast surveyed the light of the morning for any sign of its prospective conquest.

It knew the cat was there, somewhere, and she was well aware that it did.

Her mind raced to define options, and surmise a solution to this dire situation but, coming to the understanding that she was proceeding about this problem in the entirely wrong way, it made an abrupt halt.

She was Queen, after all, and yet she was hiding and fleeing, like some common rodent. This beast, once she made her royalty apparent, was certain to bow to her majesty; she ought to confront it, and challenge it to defy her will.

Her courage rose while she reasoned it out; after the monster was made aware of just who it chased, it would be

sure to beg off, and embark upon a search for new game, leaving her be.

At that moment, it was the time to do such, for sharp with deadly purpose, its steel eyes were focused -- the beast had located her, and it was advancing upon her position directly.

She emerged from the hollow and, to the front of the beast, stood proudly whilst daring the monster to violate the rule of her law.

Proceeding to parade her noble nature, a stalemate was consequently created.

She cast her royal blue eyes into the cold, metallic gaze of the beast, waiting for it to decide, and make the proper choice, forsaking its improper endeavour in the face of her clear superiority.

The monster paused for a moment, baffled by the dubious performance of his probable provisions, and bewildered by the apparent disregard it had for its life. He wondered if this was some still-nameless adversary; it may be a menace previously unknown to him, which he should heed.

His sense told him that he must not take the chance that this prey could, in truth, be a predator, and that he should flee in discretion, but his hunger told him that he was starving. He would not have the luxury to undertake a new search for quarry.

Her waiting continued and, with the beast that seemed incapable of reaching an obvious decision, she soon began to grow rather impatient. A hiss and a growl were submitted in order to add further persuasion; the beast recoiled for a brief moment, but failed to yield any appreciable ground.

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His dishevelled prey then gained an aggressive posture; it hissed, as if it was a snake, and growled like a cougar. Those efforts merely contributed to his confusion; either it truly was more of a threat than he had previously assessed, or it was malfunctioning, and he should put it out of its misery.

Unable to determine which it was, the exhausted timber wolf, with the notion that the impasse was likely to ensue for some time before it found a resolution, lowered his haunches to the ground.

He stayed his verdict, opting to wait, and see what this most perplexing prey would do next.

“Insolent beast!” she ruefully cursed to herself. She could not believe its arrogance, for it would not leave; indeed, while it persisted to stare at her in the manner that she would similarly gaze upon an unopened can of tuna, it had then decided to sit down and make itself comfortable.

These circumstances were becoming quite intolerable. To reiterate her displeasure, she growled and hissed again, but it was to no avail.

Whilst they remained in the clearing, the daylight of mid-morning came upon them, each facing the other, and waiting for their opponent to make the next move in their battle to establish dominance.

To his recollection, he had never before encountered any situation such as this. The mysterious creature defied the rules of the forest, and those comprised the only law that he knew. Another animal either ran from you, or attacked; there was no middle ground, and yet that mythical location appeared to be presently occupied by his prey.

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It remained fixed in place, persisting to hiss and growl, but neither declared an intention to attack, nor displayed any sign that it would soon flee.

His ravenous hunger grew, but only in proportion to his festering fear of this peculiar adversary -- no solution appeared to be on the horizon.

In truth, it likely had him.

The sad reality was it probably had her.

Becoming convinced that her rapidly approaching, tragic end was inevitable, she berated herself for her foolishness, for such a creature would never have the capacity to comprehend her royalty.

Nevertheless, the feline was committed, and was unquestionably not in a position to withdraw; her only option was to herself sit, occasionally tendering a hiss, or offering a menacing growl, while silently imploring it to vanish, let her alone, and simply disappear.

However, it would not; it lingered, still gazing upon her like she was a Christmas goose roasting in an oven, and salivated over the impending feast. She pined for the hearth; unable to remember precisely why she had left it, the cat silently damned whatever force it was that had prompted her to embark on such a senseless venture.

A rustle from the kitchen was heard, the distinctive sound of kibble being placed into her bowl. She had raised her head from the comfort of the carpet upon which she laid, that resided in front of the fireplace, soon making the carefully deliberated decision to rise completely and eat her dinner.

This cat was no kitten to be sure, and that required some effort. She thoroughly stretched, took to her feet and

then, to meet with her supper, sauntered idly into the room that housed it.

She shortly stood over her dish, and nibbled contentedly. Although peaceful in her routine, the cat longed for change. She had recently, gradually developed an urge for more engaging activity. The feline, while she chewed, then came to a decision.

That night, she would grace the outside world with her presence and, rewarding her hosts for their ample generosity, capture a trophy with which to return.

After all, for their longstanding service they most certainly deserved it.

For his part, the wolf was lost. In fact, he had been disoriented not long after he was separated from his fellows in a futile chase after a very quick deer. It had been too fast; the others implored him, brief moments before they themselves had finally done so, to call off his chase.

Confident that he would overtake it, he had refused to listen. For hours, well into the night, he carried on; the scent of his pack had gone astray. The wolf was left with no consolation; he had not caught the buck, it had escaped him.

Alone, he was cold and hungry, in the dark.

Then, he had spied his salvation; the small creature was unbeknownst to him, but it moved and was, therefore, likely edible. He pursued it. Eluding him for a time, he had hastily discovered it again. His ravenous belly would be full; the journey back to his family could begin.

That was how it ought to have been, but yet it was not. The wolf was, perhaps needless to state, rather frustrated.

The cat and the wolf both sat, endlessly eyeing each other well into midday; neither risked acting upon any

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further aspirations. The sun, meanwhile, had warmed the snow and, with a vengeance, it melted; it was as if heavy rain, kept at bay from it by some divine force, surrounded the clearing.

She too was becoming famished; the cat began to seriously consider if the beast itself was edible. The wolf noticed the hunger in the little creature's eyes, and was mildly concerned, but yet amused that it would entertain the notion of eating him.

However, he was quite faint, and would only become more so. Perhaps, if events kept progressing as they were, it would be provided with the chance to lunch upon him after all.

There was a quiet noise then, one that emerged from the brush on the edge of the clearing. The two adversaries almost failed to notice it, the pair far too engrossed in their own affairs to be aware of such an intrusion.

Soon thereafter, the bushes rustled again.

A brown jackrabbit, completely oblivious to the predators set in their motionless confrontation, then haphazardly hopped, in search of some foliage to graze on, out into the clearing.

The carnivorous rivals remained still while the rabbit made its way over to an exposed patch of wet grass, no longer covered by the melting snow, and began to consume its herbivorous repast. A voiceless negotiation took place between the two, then; a pact was created, borne of both circumstance and necessity.

They took one final glance of mutual respect towards each other, and then, the predetermined measures were swiftly enacted.

While the wolf made a lethal lunge for the rabbit, the cat turned and scurried off through the thicket. The loud cries of the hapless hare, grasped within his jaws, were heard as she ran; gruesome crunching, whilst the predator crushed the bones of his revised prey, was subsequently noted.

Her frantic flight through the forest persisted; afraid that the beast, opting for a second helping, might change his mind, the cat made a desperate dash for the cabin, and for her fireplace within.

Direction only determined by her deepest desire, she ran for what must have been hours and, howling hysterically at the door until one of her hosts emerged, returned to her home in due course.

They scolded her vigorously for the worry caused by her inappropriate, impromptu adventure. Afterwards, the sodden, starving cat was attended to by a dry towel and a generous meal.

She then contentedly took to her position in front of the hearth.

Revelling in its warmth, she vowed to never leave either the comfort it gave, nor the security it provided ever again.

Twilight soon came, and the cat partook in the same leisure that she had every evening previous to the last; she whiled away the time gazing into the flickering flames, and enjoying their endless dance.

The night had quite well settled in when, over the relentless roar of the fire, a faint cry was heard; it seemed important that she investigate it, but the feline was uncertain as to why.

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Rousing herself to her feet, she made her way over to the window, leapt up onto the sill, and looked out beyond. On the edge of the clearing, in the darkness of the trees that surrounded the cabin, she saw two familiar steel eyes.

Their gazes met; a brief acknowledgement was made of their previous encounter, with a footnote appended that the wolf had found his way, and was himself heading home.

He then disappeared, and she jumped down to the floor; their story had concluded.

Her host, situated upon the chair that stood in front of her fireplace, was startled when the cat took to her lap. She purred happily; warm and safe, the feline was Queen of at least this.

With that, she was quite satisfied.

- Second -

The Ballad of Edward Fatticus

IT HAD BEEN A FRIGHTFULLY COLD WINTER, one of the frostiest that the Scottish housekeeper could recall ever weathering.

Missus Glenferrie had found the cat, half frozen and clinging to life, huddled in a corner on the front porch that served as entryway to her master's modest home in a less affluent, but respectable outer suburb of London.

Furthermore, the feline was pregnant; there was simply nothing to do but take it in. The woman knew that her charity, in a household of humble finances, would result in more mouths to feed. Nevertheless, it would be uncivilised behaviour to permit the poor creature and her kittens to succumb to the elements.

Such notions were only those of savages.

Missus Glenferrie had hidden the ginger-tabby in her pantry, and secretly nursed the cat back to health the best that she could before the master of the house, a widowed British Army officer and a veteran of the Great War, became aware of the stowaway's presence.

At that point, the man complained bitterly regarding the intrusion, and protested at some length the potential

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inconveniences posed by the introduction of such a 'four-legged furry nuisance' into his rather restricted quarters.

"Perhaps you might like to invite some rats in, next. Then, you could adopt some dogs, and a pig. At least if you brought in some chickens, they could be put to use laying eggs."

Regardless of her master's objections, the Scotswoman stood firm in her resolve that 'Ginger' was to remain. Her offspring would be born and then, when they were of suitable age, they were to be given for adoption.

"Not just to anyone, though. They'll have to meet to my standards, and I have to say they're rather high, in order to take one of my kittens," she declared tersely.

Having engaged Missus Glenferrie's services for many years, and grown to know her a great deal over that time, the master of the residence had the unsettling notion that this process might require a great deal of his patience.

However, despite his conviction that the situation would inevitably cause him distress, the military man was forced to placate his housekeeper and relent, but stated firmly in his defeat that he would tolerate the presence of the felines only so far.

"It would be your responsibility to place the kittens into new homes, and in a timely fashion." He concluded with an uncertainty in his baritone timbre, "I trust you will be capable of that."

The housekeeper agreed cheerily, and the matter was for that moment resolved.

Weeks passed and then, early one spring morning, there were kittens. A litter of six was born, remarkably all ginger-tabbies who, like their mother, had beautiful blue eyes. Although, if you suggested that one of them could

count for two, you might be given to argue that there had been seven; for his weight, he could have easily qualified as such.

In any event, it would almost be mockery to declare that the kitten was unusually large.

It might have been a she; it was uncertain at that time as to which gender the fuzzy cherub belonged. The Scottish housekeeper had named him Edward, for reasons that she declined to elucidate. If female, it may have instead been Edwina, but Missus Glenferrie was convinced that the kitten was a boy, since he was quite voracious at his poor mother's teat.

That was a sight for which the Scotswoman had felt great pity for Ginger.

The bulbously shaped kitten was insatiable. It would be reasonable to speculate that Edward's early thoughts consisted likely almost exclusively of...

...EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT SLEEP EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT POOP...

...and in those general proportions.

When they had taken to solid food, Missus Glenferrie had to become quite vigilant with respect to the felines' mealtimes to ensure that the other kittens were able to eat their fair share.

If she had not done so, Edward's appetite might have led all of his siblings to starve to death.

Typically, as it matures such a kitten will become equal in size to the rest of his litter, but this was not the case with Edward; the older he grew, the larger he became. It was a curiosity that the housekeeper would chat about at great length with any who would listen to her.

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“Have you ever seen such a thing?” she would marvel with the neighbouring housekeeper, Missus Footscray, over afternoon tea. Her guest would always shake her head to the negative, and agree that she had never before encountered such a sight.

“He probably weighs the same as his mother. How much does he eat?”

Missus Glenferrie would laugh. “His diet is better than mine, I’d wager.” They would then quietly gaze upon the kitten, whilst sipping the remainder of their tea.

Between those two, the enormous kitten provided a never-ending basis for casual conversation.

To his credit, the always-ravenous Edward was equal in his affections as he was to his gluttony. Once he discovered his ability to purr, he exercised it liberally throughout the day. The tabby never declined the touch of a gentle hand, and he enjoyed playful activities. This juvenile feline ‘defence mechanism’ ensured the ongoing supply of the cuisine to which he had become most partial.

He was fat, friendly and just so dreadfully adorable; the numbers of people who can resist such charms are few.

However, although Missus Glenferrie, in respect to Edward’s immense appetite was always quite generous in the portions that she had provided, the quantity had never been found to be sufficient enough to satiate the kitten. One evening, the woman had found him ensconced within a pot of casserole that she had removed from, and placed on the cupboard beside, the oven in her kitchen.

The rather heavy cast iron lid was still affixed properly to the rim of the vessel; there were no signs as to how the obese, but still tiny kitten had been able to force it open, and climb his way therein. Yet, when Missus

Glenferrie had gone to serve tea, that was where she had observed the industrious little cat, happily striving to fill his seemingly bottomless stomach on her master's dinner.

"You... *fatty cuss!*" the housekeeper cursed at him under her breath as she pulled Edward abruptly out of the pot. She proceeded to drop him upon the floor, and swiftly chastise the offending kitten with her broom.

It would just not have done to mention the incident to the master of the household; of course, there was no need to waste such a perfectly good meal. That the kitten had obtained admission to the interior of the kettle would stay a mystery known only to the Scotswoman.

The epithet remained though and, as it soon became common pastime to swear in reference to the actions of the troublesome tabby, Edward would become forever known to the world by his revised label, the 'Fatty Cuss'.

The unfortunate truth of the incident was that the 'Fatty Cuss' was not at all certain himself as to how he had gained entry into that pot. All he could remember was that at one moment he was positioned outside the kettle, smelling tasty odours emanating from it, and wishing that he was being made acquainted with what resided within; the next instant, Edward was inside, giving himself a comprehensive introduction to its delicious inhabitants.

How the tabby had found himself there was not terribly important to him at that time; his major concern had only been the following, and rather inappropriate removal of the kitten from his scrumptious buffet.

Later, it was to be an experiment that the always-hungry Edward would try to repeat, but with depressingly little or, more accurately, no success. The kitten attempted to simply push himself through the exterior of the pot, and his malformed hypothesis merely served to severely burn his

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tender nose, leading to several subsequent hours spent soaking his nasal button in the soothing coolness of the water bowl.

The 'Fatty Cuss' then tried perching himself atop the pot, patiently waiting with the intention of eventually sinking through the lid, but received only a resounding sanction, delivered with the housekeeper's broomstick, for his efforts. He promptly declared the endeavour to be hopeless.

There appeared to be no method of re-admittance into the pot. That revelation painfully perturbed the perpetually famished kitten a great deal. The furry, leg-bearing cricket ball withdrew from his pursuit, and was then resigned to the uninspiring fare that he, along with the other kittens, regularly received.

However, the problem remained that those rations would never be of sufficient quantity to fully serve Edward's needs, for he was always so desperately hungry. In fact, it was quite likely that no amount of food would ever fill the hole within the kitten's belly; as such, he would require an endless supply.

The ginger-tabby devised a new stratagem, one that should it succeed he was quite positive would put an end his predicament.

One afternoon, while his siblings were all deep asleep in the former vegetable crate that they called their home, Edward made his escape and, as quiet as could be, hid beneath the kitchen table, his form shaded by the cloth that covered it. He waited, as patiently as any kitten could for Missus Glenferrie, in the midst of meal preparation, to turn away from the pantry, leaving the cupboard door open, and unguarded.



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Edward was not entirely sure what lay within; all he knew was that at least some of what had emerged from it had eventually resided briefly in his supper bowl. It was his aim to cut out the middleman, or woman in this case. The storage compartment appeared to have an unlimited supply of groceries, so there would be no harm if he took up station at the source of his nutrition.

His deed would also function as an act of compassion towards his brothers and sisters; if his stomach did not necessitate the commandeering of the supper bowl every single night, they would have much more to eat.

When it appeared that the woman would soon move away from the cupboard, he tensed in preparation. Edward then slowly began to creep. The 'Fatty Cuss' remained silent, as if he were a tiger in the jungle stalking his prey.

Like a soldier on an assignment of the greatest importance, he moved with a careful determination not to be caught in his attempt, and make it inside the pantry.

After all, he was on a mission that could save the world.

Rather, he was not, precisely; in truth, it served an even higher purpose. More importantly, it would rescue his stomach.

The human temporarily departed, and the door remained open. It was then his chance; the kitten bounded towards, and was quickly within, the pantry. A harrowing few moments subsequently transpired while Edward waited, with his breath suspended, for confirmation that the housekeeper had, or had not become aware of him during his traversal.

He was relieved when an apparently undisturbed Missus Glenferrie moved back to the pantry, and returned an

unseen object inside the cupboard to its place on a shelf high above.

An adverse eventuality, previously unconsidered at that point became a much real event. The housekeeper then firmly shut the pantry door.

The adventurous kitten was confronted with his first major challenge. It was dark, more completely so than Edward had ever previously experienced. The frightened cat resisted his overwhelming desire to mew, and did his best to be brave; he strove to grow beyond the infantile trepidation that he felt towards his blindness, and regain mental focus upon his crucial objective.

He reasoned that the only thing he truly had to fear was his stomach; with that rationale, he gathered his emotions together and soon, the search for provisions began.

There were all sorts of objects occupying the shelf inside the pantry; these included items made of glass and of tin, bags constructed of paper and cardboard cartons. The kitten toppled a jar, and a pervasive powder rolled out like a fog from the container; it covered him as if a dusty blanket. Edward attempted first to lick himself clean, but the substance foamed in his mouth and so, in disgust, he made his best effort to shake off as much of the offending material as he could.

He failed to understand how this noxious matter had anything to do with food, and hoped that this would prove to be the only exception that he would encounter.

Regaining more of his confidence, the kitten moved on. He found a box containing wrinkled bugs, or at least they were the general diameter of such insects. They seemed like little beetles, but were chewy, tough and did not taste like them at all. He certainly could not survive on that sort of fare.

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Edward carried forth again.

He investigated many other powders, some of which made him sneeze; there were crystals that made him really thirsty, and those that tasted rather pleasant, but made him feel quite agitated. It was a feeling that the little cat was unaccustomed to, and not easily convinced he could appreciate.

Soon, the area was a complete and total disaster. It appeared that his undertaking only provided him with a relatively limited victory; he had located what would loosely qualify as food, but nothing that could sustain him for the near future inside of the cupboard.

As well, those thirsty crystals caused him to desperately crave water, which was regrettably not available within the pantry or more precisely, and this he knew for certain, not on his particular shelf.

He would be required to promptly depart -- and quickly!

To his misfortune, the door refused to comply with Edward's desires. He had first pushed casually, and subsequently shoved repetitively with increasing urgency, but his efforts were to no avail; it appeared to be stuck shut in some fashion. He then became quite frightened and, whilst the kitten mewled hysterically, he made a frantic assault on the exit. Sadly, as he fought his campaign against the pantry door, his tiny legs gained little purchase on the powder-covered shelf, and his struggle proved futile.

His anxiety soon rose to the point of panic; he scratched and howled as loud as his diminutive voice could muster, and then repeated the exercise with an even heartier enthusiasm. It was during this strife that he prayed, promised and vowed never to venture forth inside the horrifying pantry ever again, should the powers-that-be

only see fit to allow him to escape the dark prison wherein he had become unwittingly interned.

Much to his great relief, Missus Glenferrie heard the little kitten's distress and came to his aid; Edward sprang free from his prison, and ran gratefully out of the kitchen, followed closely behind by the angry cries of the infuriated Scotswoman. Although quite appreciative of her for his renewed liberty, he was justifiably afraid of the housekeeper's unforgiving broomstick.

The little kitten swore that he would be true to his oath and never attempt to enter the evil pantry again. He would simply have to find other ways to get his fill.

Time passed and, in harmony with his hunger, Edward grew. It was not long at all before a new plot began to emerge from the recesses of the starving kitten's scheming mind. By order of the master of the house, still-living animals were not permitted within the room in which the humans ate. Despite this, Edward had become convinced that, were he to plead his case to the man of the house, his generous patron would reward the petitioner with further portions.

Indeed, it was the bold feline's intention to ask the following time-honoured question, "Please sir, may I have some more?"

That evening's agenda was to include an exceptional banquet; the humans referred to the extensive meal as 'Easter'. It was a grand feast, and there would be no better time, Edward thought, than this celebration of abundance to make his simple appeal for kindness. In such a context, there was no doubt in the kitten's mind that his appeal would result in a resounding dietary victory.

Edward concealed himself, several hours before the festivities were set to begin, under the china cabinet that resided beneath the window through which the afternoon

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sun streamed into the dining room. While he waited, the fat little kitten fell asleep, and dreamt of the bounty that he was certain to receive for his efforts, imagining that there would be all sorts of tasty treats with which to satisfy his wanting stomach.

It would be, at long last, full, satiated and replete.

He awoke to the darkness of night, and the sounds and smells of the wondrous meal being served. The menu consisted of roasted goose, mashed potatoes, Yorkshire puddings, tender squash and savoury gravy. The humans were soon gathered about the table, and his intestinal overlord began to rumble with its demands that an offering be made to it without any further delay.

Edward carefully crept out from his hiding place underneath the cabinet, and slid silently beneath the dining room table, where he made his way cautiously over to his master's legs prepared to plead his case.

Then, the kitten had a thought.

He pondered on the potential benefits of instead making his appeal from the podium of his master's lap. If he were closer to the man, Edward would be able to exercise the full measure of the charms that his youth had provided him; after all, it was his intent to impress the man with his cuteness, which would be a great deal more evident at such a close range.

After a rather brief deliberation, Edward decided that he agreed with himself; the kitten then swiftly set off on an expedition to climb upon his master's lap, using the man's leg as an impromptu ladder.

He had not made it at all very far in his ascent before the master exclaimed loudly, and then hastily took to his feet; in the process, he pulled at the tablecloth that he had

tucked into his shirt for use as a napkin, throwing his plate, and the contents thereof, tumbling down onto the floor below.

The kitten fell and, briefly startled, had begun to 'make a run for it' when he noticed that a leg of roasted goose had conveniently placed itself not far askew from a potential avenue of escape.

Opting to find a brighter side to such a dreadful situation, Edward summoned the whole of his tiny might; he retrieved the drumstick, and dragged it with his teeth towards the exit. In the ensuing chaos, he made his way through the door to the kitchen unnoticed, but afterward became confused regarding where he ought to go next.

The pantry door, open barely the slightest crack, beckoned him into a sanctuary within which he could hide from the furious humans that were running amuck throughout the residence. He could not accept the offer; on the one hand, it would violate his sacred oath, and on the other, his fear would not permit him to risk his becoming trapped inside the cupboard once more.

Then again, the goose's leg smelled so wonderfully good, and there was so much delicious meat on it that Edward could not possibly consume it all without being given ample time in which to do so.

The humans were searching for him quite feverishly, and if he did not conceal himself soon it was a safe gamble that they would discover him quickly.

"You fatty cuss!" Missus Glenferrie shouted, "When I get my hands on you, you are going to wish that --"

Her threat required no distinct conclusion.

Prodded along by both his ravenous stomach and his considerable sense of self-preservation the little kitten,

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Edward the Fatty Cuss decided to use his invitation, braving the pantry for a second time.

He managed to nose his way in carefully with his trophy, and the cupboard door made a willing accomplice by swinging gently shut behind him. Edward then listened intently as the hunt for the troublemaker continued unabated, whilst he prepared to devour his well-earned banquet.

The little gourmet was going to take tremendous pleasure in its consumption; much time would be required, and it would eventuate that plenty of it was to be had. In fact, he savoured his meal, between naps, throughout the night and well into the morning, until there was nothing left but a polished bone.

Shortly thereafter, Missus Glenferrie, in her preparations for breakfast, swung open the pantry door revealing in the process a very pleased kitten with an unusually contented stomach.

“You!” The angry Scotswoman hoisted up the larcenous kitten by the scruff of the neck, raised her finger to his nose and was ready to chastise him with a severe scolding when her rage abruptly gave way to relief. She instead cradled the goose-thief in her arms, and stroked his forehead lovingly. “I was worried about you all night, you damn little cuss,” she said quietly.

“I’ll forgive you just this one time, but if you ever do anything like that again,” she continued gravely, “you’ll be shaved bald, and your fur will be fashioned into a hat.”

Edward, not quite certain if the woman meant it as a threat or a jest, took that under careful advisement. Frankly, he was not sure he even cared; for the first time in his life, he was actually full.

To ensure that such a fiasco did not make an encore performance, Missus Glenferrie tied a little bell around Edward's neck with a red piece of yarn to keep his further efforts to a minimum and, much to the his immense dissatisfaction, it proved to be quite proficient at doing so.

Time went on once more, and soon the kittens were weaned; they were finally ready for adoption. Ginger-tabbies were quite popular, especially ones as unusual as these and it was not going to require a great deal of effort to find good placements for them in respectable homes.

Strangely, and much to Missus Glenferrie's relief, nobody seemed to take an interest in the obese little kitten, nor he take any liking to them. The housekeeper had come to love Edward very much, and it was not the best kept of secrets that she did not desire to see him go.

The master, on the other hand, wanted Edward to disappear sooner rather than later. He would ask if anyone had yet elected to adopt 'that portly disturbance' every evening, upon his return.

"You did, at the very least, try to get rid of it," he would query leadingly to Missus Glenferrie, who would then quickly assure him that she had indeed given her utmost efforts towards Edward's adoption. "I am quite sure that you have," the master would retort sarcastically; the man retreating to the relative safety of his study, he would afterwards mutter his contempt for the troublemaker who had deemed it acceptable to ruin his Easter supper on his way up the stairs.

New residences had shortly been found for all of his siblings, and presently only Edward remained. The master, despite his housekeeper's best efforts to convince the man otherwise, persisted to call for his removal; the kitten's mother could remain, but the 'Fatty Cuss' must go, either by

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adoption or through a forced introduction to an alley, and he wished for that task to have been completed one day earlier.

Thankfully, for the kitten, a woman paid a visit, an author by the name of Caroline Hawthorn; Missus Glenferrie was certain that had been her name. She took to the fat little kitten, with the bell tied around his neck by a piece of red yarn, as if by nature; that had been a surprise to the Scotswoman. It was as if the bond was predetermined, and their meeting had been destined.

“You simply must tell me this adorable fellow’s name,” Caroline politely demanded, while she held Edward on his back as if he was an infant, and stroked him gently beneath his chin; it was an activity for which he rewarded her with vibrant purring.

“Edward. But, some days, we call him the ‘Fatty Cuss’.” Missus Glenferrie laughed, whilst she recounted a few of the kitten’s more notable exploits to the one who would soon give her favourite feline son a home.

Caroline chuckled. “‘Fatticus’,” she repeated, contracting the two words into a singular moniker. “I think I like it,” she smiled.

It soon followed that Caroline Hawthorn took Edward ‘the Fatty Cuss’, and he was gone, likely forever.

Missus Glenferrie, for the remainder of her life, would never long for the presence of anyone as much as she would miss the company of that obese blue-eyed ginger-tabby, and the sound of his bell.

- Third -

The Witch's Familiar

MISCHIEF, SO NAMED FOR HER PROPENSITY TO ENGAGE IN EXACTLY THAT, lounged lazily on her bed, tucked away in the corner of a run-down cottage, itself hid in a dark, foreboding area of a vast medieval forest.

The black cat was quite pleased with herself, for her belly was full of tasty morsels, and a thunderstorm raged outside. It sang a chaotic lullaby by which she would come to sleep; her evening could not have been any better.

Lightning lit up the inside of the cottage as the witch, whose familiar Mischief was, toiled away feverishly upon her latest spell, an enchantment intended to cause the neighbouring village, one that had wronged the sorceress, great misery.

The cauldron boiled and bubbled on the hearth; the witch cackled wickedly while she assembled the necessary ingredients to create the vile potion, a concoction that would educate the inhabitants of the town on the follies of betraying her.

It would provide penance for the crime that, by failing to yield to her simple demand for livestock, they had committed, and a fitting retribution for the harm that they had subsequently conspired to inflict upon her.

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A consequence of lightning blazing across the sky in the tempest that reigned outside, the resultant thunder crashed whilst the witch increased her efforts to a feverish pitch. Employing her sorcery upon the kettle, she screamed out her desires for revenge, and fermented the brew that was to become the mechanism of the naive villagers destruction.

The cat stretched and yawned, her efforts at slumber curtailed by her mistress's shrill endeavours. An odd scent had chosen to waft past her gastronomically inclined nose, and she sniffed at it curiously. The odour possessed an amazing appeal and Mischief, ordinarily quite a fussy feline, was certain she had never before encountered anything like it; the smell was absolutely superb.

There was no question; she must discover the source of such a divine aroma.

The witch, her malevolent masterpiece complete, poured the accursed liquid into several small vials, then corked them and collected them within her cape. Taking to her broom, she hooted wickedly, then opened the door and set off into the night, her task to inflict mayhem upon the ill-fated, unwary souls that she strove to punish for their contemptible acts against her.

The witch departed, having left the cat alone to her own devices.

By then, Mischief was thoroughly enraptured; the wonderful aroma that the cat promptly deduced was emanating from the cauldron had charmed her into submission. Without delay, she made her way to the kettle that held such appetizing magic, and worked to assess exactly how she would elevate herself to its lip.

The cottage was rather sparsely furnished; there was a rustic wooden table, some comparable chairs and little else. A pile of logs was stacked beside the hearth; however, it was

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not tall enough for the cat to reach the cauldron from its summit. She considered that, for her to take a sample of the astonishing brew, a combination of the firewood and the chairs would likely prove to be of sufficient height.

First, the witch's familiar would scamper up onto the lumber, and cause an intentional landslide; this had the effect of sending the carefully placed stack tumbling down into a chaotic heap to the front of the cauldron. Then, Mischief proceeded to scale the back of one of the chairs, and jump from it; the furniture was compelled to tip backwards, leaning upon the top of the firewood.

Another ascent, made to the back of the remaining chair, prompted an additional leap; it was induced to tilt against the previous chair, and present a stepladder with which the cat could climb, and then only just stretch herself to the lip of the kettle.

She clambered up the impromptu ladder. While she balanced precariously, Mischief extended her feline body to its greatest possible length in a bid to attain her objective. She was rewarded for her efforts; to her delight, her nose barely poked over the edge of the immense pot. Mischief sniffed and she smelled; the cat happily savoured the sensational aroma of the concoction that she had craved to enjoy so urgently.

In an effort intended merely to sample a taste, the cat's tongue took a single lick of the soup. Mischief's mouth was overwhelmed with a symphony of flavour such as she could never have even vaguely imagined. The fluid was fantastic and it was fabulous; the feline could not resist partaking freely of it.

Standing above it, her large, thick tongue eagerly lapped at the contents of the cauldron. Mischief no longer needed to stretch unsteadily but rather, her long legs

provided a firm footing. She gazed curiously into her reflection, that of her big, brown eyes, her vastly oversized nose and the disquieting remainder of her revolting equine visage.

The creature formerly known as a feline abruptly ceased her reckless imbibing, and mounted a serious attempt to grasp the repugnant reality of her present circumstances.

Mischief was a donkey; of that fact, there was indeed little doubt. Of course, it was ludicrous to think that she should have anticipated anything less; a witch had prepared the gourmet soup, after all. That no harm could come of its consumption had been a foolish belief. However, foresight of these details would have done nothing to diminish the irresistible aromas that the cursed liquid contained, nor quieted her overwhelming desire to experience its flavours.

The transmogrified beast, whilst pondering her new existence as a donkey, took a few mournful licks at the potion, and concluded that such a life was simply not for her. Mischief was confident that would be a method by which to reverse the calamity that she had suffered. Indeed, upon her arrival, the witch was certain to deftly return her familiar to a somewhat more desirable feline form.

Unfortunately, the trifling possibility also existed that the foul sorceress, for trespassing into affairs of which the animal had no concern, would instead do away with her troublesome companion. Perhaps, and even worse, the witch might choose to sentence Mischief to hard labour, condemned to live out the remainder of her miserable days in her current form.

The donkey, but only recently, evaluated all of her prospects, and found there to be, in truth, a greater likelihood that one of those more unfavourable outcomes would come to transpire. Lest she face the wrath of the

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sorceress that was soon due to return to the cottage, she would quite plainly be required to correct the discrepancy that she had caused on her own.

Some vague recollections regarding the art of potions resulted from a rapid search of her memory. There was a possibility that if the brew were modified but only slightly, it would prompt a reversal of the less-than-desirable effect that the original had instigated.

Rummaging through the witch's assortment of herbs and dehydrated animal parts, the donkey then stumbled across what ought to have been the perfect ingredient: cat's claws. In her mouth they were carried, and then deposited into the cauldron. She allowed it simmer for a just little while before taking a timid sip of the newly adapted recipe.

Mischief waited anxiously and, when she began to return to her former size, was not disappointed. However, there was some mild alarm when her rapid decrease in dimensions failed to end at their anticipated proportions. While her dramatic reduction continued, her apprehension equally grew, progressing even further still until, when her dwindling finally came to a halt, the familiar found herself a great deal nearer to the cobblestone floor than she was generally accustomed.

She examined her tiny little paws, with their minute mousey claws; promptly, they were instinctively pressed into service to bathe her petite rodent muzzle. Toward this latest dilemma, Mischief squeaked her overwhelming frustration whilst she strove to determine precisely how it could be that a diminutive creature such as herself might ever obtain any further opportunity to access the cauldron that was presently so very high above them.

Envisioning a solution, the little mouse struggled with all of her minuscule might to scale the table's nearest leg;

eventually, she succeeded upon ascending to its wooden plateau. She hastily rummaged through the witch's supplies again, and quickly located a few dried mouse-tails; the logic behind her choice of ingredient was that, if cat's claws turned her into a rodent, those ought to affect the opposite.

Her distance from the cauldron remained the only hindrance to her current aspirations. A crude catapult, consisting of a wooden spoon and a saltshaker, was fashioned; she then utilized it to launch the mouse-tails into the potion. Her first attempt came up a little bit short; she was a mite too long on her second try. Happily, the third time was the charm and, soon after the little mouse jumped upon the wooden spoon, the mouse-tails sailed merrily into the kettle, to great celebration on the part of the relieved rodent.

With what little patience that remained to her, the mouse that had previously existed as a donkey which had formerly known life as a cat waited and, while its new ingredient stewed within the contents of the cauldron, worked to devise a practical method of reuniting herself with the pot.

Mischief had a theory, one whose hypothesis held that she could simply throw herself into the brew; once she had partaken of the new potion, a return to her feline form would be made, and she would then be in a position to pull herself free from the cauldron. She considered employing the catapult in order to accomplish this; however, to launch her the relatively vast distance to the kettle, she would first need to find an object heavy enough to provide sufficient force.

A book presented a likely candidate, of magic or recipes, Mischief was not certain; she made her way atop it, and then leapt from the volume down on the depression of the spoon. The tome toppled, falling upon the handle of the

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cutlery; it sent the mouse hurtling through the air, across the chasm to the hearth up, and almost over the cauldron.

The rodent frantically grasped at the hook that the kettle's handle was set into; finding success, she held on to it as best that she could, in order to stifle her forward momentum, and prevent a fall into the fire beneath her.

In her imagination, the phantom odour of burnt mouse fur lingered while she scurried up onto the hook, and looked down below upon the bubbling pot. No other options remained; her only choice was to willingly fall from her perch, dive into the soup and drink deeply of it, with the greatest hope that she would be granted a return to her usual feline self, rather than drown to death within the potion.

The mouse, deciding that she would rather suffer that latter fate than remain a rodent then, while making mad appeals for a miracle, promptly sank like a stone into the concoction, consuming as much of it as her miniature stomach would permit.

The racoon, her fur saturated with the potion, struggled to emerge from the cauldron; perching upon its lip, she waited for the turbulence within the soup to calm to the point when she could discern her reflection. It soon did so, and Mischief quite abruptly found herself incited into a stance of defence; her back arched, and her mouth opened wide to make a parade of her fangs.

However, her attempts to generate a hiss resulted in no sound being emitted whatsoever. Until she was able to calm herself, and try to desperately decipher what had went amiss, the creature swore furiously, chirping phrases so foul that, could he comprehend him, even a seasoned military man would blush.

The introduction of cat claws had morphed a donkey into a mouse; an addition of mouse-tails had changed that rodent into her present form. Mischief's mind had the briefest of suggestions that it may be the addition of a racoon's whiskers might turn said animal into a feline; there did seem to be a strange sort of sense to her reasoning.

She leapt down from the cauldron, and once again rearranged the furniture; this time, it was in order to permit her re-ascent to the table.

Another browse through the apothecary yielded the required additive, and the catapult was engaged to make delivery. A refashioning of, and a climb up the impromptu chair ladder soon led the raccoon to dip her nose into the potion, tentatively lapping at it whilst steadying herself for the worst.

The reflection in the cauldron was swiftly revealed to be that of the most hideous countenance it had ever been the revolting creature's misfortune to observe. Mischief was a bat, perhaps even the most unsightly of the species; this made it obvious that her attempts at finding any sort of logic regarding the relationships between the ingredients and their effects had failed dismally.

The bat began to panic, for the witch would be back at any moment. Once she became aware of the trouble her familiar had caused, that cruellest of women was certain to make a feast of whichever creature Mischief consisted of at the time.

The quite batty, once-upon-a-cat hysterically and haphazardly flew across to the table. Hurriedly assembling a completely random assortment of ingredients, she quickly ferried the collection over to the cauldron. Mischief deposited them into the brew, and nervously waited while the revised potion reconstituted.

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A liquid of an odour and colour never previously encountered soon resulted from her effort; she drank feverishly of it. She wished to change as soon as she could, and she cared quite frankly not into what; a future lived as any other creature would be preferable to remaining a bat any longer, regardless of however brief that period may be.

Mischief lapsed into unconsciousness, and when she awoke, she found herself with her limbs arranged in disarray upon the cold, stone floor. The familiar sat herself upright, and then gasped at the hairless nudity that was exhibited before her eyes.

She held her hands out in front of her face, and was amazed by their redness; she marvelled over the slenderness of her fingers, and the hairlessness of her palms. Mischief felt her hair, and her skin; then, she rose to stand on her two legs, and began to examine her surroundings from this new perspective.

The former cat was human. Mischief literally stood in awe of her tremendous stroke of good fortune.

Her mind overflowed with all of the opportunities that she would have as a human, contemplating upon the endless catalogue of experiences that existed purely for her to enjoy. Mischief could be a witch; like her mistress, she could take custody of her own familiar, and indulge them in ways that they would undoubtedly love to be pampered.

Alternatively, she could leave the cottage, and go live in the village as an ordinary woman, to have a husband and raise children; the range of possibilities appeared endless. The world was hers to explore, through all of the means that humanity had available to it; the benefits of membership in the world's dominant species were indeed quite extensive.

Then, much to the misfortune of the truly wretched creature, her mistress returned; caught completely off-

guard, the fantasizing maiden was unable to defend herself. To survey the scene, and deduce the events of her absence, took for the witch all of a few seconds; crowing with an evil mirth, she then cast a spell.

An enchantment that would not only change poor Mischief back into a cat, it would also make the familiar a feline eternally, unable to take on a different form ever again.

*"Tails of mice and wings of bat,
Whiskers of raccoon and claws of cat,
All of these combined this night,
To make a grim and ghastly sight,
But, other things these do as well,
Such as forge your perfect Hell,
Hear my words! Listen to me!
This creature, a cat, you will always be!"*

A worse punishment could not have been meted out to Mischief, for the cat, cursed with the knowledge that she would not be granted a further opportunity to experience these possibilities, was to be perpetually haunted by the spectre of those wondrous trappings of humanity that had been everlastingly denied her.

She then, as the cat that had left it a few hours before, skulked back into her corner, and curled her feline body up on her bed to sleep, endeavouring to forget the terrible truth that she would never find true happiness in her lifetime.

In this particular case, curiosity killed the spirit of the cat.

- Fourth -

The Kitten and the Kibble

ONCE UPON A TIME, not too very long after the kind Lady Caroline had taken Edward, thereafter known as Fatticus, to her wondrous castle in the sky, the chubby kitten undertook his first noble quest.

On a daily basis, the unfortunate Lady Caroline had been required to reach up, high above the kitchen shelves to obtain the magical jar that housed Fatticus's kibble. He had soon decided that it would be far kinder to her if he brought the container somewhat closer to the vicinity of the floor; Lady Caroline would be forced to assume such a burden no longer, as it would then become a trivial matter for her to acquire his provisions.

Fatticus was certain that he would be doing her a great service. There would be an additional, minor benefit; should Lady Caroline be mistaken in her estimation of the kibble required to satisfy the hungry little kitten, the close proximity of his fare would enable his incessantly ravenous stomach to be easily and casually satiated.

He would never be hungry again.

Indeed, since it appeared to be quite solidly favourable for all concerned, there could be no arguments against his

motion -- in fact, it would be foolish not to proceed with his brilliant, self-imposed assignment.

Lady Caroline had never wanted for Fatticus to climb up on the kitchen shelving. The kitten was certain that her edict was because she did not wish him to tumble, and injure himself. He did not desire to cause her any unwarranted concern, and so he had stayed the launch of his righteous enterprise until such time as the woman was in the grips of another fierce battle with the apparatus that she referred to as a 'typewriter', a contraption with which she grappled on a regular basis.

His Lady no longer in a position to take any notice, the little kitten had then jumped quietly down from his preoccupied human's lap, and crept away into the kitchen where he began his preliminary assessment of the task that literally lay before him.

Over the wireless, an orchestra played the 'William Tell Overture' while Caroline toiled on her most recent novel, telling a customary tale of high-class romance and affluent social drama. She sniffed repeatedly, the author in the foul clutches of a miserable summer cold; in order to reach for a handkerchief and massage her tender nose, the woman was forced to take frequent pauses in her musings.

She sneezed violently and then, as her outburst had soiled yet another page, groaned in frustration; Caroline would be required to re-type it all. The spoiled paper was jerked from the platen with exasperation -- she began the sheet again.

Meanwhile, the kitten was diligently working to determine his best course of action. The kibble container resided upon the top shelf; its perch was very high, practically to the ceiling in fact. A cabinet dwelled below it, and then two shelves beneath that. Underneath it all was a

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bench that housed a sink and faucet, with a final row of cabinets, lower.

Fatticus diligently searched for any item that he could employ in his quest to climb, but his choices were few; since she held a grave trepidation that Fatticus would harm himself, Lady Caroline had been careful not to leave any such objects accessible, lest he make any attempts to ascend to the countertop.

Nevertheless, he remained undeterred. For the sake of his Lady, the kibble jar would be relocated to a new residence nearer to the floor before the end of the day; the kitten was willing to stake his short life on such a gracious pursuit. Fatticus merely required some trifling assistance in getting his venture 'off of the ground'.

Like a tiger, back and forth he paced in front of the lowermost cupboards, his keen eyes intensely probing his surroundings for any potential avenues upon which he might travel, and complete the first stage of his mission.

Unfortunately, the kitten failed to distinguish any.

Perhaps, he considered, deep within the cupboards there could conceivably exist some sort of passage leading to the land up above. It might just be that there was a secret tunnel, constructed by cats during the days of long ago in their own quest to conquer the mountain of wood and metal.

It was an idea that he felt held sufficient credibility to investigate.

The symphony rose to a shrill crescendo while the writer feverishly related a scene in which her primary characters, a young lady and her youthful escort, danced to a waltz at a masquerade ball. Their tryst was condemned to proceed no further, for her father was of too high a station to

ever grant her the right to marry the simple soldier who held her waist, and took her hand.

They moved to embrace, silently. Then, the music, and even the party itself appeared to fade away; it was as if only the two lovers remained. In a perfect world, their star-crossed souls would be entwined forever in that gentle expression of affection, and never disturbed by the petty notions of society.

In the kitchen, Fatticus, in an effort to pull open one of the cabinet doors, made vigorous use of his paw; however, the thoughtful Lady Caroline had secured it, not wishing the portly little kitten to lose his way in the frightening world that existed on the other side.

All attempts to persuade the gateway to allow him entrance were frustrated, and he proceeded onward to the next with a similarly dissatisfying result. The third door was also unwilling to grant passage to the little adventurer, but the fourth had been improperly fastened; it yielded to the kitten, yawning its great jaws apart, and beckoning him within.

His resolve wavered momentarily. Terrible memories, in which he had been trapped inside another such foreboding place, rose to the surface of his juvenile consciousness, and implored him to take heed of the past lest he repeat that unpleasant event.

Fatticus swiftly cast his recollections aside, calling upon his bravery to douse the flames of his fear; for the benefit of his good Lady Caroline, and for the wellbeing of his belly, his assignment could not be abandoned. He boldly strode forth into the cupboard, and initiated his hunt for the secret passage that the kitten was confident he would soon discover.

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The mouth of the cabinet abruptly shut behind him. It was indeed a dark and scary realm; for a brief moment, it was if Fatticus had only just entered Missus Glenferrie's pantry and, as he had on that day so very long ago, the kitten again turned to panic. Once more, the ill-fated little creature was lost, disoriented and unable to find his way.

Despite this, he had grown; on this occasion, his maturity enabled Fatticus to regain control, taking charge of his fear and mastering it.

Having then composed himself, his search resumed.

Out in the study, Caroline sneezed yet again; however, on this occasion, she was able to cover her mouth before any further damage was done. For a moment, she grew concerned at the newly revealed absence of her kitten, but she was far too engrossed in her writing, and was not willing to waste what little strength she had to rummage about the flat for him.

Caroline carried on with the account of her two lovers covert rendezvous, the clandestine relationship that had blossomed, and the love that they had cultivated; their bond was so harshly decried by her father, a mean-spirited monster that would never permit her happiness. It was a familiar formula; even so, each time she reused the vanilla-flavoured plotline, the writer would repackage it with fresh backdrops, and decorate it with differing circumstances, producing a narrative that her loyal audience would find as engaging as any they had previously read.

The author, regarding her prose, was rather particular; she adhered to a strict set of self-imposed rules. For example, Caroline found contractions to be uncouth and vulgar; one ought not, she would argue, write how one spoke. As well, 'had not' and 'hadn't' were not substantially

different in their consumption of ink; therefore, there was no proper reason to employ such abominations.

Fragments, she similarly abhorred; the use of the word 'and' twice in the same sentence the woman did her best to avoid. Commas and semi-colons were sprinkled liberally. Nouns, pronouns, verbs and adverbs Caroline all chose cautiously, to preclude repetition as much as was feasible. There were several other conventions.

Literature, and of this she was quite firm, was an institution that should not be trifled with. As a result, her language was both formal and dramatic; she would not have it any other way. It was merely how she wrote.

In the meantime, the expedition in the cupboard had continued, all manner of things having been thoroughly investigated by the little kitten and found to be of no aid to his search. The crestfallen Fatticus had been forced to conclude that there was no passage after all; he had combed over every square inch of the cavernous interior until he was completely convinced of it.

In his examination, every carton had been tipped over, and every jar thrown aside, but his ransacking had all been for naught; the brave knight had progressed no further in his quest than when he had begun, and was rather perturbed by the apparent lack of any further options.

Caroline's fictional soldier was a simple corporal, once a stable boy who, as a child, had been known to the Heroine; the boy had run away in a bid to win her heart, to join the Army and return a man. It had not yet been decided if this most recent incarnation of the author's signature tale would be a tragedy, and the lovers would be kept apart, or if it would have a more comic conclusion, allowing the pair to be together. This was completely at the writer's discretion; her

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temperament at a crucial moment in the narrative would lead the fictional couple to their then-predestined fate.

The kitten nudged at the unsecured exit; it happily swung open again, and released him back into the world at large. He had the curious thought that he could scale the edge of the door, and then ascend to the countertop above; there was no certainty that such a plan would succeed, but no further alternatives seemed to be forthcoming.

He pushed a pint of preserves with his nose, rolling it out of the cupboard and on to the floor, where it prevented the door from closing completely; it was jammed ajar sufficiently such that Fatticus could employ his tiny little claws, and clamber up the impromptu ladder.

Currently, the author's mood was one of illness, and her poor health was not likely to sway her decision in any particular direction. Caroline could not bring herself to foster any concern over the destiny of her characters; for all it mattered to her, they could fall into a volcano during a fit of ritualistic pagan passion. It had just so happened that, whilst resting in bed, an infrequent moment of inspiration had chosen to appear to the disease-inflicted author; such instances were too precious to simply be cast off merely due to viral invasion and ignored.

As a consequence, the woman was, when it was a challenge to simply remain upright, instead positioned in front of her typewriter, regaling the keys with a legend of bravery and cruelty such as the world had seen little enough of that it was hopefully still willing to pay for the privilege of reading it.

While Lady Caroline carried on with her own quest to find tasty morsels, hers of the English language, Fatticus was in the midst of making repeated attempts to mount the cupboard door. He had first taken a measured approach by

carefully calculating each grasp, and pulling himself up slowly; however, he was repeatedly confounded when he reached the midpoint of his journey by a loss of grip. He soon abandoned the method, and chose to instead scramble frantically at the edge in the hope that his claws would gain purchase upon the wood a sufficient number of times with which to permit his ascent.

This hasty mode of assault lacked any greater productivity; the kitten was still unable to achieve any greater altitude than that of half the height of the door.

A cry of elation emerged from the study as Caroline stumbled upon a plausible outcome for her romantic narrative. The ginger-haired adventurer froze in his place; Lady Caroline's outburst presented the unhappy possibility that he would be imminently discovered, and then severely chastised. The seconds sluggishly passed, ticking by monotonously until Fatticus was tentatively confident that the human was indeed not heading in his general direction. Slowly and carefully, he resumed his climb; when he approached the cursed midpoint, Caroline emitted another outburst, producing a horrendous sneeze that prompted the startled kitten to scuttle madly to the top.

The author had concluded that a duel, a swashbuckling confrontation of swords, was to be had between the soldier and the father of his affection. They would fight it out in a contest that was intended to be to the death; in its stead, the Hero, in exchange for the hand of the Heroine, would spare the life of his opponent, the Villain.

The sequence of events would likely prove one quite thrilling and exhilarating; her thesaurus would provide a chorus of apt descriptions, with each note equally as appropriate. The narrative could be easily lengthened to fill dozens of desperately needed pages.

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Caroline would propose that his infantry commander had schooled the soldier in the art of swordplay, that officer himself having been taught by the Villain; the two rivals would then be evenly matched. It would provide the essential 'ingredient' that was necessary to make the novel palatable.

Like an alligator clip, Fatticus the Frightened remained tightly affixed to the top of the door. With the goal of preserving his precarious position, his little claws were cemented firmly into the wood. He dared not move, lest the door shake and toss the kitten into the depths below; however, he could not linger on his perch forever. His next manoeuvre would require him to traverse the remaining distance to the countertop -- if he failed, it would spell the end of his enterprise.

Fatticus the Acrobat arose, and then, imitating a tightrope walker, nervously balanced himself upon the edge of the violently quaking precipice. Cautiously, he inched towards the countertop until he was finally prepared to make his leap to safety.

The world up above fascinated the kitten. It held a landscape upon which water dripped lazily out of a twisted metal cylinder that emerged from the wall into a shiny silver bowl; he surmised that the basin could hold a lifetime's supply of kibble. Fatticus the Thirsty paused to refresh himself, catching the droplets with his paw and licking them off; the liquid felt fresh and crisp on his parched tongue. He resisted the urge to loiter at the faucet, for his quest must resume. When his journey had been brought to completion, there would be plenty of time for leisure.

The resolute kitten soldiered on.

Caroline the Novelist similarly continued her epic encounter with her typewriter, fighting to adequately convey

the finer details of the passionate confrontation between the Hero and the Villain; she passed the advantage back and forth between the two characters in true swashbuckling style.

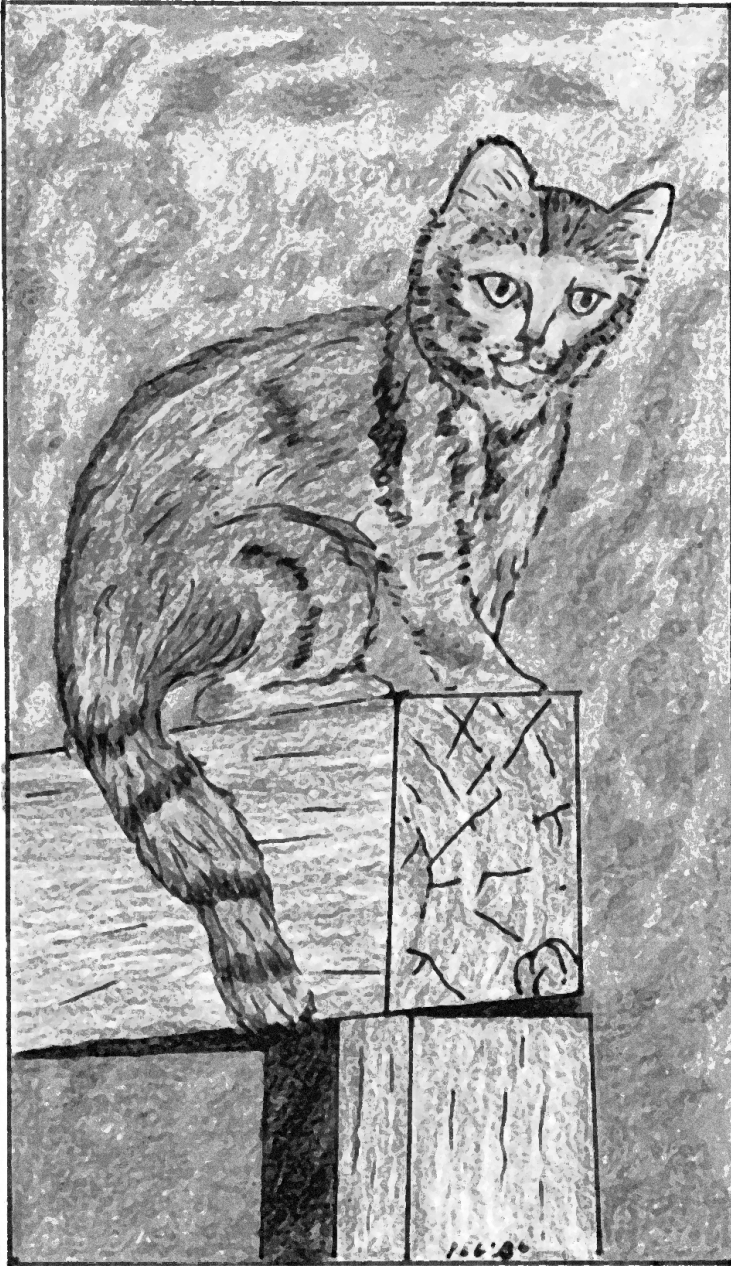
The writer was somewhat pleased with how her proceedings were unfolding. She had revealed that it was the Hero's commander who previously described to his subordinate the beauty of the Heroine, and that the soldier, having recalled the young girl from his childhood was then motivated to seek her out once more.

As well, the Hero knew a secret, a crucial piece of information told to him by his commander on his deathbed. It was a revelation that could destroy the Villain, and a token that the young man could use in additional barter to obtain the hand of his enemy's daughter.

While their swords lay crossed at each other's throats, he whispered it softly into his adversary's ear; the father turned as white as a spectre and, as he absorbed the significance of this ghastly turn of events, the blood drained from his features. His pause gave the Hero the chance he needed to seize the decisive advantage, and place the then vulnerable swordsman in a position of total jeopardy.

Stationed firmly upon the kitchen bench, the kitten contemplated his next move. The two shelves above him appeared relatively easy to navigate, but they were inset beneath the cabinet that the stout little mountaineer would next need to negotiate; it was going to make it tricky to clamber up into the cupboard, even if he were able to open one of its doors. Then, there was the question of how to keep the entrance open whilst scaling the edge of it, as he had done from the floor below.

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The complexities began to overwhelm the adolescent feline, and his anxiety began to build, casting doubt on the future of his mission.

Caroline had her Hero contemplate the merits of permitting the defeated Villain to live quite carefully; over several pages of her rapidly expanding novel, the victorious swordsman internally debated the pros and cons. The secret was indeed rather devastating. The beaten man was nothing more than a common criminal, a petty thief that had inherited his noble title from a remote second cousin.

His death, once the scandal was revealed, would raise no objections; if he disposed of the scoundrel, the Hero felt that justice would be well served.

Nevertheless, he knew that the Heroine still loved her father very much and, despite his despicable actions, she would likely be deeply troubled by his demise. That his death would come at the hands of her Hero would be too painful for her to bear; the young man concluded that he could not be the instrument of such grief, regardless of whatever crimes the rogue had committed.

The Hero chose to spare the Villain's life and in return, the rascal swore to change his wicked ways; as well, to the swordsman that had bested him, he offered his daughter's hand in reparations.

Fatticus casually observed that there were spikes, wooden spears with pieces of cloth hanging from them, protruding from the left side of the cabinet. The kitten was delighted with that discovery, for it meant there was still some chance his task would be completed after all. He scrambled up onto the second shelf, struggling to pull his round bottom up with him, until he was right below the base of the cabinetry overhead.

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He reached, stretching his fat little body out as far as he could, his little paw grasping for a dishrag that hung down in front of him from one of the spikes above. Fatticus reached a whisker's breadth further with each attempt, until the very tip of his outermost claw succeeded to snag the nearest thread of the fabric of the cloth; he was then able to bring the dishtowel into his firm grasp.

Concluding her tale, Caroline painted the final portrait. She ran to him, the Heroine ran to her Hero and placed her arms around his neck; the man held her in a firm embrace, and they embarked upon an expression of love that would take several paragraphs to fully describe. The author penned a display of affection that Caroline was confident would only ever exist within the pages of a romance novel; their kiss was one to which it was certain all others would be measured, and fail to compare.

Then, with the book finished and her writing ended, the ailing but contented author began to rouse her weary legs, to make the journey back to her bedchamber where she could retire for the remainder of the day, and rest her disease-ridden corpse.

Fatticus had since easily conquered the towel; like an alpine climber on a familiar face, his claws had made short work of the ascent. He then swapped over to another rag, then one more, quickly finding himself at the top of the course, perched upon the highest spike like a cockatoo, and surveying his kingdom below.

It was at that very moment that the kitten caught his first glimpse of the flat mouse; the tiny brown rodent had wisely chosen this period of feline indisposition to forage on the kitchen floor for crumbs.

If the ginger-tabby had possessed one, he would have eaten his hat. However, the matter of the mouse would

simply have to wait for another time; his present activity was of far greater significance. He twisted his wide, but nimble body around to his left, straining to reach his tiny little nose over the edge of the cupboard. Then, he leapt with all the strength that he could muster, and landed on the summit.

His victory was imminent.

The kitten ran for his prized kibble jar, ordained to liberate it from its imprisonment on the top of the cabinetry. Fatticus then did what he had come so far to do -- he pushed the crockery off the ledge.

Caroline arrived at the entrance of the kitchen at an appropriate moment upon which to observe the jar fall from its position of relative safety on the topmost shelf. The clay cookie crock, which she had delegated to contain kitty kibble, tumbled from where she had carefully placed it to preclude her fat little kitten from gorging himself, and then regurgitating his gluttony in unfortunate locations such as the seat of her chair.

Much to her surprise but yet not, the kitten was occupying the space in which the container formerly resided, seemingly confused as to whether he ought to be pleased with himself for his accomplishments, or if it would be better to fear the likely consequences of being caught so obviously red-handed.

Whilst Fatticus considered his conundrum, the crock persisted in its fatal plunge, striking the unforgiving tile suddenly; it fractured into a hundred pieces and, as the tiny mouse ran for its life, shards of pottery intermixed with kibble spread out from the epicentre of the impact over the entire length and breadth of the kitchen floor.

The gravely ill Caroline could merely gawk at the horrific event, powerless to prevent the incident from

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proceeding upon its natural course; the concepts of gravity and inertia were demonstrated quite effectively courtesy of a rotund ginger-tabby with an insatiable appetite, and a nose for trouble.

Discretion was again the better part of valour; the kitten felt it best to maintain his place on top of the cabinetry until his Lady Caroline chose to see reason, and her rage over Fatticus's 'accident' had abated. In his defence, he had no prior understanding that the jar would shatter in such a spectacular fashion, and no comprehension that it would fail to withstand the excursion to the floor.

Quite frankly, that the crockery had not been of sufficient standard to tolerate such a minor collision was not his responsibility.

In the end, Fatticus was certain that his guardian would come to appreciate his position, but until that time, he would remain firmly pressed against the back wall, evading Caroline's haphazard grasps whilst the woman attempted to coax him into reach with counterproductive curses and threats of bodily injury.

Once more, it should here be noted that the author would never do anything to intentionally harm her kitten. In spite of his frequent antics, Fatticus had never been hurt by Caroline, and the kitten thoroughly trusted that she could never willingly cause him suffering.

All the same, there was no reason to test that conviction in this context if it were not necessary.

Eventually, unable to get her livid fingers around the feline destroyer of clay cookie jars, Caroline capitulated and, using what little strength she had left to muster, began the tedious process of tidying the calamity that presently populated her kitchen floor.

She had two comforts. First, there was the knowledge that she had completed her novel; that would enable her to purchase a new container of superior durability. Second, she had the certainty that the awful, but evidently rather industrious little kitten would eventually be forced to descend from his tower.

For the sake of Fatticus the Naughty, it was hoped that Lady Caroline would not be quite so cross with him when he did.

- Fifth -

The Barn Cat and the Owl

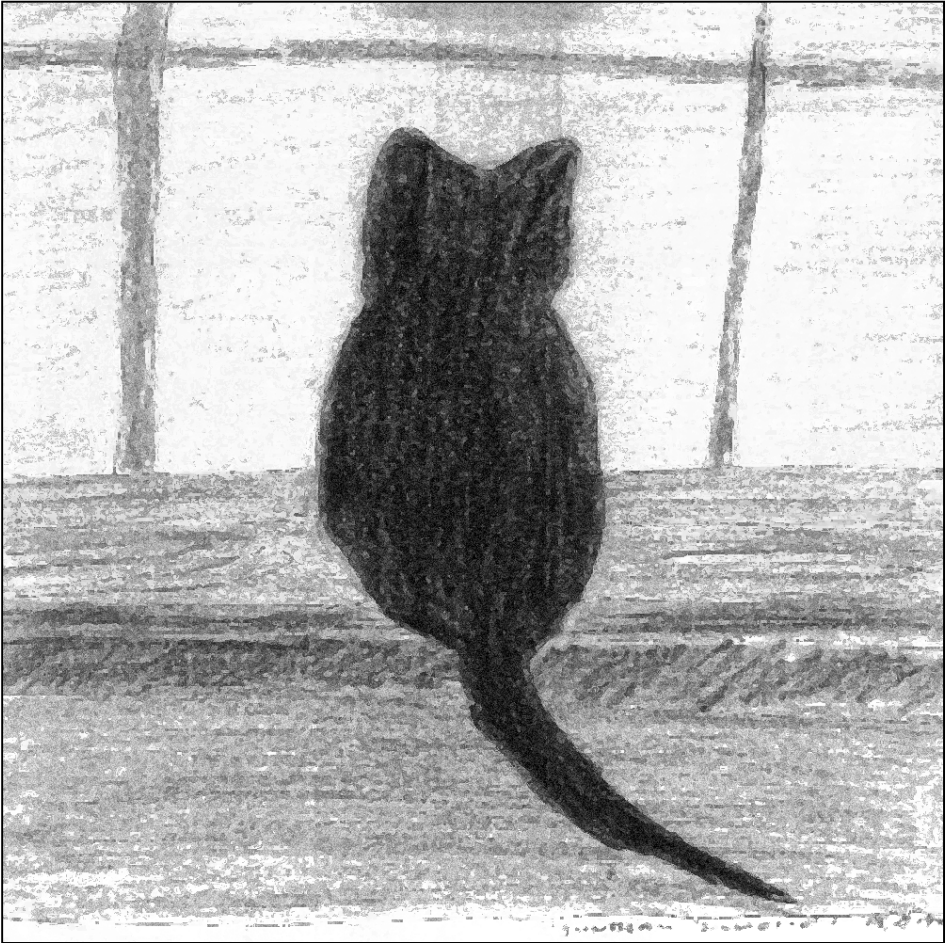
THE LAZY AUTUMN AFTERNOON WAS A PERFECT TIME FOR SAMUEL, nestled in the hay far up in the loft of the barn that was his domain, to take a little nap.

It had been a long, hot summer, and the weary feline had been forced, in an effort to discourage some rather persistent predators from making their meal of the chickens, to fight vigorously; he had also spent countless hours endeavouring to keep the stalls that housed the livestock, cows and horses free from a seeming plague of insects.

A gentle, cool breeze swept through the barn. That respite was welcomed by all of the animals, but particularly by Samuel who, prepared to dream of endless fields of mice and limitless lakes of milk, had settled into his slumber.

However, while drifting off to his ideal world, he heard a faint noise.

The sound was not borne from his imagination -- it was a familiar rustling, the clatter of a nearby rodent. He simply could not be bothered with it at present; Samuel would not abort his well-deserved relaxation for the sake of one miserable mouse. The seasoned hunter would later deal with the creature, and quite efficiently.



He made a gentle frolic around the idyllic cat park that resided within his feline mind. The cat captured a mouse or two, sampled the milk and then, in the long, dry straw of his imaginings, chased grasshoppers and garter snakes.

Samuel could while away the entire afternoon in such fashion and, if given the choice, he would, the sentinel asleep in the loft above the barn, over which he had remained vigilant for his entire life.

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The rustling of the rogue rodent continued, and threatened to intrude into his fantasies, but he did his utmost to ignore it, and block its presence from his self-perceived utopia. Samuel would simply refuse to permit the irritation to ruin his perfect afternoon.

He stretched, and the smoky-grey feline yawned before he resettled himself, and began to resume his daydreaming. The cat, in his efforts to keep the bothersome acoustic indications of mouse activity at bay, found success in resisting the instinctual urge to investigate and, vanquishing the impulses that would only serve to disrupt his drowsy undertakings, the afternoon quietly passed away.

Later, a sharp noise had then intruded. It was not the ceaseless rustle, but rather the distinctive squeal of a mouse in peril that had made its way, from the world outside, into the barn cat's playground.

That rodent's shrieks had promptly awakened the feline from his slumber and, recognizing the unmistakable sounds of flapping wings, he observed a bird fly easily from the barn through the wide space provided by the then fully open doors.

The protestations of the terrified vermin quickly faded, until they were soon heard no further, into the distance of the late autumn afternoon.

Samuel was not quite certain what to make of this new element, or what consideration he should provide to this unfamiliar creature that had made an appearance inside of his barn unannounced, and then proceeded to make off with one of his mice.

On the one hand, the bird had done him a favour; he could spend the remainder of the golden afternoon in peace and quiet, the irritation having been conveniently disposed of. On the other, he would have rather enjoyed a fresh, warm

entrée at the conclusion of his recreational dozing. The cat may be consequently forced to contend with far less attractive fare, in order to satiate his hungered stomach.

Perhaps, Samuel mused, before the sun moved to set, another such ill-fated rodent would make itself known to him. Satisfied with that speculated compromise, he curled up, to soldier forth with his regimen of rest once again. He revisited his land of milk and mice, savouring all that his imagination had to offer him.

The theft of his property by the unexpected visitor rapidly faded from the cat's mind and, his slumber further devoid of any distractions, he concentrated upon enjoying the remains of his presently peaceful afternoon.

The sun began to approach the horizon, its rapid descent in the sky signalling the close to yet another day. Samuel was pleased to hear a return of the characteristic rustling, and he decided, in exchange for that delicious delicacy, to terminate his leisure early and begin the slow, arduous process of rousing himself into a return of his typical hunting form.

The cat yawned and he stretched; in his efforts to resume awareness, he made no haste, slowly building the strength with which he would pursue the mouse that, quite suddenly, had only just departed the barn, courtesy of the repeatedly trespassing bird.

The entire affair had concluded in a matter of seconds. With the light of the setting harvest sun streaming forth from behind it, the bird had flown in -- the crimson beams illuminated the creature as if it were a phoenix composed of fire. Using some undetermined talent to pinpoint the precise location of its target, hidden beneath the piles of grass and hay, the predator had made its swoop down, and over the straw strewn across the floor far below.

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The unwary mouse promptly and masterfully secured in its talons, the bird then, banking as it did so, performed a steep ascent. It glided from the barn, its treasure firmly in hand, subsequently removing it from the reaches of the astonished cat.

By her most recent discovery, the owl was rather impressed. She had arrived there the previous night. The site was initially just one stop of many during her prolonged search for another place to settle. Her old residence had been destroyed by humanity who, in order to erect their own strange structure, chose to chop down her tree.

The odd-shaped structure appeared to be rather well stocked with prey for her to harvest; it seemingly contained a veritable hive of mice. There was a minor menace in attendance; a feline marauder resided within that she would have to observe carefully.

However, she was certain that it would pose no serious threat. Cats were relatively unintelligent animals; their movements and actions were rather simple to foresee. Indeed, those creatures' behaviours were almost as straightforward to predict as deducing the whereabouts of a mouse under a blanket of straw.

On the proceeds of her latest find, she could easily sustain herself throughout the looming winter. The owl had settled in the high branches of a nearby tree, one sufficiently near to the den of rodentry for culinary convenience, but far enough removed from the reaches of the potentially troublesome feline that tended to them.

The owl was certain to be both safe there and well fed. The approaching poor weather would be survived comfortably, while the sheltered mice served to nourish her during the dark, frigid season.

The cat, meanwhile, was distinctly unimpressed. The pilfering of the first mouse he could forgive, but the heist of the second proved to be a major slight for Samuel. It was entirely inexcusable and, that he would permit such an outrageous event to occur for a third time, there was absolutely no possibility.

He may have granted a small measure of respect to the bird for its demonstrated expertise in hunting mice, but they were his rodents and their ownership was absolute. He feared that, if left to its own devices, the rogue would completely decimate the rodent population, having previously been carefully maintained by the feline at a manageable level.

Should it be allowed to continue its activities unimpeded, he could literally find himself, by the voracious winged assassin, soon eaten out of mouse and home. He could not allow such a circumstance to occur. This would be, quite plainly and simply, war -- the cat would defend his stable of snacks to the death, if necessary.

However, he was confident that he would prevail; the bird would prove no match for his superior intelligence, and the campaign would be over in a matter of days, if even that.

Samuel, scrounging some kibble from beneath his empty supper bowl, began to architect his plans for battle. His tendencies for aggression were inflamed by the unfulfilling blandness of his less preferred sustenance, and the feline, incited by his dissatisfied appetite, shortly howled a poignant call to arms.

Closure of the main barn doors had made the cat feel a tad more at ease. That impediment would serve to make it much more difficult for his adversary to achieve such unrestricted entries -- and unimpeded escapes.

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The bird would be forced to enter the barn through the ventilation opening high above the main doors, up in the loft. Samuel would then be provided with the chance to state his desire for the pillaging of his mice to cease, his strongly worded request to be punctuated with claws and teeth.

The nocturnal hunter had no desire to pilfer the barn that evening, for her belly had been filled with her two-stage breakfast to bursting. Instead, the owl, content in the knowledge that her requirements had finally been met, and she need wander no further, would spend the following twilight hours in quiet contemplation, revisiting all of the sights that, during her travels of the last several months, she had encountered.

He stood watch until, the bird apparently opting to make no further appearances, he became too fatigued, and then took to his bed for the night, to consider what such a creature must taste like, and contemplate upon how much satisfaction he would obtain by removing the flying vermin from the sky.

Morning came and, while the owl slept the cat, unaware of the greatly divergent slumber pattern his enemy followed, readied himself for the conflict that was certain to be inevitable.

The doors remained firmly shut that day; Samuel need only wait patiently for the bird to fly through the tempting, remaining opening, and into the loft. Then, he would have it; he would pounce upon the creature and, the feline's brief campaign resulting in a quick victory, pull it from the air.

While the afternoon pondered laboriously and uneventfully forward, the cat grew rather exhausted. Before long, his yearnings for sleep pulled at him with an almost irresistible force. Regardless, he would not succumb for he

must stay awake; the stealthy burglar could choose any moment to make its appearance.

However, it began to appear to Samuel as if the bird would never arrive. He began to consider that perhaps it had departed and, the creature to never again harass the cat or his precious mice, flown off to points elsewhere. In such a case, having a little nap to celebrate this development would certainly be in order.

It was subsequently concluded that the bird had indeed gone, and therefore the cat had won.

Having thoroughly convinced himself that the crisis was over, the cat settled down on his preferred place of slumber to travel once again amongst his tasty fields of mice and delicious lakes of milk, whilst partaking in lengthy pursuits of both grasshoppers and garter snakes. He was pleased; his supplementary food supply was no longer in jeopardy, and to be further consumed only by him, at his discretion alone.

Sadly, it was to be a wonderful, but unrealistic notion, for while the cat dreamt, the owl glided silently through the undefended aperture, swooped down quietly and secured her completely oblivious repast.

The resounding complaints raised by the mouse were, until it was forced to noisily flap its wings in order to affect its escape, the only indications given to the slumbering feline of the bird's intrusion. By the time Samuel had succeeded in reviving himself, all he could do was gaze mournfully through the inappropriately exploited exit and, while another of his prized rodents was carried off by the shameless barnstormer, look on in disappointment.

There were simply not enough mice to go around, not for both the cat and the bird; a doubling of consumption would soon render the barn's mouse population completely

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extinct. Samuel would refuse any notion of defeat; he would not surrender his mice to the foul phoenix, nor would he permit their numbers to plummet to nought.

There was no compromise here -- only one outcome was possible. He would dispatch the bird tomorrow; the cat, having been made painfully aware of his adversary's schedule knew that, in the following, late afternoon, he could expect it to make another appearance.

She would catch another mouse just before she went to sleep. The owl did not wish to furnish the cat with the circumstance to predict her next call to its hay-laden buffet table, so it was prudent to vary the timing of her visits. The cat had been sleeping, but it would likely be awake on other occasions and be given the chance to attack her.

All she was required to do was keep her meal times somewhat variable; then, such an outcome would be unnecessary.

The owl was quite convinced that there were plenty of mice for all. If the cat took offence to her sharing in such abundance, then it was merely demonstrating its selfish nature. She would not abscond with more of the rodents than what was necessary for her survival -- the owl was not greedy, and it would be better if the cat grew to attain an awareness of that fact.

Unfortunately, she had, regarding the cat's ability to properly assess the situation, rather low expectations and was concerned that, if able, it would violently confront her; this recognition provided great motivation for the owl to avoid an encounter with the clawed and fanged simpleton.

Samuel found himself foiled once again. The source of his consternation had arrived as he slept deeply, the rooster having not yet stirred to sound its daily alarm, during the dim light of early dawn.

The brigand had flown in, directly past his slumbering eyes, stolen its rodent bounty and then, without so much as a how-do-you-do, left. The entire matter, at that point, had progressed from a minor slight, into a major affront, the feline quite infuriated that this inconsiderate animal had persisted to demonstrate a complete lack of respect by showing absolutely no regard for his authority over the barn.

The cat felt that he might be forced to assume a course of more direct action, and pay his own unannounced visit to the bird's arboreal sanctuary.

He had observed the bird fly to the tree; the flight to its destination required several minutes. The refuge was quite a distance away, a great deal farther than Samuel had ever travelled, the cat having only once left the protective confines of the fence that surrounded both the barn and the house wherein the humans resided.

A fearsome beast had nearly done away with him on that occasion. It had proven to be a terrible mistake to venture out alone. He had no desire to repeat the experience, and confront the possibility of his own demise.

The cat faced quite the conundrum. He could continue to attempt to catch the bird using his current, if rather ineffective methods, any success with which was likely to take some time to obtain if it was ever to be had at all. Alternatively, he could choose to take the conflict to the bird and, whilst traversing the treacherous plain, risk providing a banquet for one of his own predators.

Finally, Samuel could simply relent and, passively standing aside, permit the bird to take whatever it desired, choosing instead to make a gift of his mice to the one who would have merely persisted upon raiding them.

One would think that some deep consideration of the subject would be required; however, a few more impromptu

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visitations on the part of the bird easily persuaded the cat to prepare for a hazardous attempt at crossing the prairie.

His anger rapidly approached critical mass, and the situation could be tolerated no longer by the furious feline.

He determined that, long after the sun had set, he would creep towards the tree. The bird would be asleep, he reasoned, and vulnerable to an attack. As well, the night would protect him, its darkness shrouding him from the eyes of the enormous beasts that patrolled the plain.

A brilliant plan, he was certain, it would be implemented with little difficulty.

Twilight approached. The cat soon set off towards the tree that provided shelter to his sworn enemy, and to the one who had seen fit to intrude upon his Heavenly existence, transforming it into a living Hell. He would make the bird serve penance for the crimes that it had committed, and exact retribution for its sins.

It would never trouble Samuel -- or his mice -- ever again.

The feline crept slowly closer to his target, keeping himself concealed beneath the tall grass and, in an effort to ensure that he remained without an audience, making his best performance.

This artist considered himself to be a professional.

The owl, having easily spotted the creature soon after it had departed from the barn, contemplated upon its journey towards her with great amusement. The cat appeared to have aspirations involving its ascent of her tree, its effort apparently intended to lead to her capture.

That was a completely absurd notion, particularly when one considered that she was quite wide-awake, and conscious of its activities.

Watching the creature merely served to pass the time. She presumed that it would eventually reach the tree, make the climb and then, when it discovered its 'prey' was not there, suffer severe distress.

She would go pay a visit to the roof of the mouse-infested structure until the fur-bearing animal abandoned the undertaking, and returned to its domicile. There would be some hilarity, once the cat realized what had transpired, and the absolute futility of its efforts dawned upon it.

She was not a cruel owl, but she just failed to comprehend why the feline would take such offence to her endeavour merely to survive. It deserved to be taught some humility. The cat would be schooled to leave her be, and allow her to pursue her natural right to sustain her life through the winter.

The cat, in the meantime inched, whilst visualizing his planned assault on the avian fortress and its occupant, slowly closer to his target. He made complicated calculations involving his future movements, the feline completely ignorant of the enormous beasts that had caught his scent proceeding toward him from the horizon.

Had he been aware of them, he might have chosen that moment to turn and run, fleeing back to the safety of the barn before the monsters overtook him, but he was not and, as such, failed to do so.

Samuel, unaware of the imminent, deadly danger that he faced, instead carried on his cursed path.

The owl, however, noticed the beasts promptly, and quite quickly realized their lethal implication. This

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development would certainly solve her problem. She would no longer have cause to worry that the feline might be given the ability to injure her.

Also, that the cat would meet its demise while moving to hasten hers would be rather ironic, and she would take some perverse pleasure in its misfortune.

Then again, the cat would not be in such a predicament if she had not decided to stay there, if the owl had instead carried on with her search, and left the feline to hoard his mice. As such, the bird was in the slightest part liable for the approaching slaughter. Regarding that, there could be little question, but due to its stubborn nature and primitive inability to simply share the abundance, her adversary held some of the blame also.

In conclusion, the owl saw absolutely no justification for any argument to feel compassion for the self-interested mammal, a creature that would itself rather see her starve.

Samuel, still completely clueless regarding the rather gruesome fate that awaited him, continued his trek towards the bird that he loathed so much. He was wholly dedicated to his task, and blissfully ignorant of any other details.

Had he been paying better attention to the world about him, the cat might have realized the threat, and made a frantic charge back to the farmyard and the safety of his barn.

However, his hate had consumed him, and rendered him incapable of any actions other than those required to satisfy his murderous obsession for the owl.

To the bird, it seemed as if the imminent proceedings had already come to their inescapable finality. Her adversary would meet his end. One would think that it would give the owl fine cause to rejoice, but rather her sense of guilt

began to foster an uncertainty in her resolve. She argued with herself that she ought not to celebrate the ghastly occasion.

Her conscience contended that she had invaded its home, after all. Perhaps the cat, even though it hoarded all of those rodents to itself, was correct to be angry towards the owl's arbitrary actions. She was forced to admit that she had been quite rude -- it really was no mystery that the feline would desire to be rid of her. The portrayal of the creature as selfish to provide justification for her own illicit activities had been equally petty, and insincere.

Truthfully, there was no distinct right or wrong side; each had been acting purely in its own self-interest.

Meanwhile, the advancing feline had passed the point of no return. There was no conceivable way he would be permitted to reach either the tree, or the barn before his hunters would overtake him.

He was condemned -- the cat, his fury and rage towards the owl blinding him to anything but his own dark purpose, was already lost to an enemy that he still failed to realize even existed.

Samuel was certain that he would soon make his destination, and he would gleefully take his frustration out on its source. He would have his desperately required satisfaction, and with that, nothing could interfere.

Unless the owl intervened, the cat would surely die.

There was a strong moral argument for her to engage in such an action, but the overwhelming instinct of self-preservation was also to be considered. Quite a debate took place within the owl's mind, each side presenting its case with rather solid arguments.

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One barrister implored to be rid of the feline, for it was naught but a menace; her own needs took precedence, and they would be well served by his demise.

She was almost convinced; however, the opposing counsel then inconveniently noted that the cat did not deserve such a horrid fate, one that the owl had herself set in motion. The execution would be a crime to which she would be, at a minimum, an accomplice and at the most, she could be accused of direct participation.

Whilst her deliberations persevered, the cat continued his advance upon the tree, and the beasts persisted in their pursuit of the feline. The owl was simply unable to make up her mind; her internal jury remained hopelessly deadlocked on the matter.

Regardless, she would be required to make a decision soon.

Her heart eventually entered an opinion; the tie-breaking voice spoke of compassion, empathy and equity. She made her verdict; the bird would aid her adversary to live in the way she demanded that it assist her.

She resolved, no matter what the immediate or future risks were in doing so, to be accountable for the circumstances she had brought about; despite the potential consequences, it was simply not ethical to allow the cat to perish in this fashion.

The owl distracted the beasts a matter of moments before they would have reached their prey; in the process, the cat was alerted to their ominous presence, providing him with an opportunity to flee back to the barn, and the safety within.

The growls of the monsters carrying on with their wasted effort to capture the owl were the happiest sounds

that the cat had ever heard. While they receded into the distance, he realized a newfound appreciation for the brazen bird that had deigned to save him.

He was surprised by the action that the bird had taken and, the creature's empathy emboldening his own compassion in kind, he was given pause to think.

Perhaps, he pondered whilst he ran for his life, there might be sufficient mice to go around, after all.

Soon, daylight emerged. Thoroughly exhausted by the previous night's events the cat, in his place up in the loft of the barn, slept peacefully. A loud screech roused him abruptly to reality and, still quite anxious from his near escape the evening before, the feline instantly took to his feet.

The bird was found to be perched in the opening above the loft, awaiting his permission to enter. Promptly soliciting his immediate reply, she emitted a second cry.

The cat relaxed when he realized it was she, his saviour and new friend, the owl. He lay down and, in a sign of trust, rolled slightly to display his tender underside, and she accepted his de-facto invitation to enter his domain, the barn.

Samuel had decided that, in return for saving his life, he would share his mice; she, in turn, had developed a method by which she could provide the cat with the respect he deserved, whilst keeping her own needs satisfactorily fulfilled.

The owl suddenly swooped down into the depths of the barn, and then quickly returned, with a mouse in her claw to present in tribute to the cat that reigned over his kingdom of rodents.

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Samuel was suitably impressed. The offering was graciously accepted.

His ego was satisfied, and his stomach even more so.

Proper consideration having since been given, the owl flew down again; this time, she secured her own meal, and then returned to the loft above to enjoy it, with her new feline friend, in what was to be her new home.

The duo would make an unlikely, but happy pair of comrades, the barn cat and the owl.

- Sixth -

Whiskers in the Dark

THE SLEEK, BLACK FELINE moved in virtual silence through the alley, remaining in the shadows with the skill that comes only with great experience.

Her presence, by any but the most scrutinizing observer, was practically undetectable.

She had a mission that night. A message, written in microscopic letters upon a tiny piece of paper, was hidden inside the cat's collar. That correspondence was of great importance, perhaps of relevance even to the future of the whole world, and the courier had been trusted to deliver it to the one who needed desperately to read those words.

Having seen hundreds of messages to dozens of locations throughout her city, she was a veteran of her service. Her metropolis, the cat was quite certain, she was acquainted with better than any other feline, human or creature of whatever description.

There was no alley she did not know, no sewer that remained unfamiliar and no rooftop upon which she, by the pale light of the moon, had not cavorted.

The miniature panther moved throughout each of these collective backdrops with ease and confidence.

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Consequently, every one of her duties had been performed with distinction and, for her stunning success record, the cat was highly praised by her clandestine employers.

That night, she was to navigate her most complex route. It was a dangerous course that wound through all conceivable locales, an impossible journey made sensible only by her expertise. The cat would be forced to stretch all of her abilities to their limits, and exercise them in scenarios that could, with her failure, lead to a premature demise.

Her destination was a human of great stature, someone who could not be seen gaining receipt of her message under any circumstances. Therefore, so that any observation of such acceptance was entirely out of the question, the cat would be forced to go through a great deal of difficulty.

The man resided high above in a building that, lit down below by miniature suns, reached for the sky. Entry was only available from the underground rail, far below the street.

She would need to reach the tunnels by way of rat-infested sewers, patrolled by rodents some of which were as large as the cat herself. Those were only themselves reached through deadly, canine inhabited alleyways, such as the one that she was currently attempting to traverse.

Complete obscurity would be required to prevent a potentially lethal altercation. Any conflict could lead to an inability to complete her mission, and result in absolute catastrophe.

On her carefully predetermined course, the messenger methodically progressed. Her destination was an unguarded entrance into the sewers, which marked the next stage of her journey.



A mackerel tabby, a male, surveyed the scene of the alley from the top of an old weather beaten fence. Her veiled presence in it, while she made her way amongst the slumbering dogs hidden in the rubbish strewn on the ground below, was presumed to be unknown to him.

She eventually ascended up a fire escape cautiously and, darting over the roof of a small block of flats, she then descended down into the alleyway beyond.

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There, she promptly sensed the unwanted presence of that same cat. He had seemingly followed her over the flats, and stood above, gazing down while the stealthy feline worked her way past the next contingent of sleeping canines.

She was rapidly becoming concerned.

Then again, there was no conclusive evidence that he had spotted her, nor that he possessed any ability to track her movements.

Indeed, the tabby's decision to take up his new location may have been a mere coincidence. Further, even if the tabby had been able to follow her, she had full confidence that she would evade him in the sewers.

Regardless, it was a development that the courier still found to be quite unsettling.

It was hoped that, if his actions were not happenstance, the tabby had merely sensed her the way some extraordinarily talented felines were occasionally able to do, and she would simply have to work harder in her efforts to avoid detection by this, or any other overly observant cat.

However, if the male truly was some form of enemy agent, it could mean that she had been compromised, and there might be additional operatives waiting along her route. Henceforth, she would need to employ supplementary measures in order to ensure that her message would fail to be intercepted by those potential hostile entities.

Whilst she passed its den of discarded debris, a peacefully sleeping dog emitted a gentle growl; anxiously assessing the depth of the grim shadow that this incident cast upon her present affairs, she froze in her tracks.

Some tense, but uneventful moments soon confirmed that the canine had not awakened, and she carried forth,

thankfully unable to sense the tabby any further, with his gaze no longer felt by the sleek messenger.

That undesired complication having apparently made a much-welcomed exit, she relaxed somewhat, and wound her way through the remaining alleyways, amongst the rubbish bins and discarded tires, until she reached the gateway into the tunnels below ground.

Alas, he was there.

Looking intently down on the sewer grate, from a tin roof high above, was the troublesome tabby. He watched and waited there, as if he had foreknowledge of her eventual arrival.

Immediate notice was taken of him whilst noiselessly jumping over the final row of fencing impeding her and, the renewed presence of the evening's nemesis then scuttling any hope fostered of an easy outing, she had quickly hidden herself away behind some rubbish bins.

That there was no coincidence was quite clear. Obviously, this was not merely an inquisitive cat satisfying a curiosity driven by her fleeting detection.

This cat had identified her destination and, with his presence there, he was taunting her, challenging the messenger to show herself, as she must in order to progress upon her way. Although entry through the grate, and into the underground would require only the briefest of exposure on her part, that would be a moment during which, should his gazing continue unabated, she could be directly observed by the tabby.

The courier could not have that; however, there was no alternative route. Through that unnervingly monitored opening she must promptly proceed.

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She contemplated -- a distraction would be manufactured. Leaping silently back over the fence, the effortless antagonism of a sleeping dog roused the attention of her rival.

Making a harried dash for the entrance, the messenger then slipped into the tunnels below, unseen.

Within the shadows beneath the grate, she waited for signs that he would follow, or any indication that he was

aware of her deception. None shortly made apparent, she elected to continue, toward the damp and the wet.

The cat forged ahead, into the domain of gigantic rats and foul odours that her poor, delicate feline nose was but barely able to tolerate.

Her memory ingrained with numerous hours of schooled familiarity that had been spent in its putrid dankness, the courier deftly navigated the fetid maze. The only noteworthy interruption to her otherwise uneventful transit was a brief, although hazardous encounter with an unfortunate rodent that had made the mortal mistake of crossing her path.

Through another grated gateway, an exit from the sewer was nearly made into the rail tunnel, but rather it was not, for he was present once again. Standing watch on the opposite side, from a perch atop an abandoned train platform, the mackerel tabby awaited her impending emergence from the malodorous opening.

It was impossible, completely and utterly incomprehensible that he should be loitering there. She was definite that no route existed alternate to the one she had followed, and she had not sensed him pass her earlier, in the sewers.

Baffled, she could only conclude that this adversary must be far more talented than previously anticipated, and that was a complication of which she was completely unprepared.

Her message was in grave peril of remaining undelivered.

That would not happen; at least, not if she could help it. Instead, another, more clever distraction would be constructed.

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Retreating back within the sewers, she would loudly simulate a fictional altercation with the horrid rats. A complex, generally thought to be impassable route was then traversed, with the courier confidently revisiting the presumed, presently unobserved exit.

Upon her return, she contentedly discovered that the tabby had indeed ventured into the pipes to investigate her ruse, and she was alone.

The sleek messenger paused to ponder heavily upon her situation. Her mission was obviously compromised, for the details of her itinerary were apparently well known to this enemy feline. The wisdom of completing her task had then come into question.

It was quite possible that, should she continue with her efforts, she could expose her contact. That would be a quite serious misfortune.

Nevertheless, the communication was of the utmost importance and urgency; she had been explicitly told that, at any and all costs, it must be delivered. That was the basis upon which the courier would make her decision, for the sake and the good of the world at large, to risk compromising the addressee of her precious cargo.

The sly feline, warily winding her way through those abandoned railway tunnels, found no additional indication of her unwanted 'second banana', and only an eerie silence, punctuated by the rumbling of trains in adjacent, still operated passages.

The vibrations mercifully kept the rats away, and she was able to relax, preparing herself for the next leg of her trek.

Into the third sub-basement, of the towering structure housing the human that served as her destination, she would

emerge, through a small gap that existed in its foundation, where it doubled as one wall of an underground rail tunnel.

That was a functioning line, and she would be required to travel a short distance with a small chance of encountering a train.

However, should she wait for a locomotive to pass before attempting to traverse that stretch, such a possibility was then considered to be unlikely.

The derelict subterranean tunnel, the passageway that she currently inhabited, met at a junction with the functioning one. Two hundred feet away from there stood a tiny hatch. Its dimensions, through which to force her lean, diminutive body, were barely sufficient.

Although it was quite late, trains still ran intermittently; it would be unwise to hazard meeting one in such a narrow corridor. In spite of this, the cat grew impatient and, the disturbing thoughts of the tabby long behind her, she boldly struck out for the hatch.

Her rediscovered confidence lasted, of course, only until she rounded the curve, and observed that her foe stood watch beside her waypoint once more.

To make matters even worse, a train was quickly approaching from her rear.

She had no chance of retreat, so she steeled her resolve, and strongly considered turning this situation to her advantage. The tabby, to avoid the locomotive, would be promptly forced to leave his post, driven to an alcove farther down the tunnel. Meanwhile, she would run, underneath the carriages, and dive into the hatch, while the train's tail passed over her.

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The enemy feline ought to have no notion that she had done so and, or as so the courier had previously thought, she would have decisively eluded him.

The littlest messenger utilized the sum total of her emotional strength in order to keep her tremendous sense of terror at bay whilst the train approached, and then overtook her.

With all the speed that she could summon she ran then, underneath the massive mechanical serpent, the roar of its engine drowning out even her sharpest thoughts.

She approached the hatch, and waited for the last carriage wheels to pass her. Not but one second afterward, the cunning feline made a lunge for her target, which she neatly slid through into the sub-basement.

Again, she paused, with baited breath, to see if she would be followed and, that the tabby was aware of her transition, the courier was subsequently given no sign.

Perhaps she had escaped him at last, and her exasperating adversary would trouble her no longer.

Despite her best efforts at rummaging through her memory, she still had not successfully placed the tabby. He did not match any of the descriptions she possessed of known enemy operatives.

This cat was an unknown quantity, a 'wild card' -- that did not sit at all well with the inky messenger.

It is much preferred to face an old enemy you know, rather than to encounter a novel foe that you do not. Happily, it appeared to matter no longer for, if she had not already driven him off her scent, the following labyrinth of air ducting would certainly confound his further efforts.

That was an entertaining hope. She savoured it, whilst progressing towards what appeared to merely be a shabby stack of crates. Those carefully placed boxes provided a path into the ventilation system above.

Meandering its way up the vast structure, the metallic maze advanced one harrowing level at a time. The svelte little pussycat would be challenged to struggle tenaciously up ladders that were designed for humans, not felines and, to finally secure each precious rise in elevation, make perilous leaps of several feet.

She had thirty of these hurdles to surmount; unfortunately, it was the only feasible way to reach her goal. Each one of those ascents would carry the risk of serious injury or, should she miss a jump, or lose her footing, even worse.

There, she was unquestionably the expert. Having made this climb so many times before, she was decidedly the one in control. That the tabby would be capable of besting her here, there was absolutely no chance -- this was irrefutably her arena.

Even so, she felt that it might not be an unproductive activity to set a trap and, although the likelihood the clever feline courier could be was less than remote, ensure that she was presently free from her extraneous shadow, just to be safe.

Were the tabby still pursuing her, he would be most vulnerable when required to scramble from the ladder, up the slippery ducting, to the landing above. Then, she would be in a good position to knock him down, falling to the intersection beneath, injuring him, and halting his unwanted advances.

With her usual careful stride, the messenger travelled the next shaft to its end where, rather than typically

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ascending she, and with the utmost quiet, then craftily returned back along it unnoticed, even by God.

Slowly and inaudibly, her covert talents were tested to their limits, and beyond; soon, the landing that she had been at mere minutes earlier was stalked for an as-yet absent enemy.

Abruptly, the courier sprang into hostile action, wholeheartedly charging at the severely disadvantaged tabby whose head and forepaws had punctually appeared over the edge of the ducting, the condemned creature desperately struggling to pull himself up on to the next level.

Struck loose of his tenuous grip by the blow that his self-declared adversary had expertly delivered, the tabby emitted a sharp cry of surprise, and in silence, he fell.

Plummeting to the ducting below, his eyes stared up, fixed upon his dark quarry.

Sadly, there was neither fear, anger nor shock in his gaze, but rather something the then-celebrating messenger did not immediately comprehend, an expression that she had never before encountered. However, the emotion displayed in the mackerel tabby's eyes became heartbreakingly clear to her in a mere instant.

She was stunned, for his eyes exhibited his irrefutable affection for her, parading the sentiment of his love.

Her mood no longer jovial, she gasped when he struck the base of the ducting in a completely uncontrolled fashion, and then, with no further movement observed, lay apparently lifeless.

The dark feline was desperately compelled by her own overwhelming emotions to abandon her mission, and run to his aid.

However, to such a relatively trivial desire, she could not surrender.

Despite his injuries, of his longing for her, or of her feelings for him, she must continue. She must deliver her message.

The world could be in grave danger if she did not.

A brief prayer by a petite black cat was made for an injured, love-sickened tabby, the same one that, as a direct result of her unfortunate action, lay unconscious, or hopefully only so, beneath her in the ventilation shaft below.

She then turned, and ran, so that she might finish her task quickly, then return to comfort her hurt admirer.

Internal debate ensued. For the sheer volcanic eruption of love that she had observed in his eyes, there were few explanations. This was not mere infatuation, but rather a devotion of such magnitude that she had never observed directed towards any feline, least of all her.

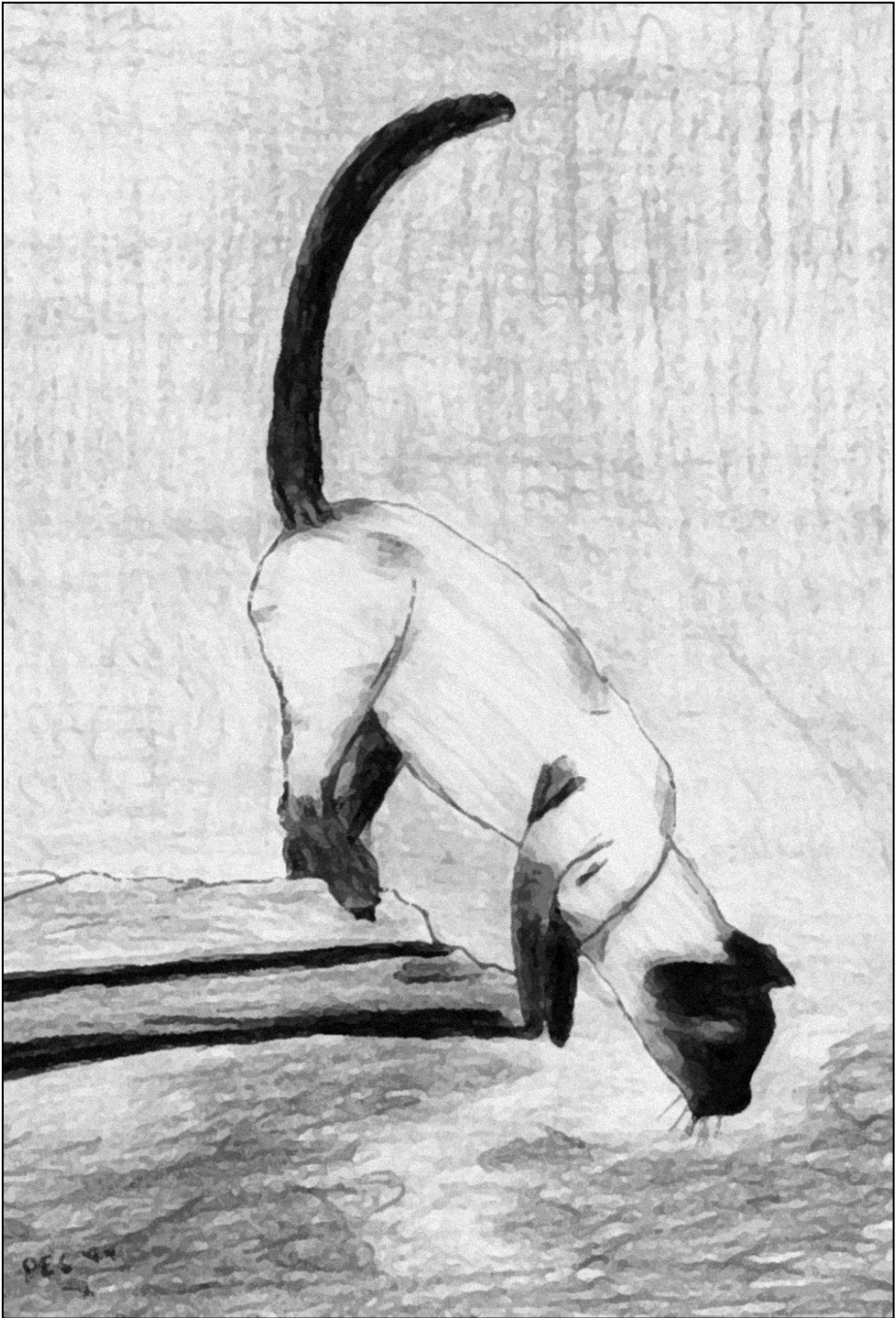
Despite that recognition, the idea he might go to such lengths to merely pursue a romantic interest was still rather absurd. She ruminated. Perhaps, it had been in an effort to protect her, and ensure that she was safe from her enemies.

How much he knew, she was not aware.

Regardless of those presently lesser details, in her immediate quest to ensure the future of civilization she scampered, scurried and climbed until exhausted.

Subsisting on the steeply rising passions that she felt for her tabby, she would swiftly triumph over the ducting, and promptly, the little black messenger had only one remaining trial to pass.

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Along a narrow ledge, affixed to the exterior of the building some thirty stories above the street, a harrowing and final foray would need to be made. Although the distance required of her was only a few yards, any misstep would prove to be fatal, for the feline would then plummet to her doom.

She emerged, from the ventilation shaft, on to the ledge. The hatch, rigged for her later return, then swung shut behind her, preventing any quick withdrawal.

Frighteningly, the courier immediately realized that she was not alone. The Siamese, a known enemy agent, was waiting for her there.

Time with which to reopen the tampered flap, and make her escape was not afforded to her. There was no option available other than to confront him on the precipice.

With the greatest menace that she could muster, the messenger moved towards her competitor and, in similar preparation to engage his rival, The Siamese arched his back.

The one vanquished was assured to pay the ultimate price for their defeat.

Nonetheless, she must deliver her message, no matter what the circumstances and despite any consequence, for this was her task. To complete his mission, her opponent must stop her, all the same.

Harbinger of destruction, the wind shrieked about them whilst the combatants slowly inched closer, waiting for the precise moment upon which one would deem it appropriate to strike. Their altercation would then commence, that confrontation consequently concluding with whatever horrific result eventuated.

Quite unexpectedly, a creature composed ostensibly only of a single howl sprang forth from the hatch and,

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smashing into the unwary Siamese, leapt over the little black cat.

They were both cast over the ledge, to their fate upon the pavement.

It was her tabby.

How he had initially discovered her, the tabby was never quite aware, nor of what force had guided him in his further efforts to find her that night. A part of his soul had distinguished that she would be in danger and, unless he undertook the means necessary to save her, she would face mortal peril.

Driven to follow her not by any ability of sense, but by the power of his feelings alone, the mackerel had then, for the one that he loved so much, made a brave stand, and fought for she whom he had observed and admired for such a long time.

That conflict had been finished in but a single shocking moment.

Morosely, the stunned survivor, her path cleared by the suicidal charge of her forever-nameless suitor, advanced towards the window that she would be swiftly spirited through, and into the office within.

Her vital message was then delivered, her mission complete and, despite her personal loss, hailed as a great success by those unaware of her sacrifice.

The world was safe once more. By a well-meant tabby cat, in love with one who had never known that he was waiting to be with her, the forces of evil had been averted from their wicked determination.

She was soon returned to the ledge and, then struck with overwhelming grief, the tiny cat cried.

Joining with the wind, she howled; another forlorn wail, as if from a sympathetic angel, was carried upon it, sharing in her song of sorrow.

She rapidly realized that it was no heavenly voice.

Rather, it was the tabby.

The courier looked over the edge and, perched on the outcropping exterior to the story below, he was trapped, for his ventilation hatch was unable to be opened from the outside.

The ecstatic little black cat mewed, to tell him that she was present and aware of him. By the incredible happiness then shown in his eyes, a fire subsequently lit in her heart. She frantically made her way through the rigged hatch, along the shaft, and down to the floor below, where the flap that prevented his return inside was quickly forced ajar.

Sparks of electricity flowed between them whilst the two joyfully touched their noses together for the first time -- each then knew the true meaning, and import of love.

- Seventh -

The Tuna of His Eyes

CHARLIE WAS GRAVELY REGRETTING HIS LAMENTABLE DECISION.

His stomach churned violently while he cowered beneath the galley table, itself below the decks of the fishing vessel 'Bait and Tackle;' the ship was presently being tossed about by the tempest in whose clutches it was held as if a toy mouse, facing the brutality of his own paws.

The cat desperately wished that, rather than being there, he had been elsewhere, at a location far removed from the disastrous situation into which he had placed himself. The feline's original aspirations long since abandoned and forgotten, his only remaining concern was to avoid the manifestly certain fate of drowning in the cold, dark seas that surrounded him.

The cries and shouts of humans, caught unaware by the incredibly sudden onset of the storm, increased in urgency and panic while the scene became progressively more desperate.

The calico, his long fur a mixture of patches of brown, black, grey and white, was foraging for morsels lost on the

gently rolling deck of the abandoned galley when suddenly, there had then been nothing other than turmoil and chaos.

The crew attempted to weather the typhoon that had beset them as if from nothing with all of their skill; however, the net failed to be brought aboard in time, and would serve as the ironic instrument of their imminent destruction.

The cat had stowed away, crept on board the coal steamer to help himself to some fresh fish; it would be the best, he had imagined, that he would ever taste.

For many years, the feline had spent much of his time gazing from the window of his seaside home, marvelling when the fishing boats came into dock at the pier below, and offloaded their precious cargoes, a veritable bounty of mackerel and tuna, the two joys of his existence.

One day, he had vowed, he would venture forth with those intrepid explorers, and witness for himself the origins of his happiness. Then, he would partake in those maritime vegetables, freshly picked from their oceanic garden, their beautiful aromas not yet hampered by the encasing of steel around them by the cannery that inhabited the village's shore.

The cat clung tenuously to the lone post that supported the top of the table under which he hid, while the ship appeared to spin in circles, as if a waterspout had taken hold of the boat, and was twirling it around like a child's toy top.

Cutlery crashed in their drawers; pots and pans clattered together, creating an anarchy of percussion that only worsened the feline's tender condition.

The adventure that he had experienced during one recent, late evening from his home, down to the docks had been a journey all of its own. An encounter with a raccoon

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had nearly brought his mission to a premature end; a dog almost convinced him to make a hasty retreat, back to his sanctuary, and lock his dreams into the cupboard that resided in the back of his mind for eternity, the cat to never consider another attempt at such a dangerous excursion again.

Despite all of this adversity, he had forged ahead, and soon found himself down upon the pier below -- his choice of fishing vessels then awaited him.

His first preference was quickly discovered to contain a member of the canine persuasion. Charlie chose not to join on under a captain who had such obviously poor taste in crewmen.

The second boat apparently had a feline crewmate already; although not sighting the cat directly, Charlie could smell him, and decided not to 'step on his toes', preferring instead to leave the fortunate creature to his own wondrous employ.

The third ship evidently carried neither feline, nor canine; the calico happily piped himself quietly aboard, promptly finding a concealed place within which to keep his presence temporarily obscured from the humans.

He sequestered himself within a tiny cavity beneath the bench seat that surrounded the table in the galley, intending to remain there until the vessel was far away from land. Following his self-initiated detection, the crew would have no option but to accept his arbitrary enlistment in their ranks, and allow him to fulfil his fantasies.

It would not be too long, perhaps a day whilst the 'Bait and Tackle' made its way out to sea, before his excitement would overtake his discretion, and he would make his presence proudly known.

One crewmate was familiar with the stowaway feline, the man an acquaintance of the cat's guardians; he had known the calico's name and, when a decision regarding his future aboard was to be made, spoken on Charlie's behalf.

It was eventually agreed that their uninvited guest would be tolerated for just this one voyage, but that, lest he meet his untimely end overboard, he was to stay in the galley at all times.

He had planned to compromise after the fact. That is, Charlie would later escape from his confinement, and seek out his freshly netted quarry, deep within the hold of the ship where perhaps thousands of fish lay waiting for his valued appraisal.

However, Mother Nature had chosen to frustrate his endeavours, and firmly cement this nasty roadblock in the way of his culinary pursuits.

While the wood-and-iron vessel groaned horribly, declaring its dire threat to burst into a thousand pieces, he hung on to the pole for dear life. Unabated, the boat was ceaselessly tossed about by the angry seas that gripped it within their watery hands.

Mere hours before, the crew had happily gathered around the galley table, toasting the end to a fruitful day's fishing. The ship's holds were well on their way to being filled to capacity by the time that the crew would make their triumphant return to the little seaside town both they and Charlie called their home.

The cat had revelled in the jovial mood, becoming the subject of many a treat and kind hand, and it seemed as if all of their plans would proceed without disruption; he would get his wish, and the feline would soon be frolicking in his heaven of fish.

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No one had any notion, especially not Charlie, of their impending misfortune; there was no feeling amongst them that such trouble laid so closely ahead in their path.

Yet, there they were, fighting for their lives in a battle with an ocean that had turned treacherous and chosen to no longer favour them with fortune, but rather punish them with suffering. Charlie had long since, and quite involuntarily, regurgitated his treats much to his considerable disgust; his seasickness had incapacitated him, and left him helpless.

The feline remained stranded beneath the galley table, whilst the humans toiled to save their souls from a fate in the frigid depths of the waters far below.

Charlie desperately wanted to turn back the clock, reverse all of his unfortunate decisions, and return to his window, gazing out upon the pier, quite satisfied to permit the humans to bring the fish to him. He would have no further thoughts of venturing forth to harvest it himself.

The cat was convinced that his carelessness would soon mean not only his ruination, but the finish of all those poor humans trapped aboard the cursed ship with him, certain that the vessel would, at any moment, tear itself asunder, and place them all into the fateful custody of the vengeful seas that sought their cruel demise.

Shouts from above had earlier indicated that the ship faced grave danger from its own net. The weave of ropes, fully laden with fish, was being tugged at sharply by the strong currents that moved below, the ship drawn along with it for a most undesirable jaunt.

Unfortunately, the winch that secured its lines was swinging most violently to and fro as well, and its chaotic movements made it far too dangerous to approach.

One, or perhaps two of the crew had already been severely injured, Charlie had noted, in their attempts to reach the controls that would allow the tether to be released. The captain had subsequently shouted that he would not tolerate his men risking their lives any further in their efforts to permit the fishing boat to run free.

Thunder and lightning punctuated the sombre narrative of their gloomy circumstance, the angered gods of the sea expressing succinctly their displeasure at the uninvited intrusion of the feline interloper that had thoughtlessly elected to tread upon their sacred waters.

Charlie made rather profuse apologies while he strove to maintain his hold upon the table leg, and begged them to grant a favourable outcome to the ship and its crew.

He wished for the seas to abate as suddenly as they had began to churn, and that no evidence would remain that any such incident had ever taken place. The wooden ship groaned once again, followed by the splintering sound of timber soon to submit to the relentless forces acting upon it, dashing any hope that remained within his heart.

Most certainly, they would all perish.

It was fitting that his gruesome end would all be for want of fish. Charlie would never eat another gill-endowed creature again; he swore an oath on it.

The food was utterly distasteful to him -- his previous fascination with the scrumptious seafood was nothing more than an evil, vile mistress, one that had tempted him into her den of destruction, to then take retribution upon him for his crimes of gluttony.

He would restrict himself to consuming animals that lived on land, denizens of the nice firm dirt that did not generally move about so viciously, solid earth that was not so

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wet and cold, and did not threaten to kill those who tread upon it merely in search of sustenance.

He had come to the distinct conclusion that fishing simply failed to be worth all of the trouble, and he would no longer partake in any facet of such a perilous enterprise. If he could only be permitted to walk away, simply depart the ship, leave it to its grim fate and make his way back home, returning to the house that looked down upon the pier, then he would be safe, and this whole nasty business would fade away.

It would become an unwanted memory, seldom reflected upon until it no longer troubled him with its ugliness.

He could not so easily depart, of course. The fortune of the ship was to be shared with his own destiny; its survival directly related to his.

Thoughts began to surface within Charlie's mind of mounting his own expedition, an endeavour to reach the switch whose activation would liberate the ship from its fatal condition, but he was quite reluctant to entertain them. It seemed a rather implausible notion that he could even convince himself to release his grip upon the table, never mind the numerous following steps that would be required in order to attain such a lofty ambition.

It would be a much better use of his remaining time to contemplate the meaning of his all too short existence, lest he be questioned regarding same in whatever afterlife he hoped await him after this terrible tragedy had reached its rapidly nearing finale.

However, despite this sane rationale, his mind eventually relented to the consideration of a possible attempt.

Charlie would be required to climb the staircase that emerged from the galley, on to the exposed deck above. His claws would likely rip free from his poor paws due to the stressors that would be suffered upon them by the same forces that cruelly persisted upon buffeting the boat.

Assuming he had success in his ascent and found himself topside, he would then need to carefully make his way to the rear of the vessel, where the winch was purportedly located.

Along that perilous route, the feline must avoid being tossed overboard by the howling winds, or assaulted by wayward pieces of equipment that, at the behest of the awesome forces that had command of them, were throwing themselves about the ship from stem to stern.

Contrary to his common sense, who felt it best to leave the matter well enough alone, Charlie could not help but visualize his proposed expedition to the release mechanism, one in which, he imagined, he would be triumphant, and free the ship from the tuna-laden burden that hung around its metaphorical neck.

The cat would be hailed as a hero, and pampered for the rest of his life, the remainder of which to be spent quite firmly on dry land. He would be celebrated as one who had the courage to take matters into his own paws, rescuing the ship and its crew from a heartbreaking demise.

As his bravery began to build, the feline prepared to release the hold he had upon his anchor, and cast himself adrift, the calico set to navigate a course for victory.

Then, the ship was nearly flipped completely upside down, flung up into the air so abruptly that Charlie's stomach had failed to recognize the event even occurred until well after the vessel struck the surface of the sea below once more.

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The eulogy for his aspirations was a brief and concise one.

“We are gathered here today to mourn the death of a silly cat’s fancy, a notion that served only to epitomize feline foolishness, and it will not be even remotely missed.”

He faced a mortal conundrum. That his death would come as a result of current events was almost a certainty, but his demise as a consequence of his attempt to prevent such a lethal calamity appeared to be even more likely.

The cat considered that, perhaps, once the vessel finally broke apart in response to the storm’s unrelenting turbulence, he would remain fastened to the table after it was torn free of the ship. Maybe those that had predestined his fate would permit him to survive, the feline floating adrift on the ocean upon the former galley fixture, until rescue chose to present itself.

Alternatively, he would be pulled down to the darkness of the sea floor along with the table, the leg and the ship to which it was fastened. It was impossible for the frightened little calico to find any firm resolution in any of these probabilities; only one thing became apparent.

He was, to paraphrase a human expression, ‘damned if he did, and doomed if he did not’.

The shouting of the crewmen had disturbingly ceased. No sound, other than the increasing complaints uttered by the ship and the roaring of the tempest that inflicted its tortures upon the poor vessel, could be heard by the feline; that was certainly not a favourable sign.

His decision was made. He would make the attempt.

The cat prayed then for a pause, a period of calm in the storm that would be sufficient for the feline to traverse the distance, from the crewmen’s table to which he currently

clung, up the galley stairs, across the deck, and to the stern of the ship.

There, he could activate the switch, and secure not only his safety, but the welfare of those who, he fervently hoped, still remained aboard their much-maligned vessel.

It seemed as if countless hours passed with no response to his appeals, and then the lightening and the thunder eased, but only slightly, the tumultuous movements of the ship losing a mere fraction of their violent vigour. However, the cat felt that it was all the reprieve that he was liable to be granted; therefore, he longingly relinquished his grip upon the post, and steadied his weary legs on the deck of the galley in preparation for his quest.

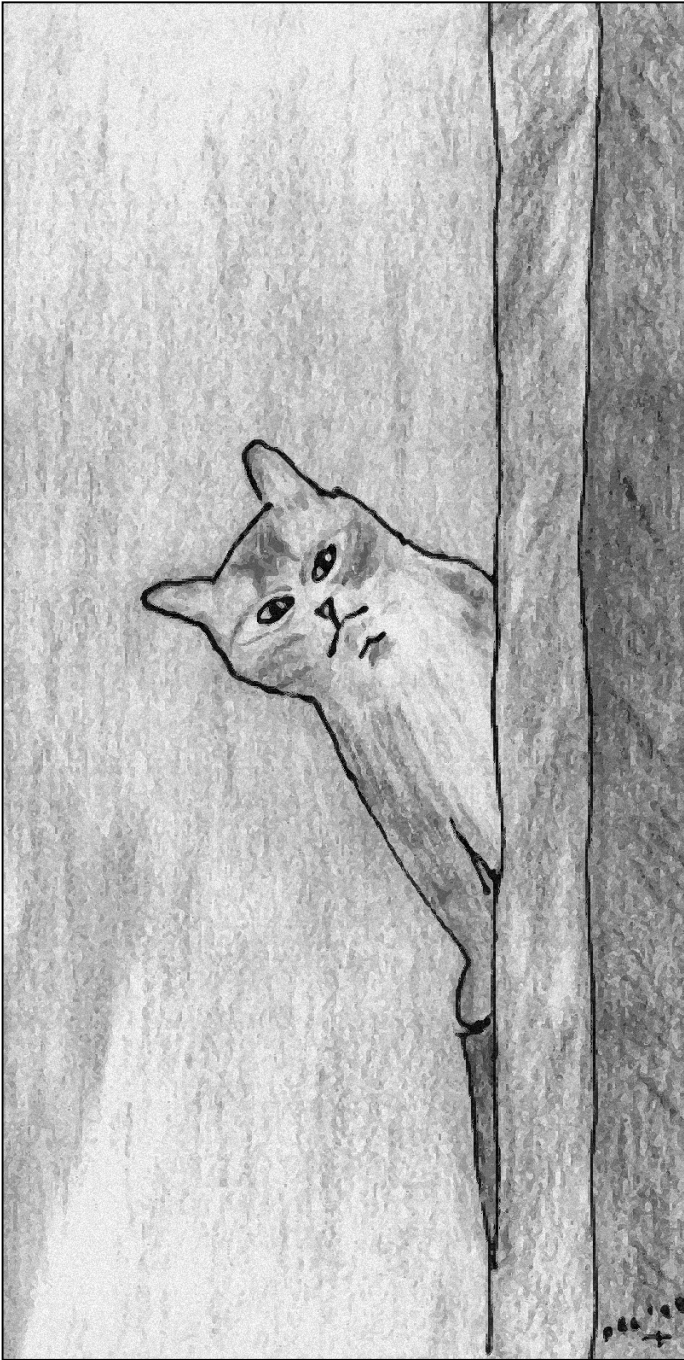
His time could not be squandered. The storm was prone to bring a return of its former fury at any instant, and the cat would not make the shameful mistake of underestimating the power of the sea any further. He ran, or rather scrambled, as that was all his disoriented paws would allow, to the staircase that led to the tempest up above and struggled to pull himself up what was truly nothing more than an angled ladder.

Each step led to its own celebration, and he inched closer to a direct confrontation with the forces of nature that had prompted him to take such bold action.

He pulled, dragged, heaved and hauled himself up the stairs, and soon the cat had conquered his first obstacle. Charlie was exposed to the elements on the outside deck, his reward to be quickly blanketed by the torrential rain that then fell in sheets over him. He precariously slipped about the topside of the ship, his claws providing little assistance in securing him to the vessel.

On a table controlled by a sadistic deity, he became nothing more than a furry pinball.

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His frantic motions granted him some minor control over the direction of his movements, and he gained ground with painful persistence. The thunder and lightening soon increased in frequency, and the storm threatened to regain its former glory, putting an end to his ill-conceived venture.

Illuminated by those flashes of light, Charlie was able to recognize the figures of his human companions; in a bid to avert their loss overboard, they had lashed themselves to fixtures on the deck up above, having found themselves unable to return to the shelter of the quarters below.

The cat was concerned that he, too, might meet such an unhappy end, but he was spurred on with the knowledge that the fate of not only himself, but the rest of the crew was in his paws.

The human's desperate efforts to survive would unquestionably come to naught if Charlie was unable to release the fishing net, and cast off the weight that permitted the sea to persist in its efforts to wreak havoc upon the ship, the vessel that protected those aboard it from eternal imprisonment in the ocean's cold, dark waters.

Whilst he struggled against the elements, the events of his brief life began to play out before his eyes. He saw his mother, who had comforted him when he was a kitten, and had reassured him after his nightmares. She would insist that he was safe, and that no harm would ever come to him.

Her presence there, in his mind, warmed him in his wretched misery, and he continued his journey down Memory Lane, reflecting on the kind humans who had adopted him, the older couple that, he sadly understood, his selfishness had surely caused great distress.

He saw those that he loved very much and would give anything to be with again, to be given a kind word and their loving touch.

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Charlie would atone for his sins, and he would perform whatever services were required of him in order to return to those who loved him. He thoroughly disparaged himself for his impertinence, the curse that presently plagued his existence paling in comparison to the one he placed upon himself, and he steadfastly resumed his battle with the forces that worked against him, gradually making his advance on the rear of the 'Bait and Tackle'.

The storm seemed to take notice of his efforts, and began to revisit its former wrath; as a result, his progress became increasingly more urgent. The awful chorus of the wind and rain steadily rose to a howl while the cat crept slowly towards the wildly swinging arm with which he would fight in a desperate bid to activate its crucial mechanism, and release the now-detrimental fishing net.

The wet and weary calico cat, his muscles crying out in agony over what they had been forced to endure, approached the ferocious iron beast with an overwhelming sense of purpose. The winch called upon the cat to make his challenge, and lock into a battle of wills with the possessed piece of machinery.

Charlie called on what remaining strength he had within him, and made his charge at the metallic monster, frantically grasping at its base and taking hold before he was swept off the stern of the vessel into the frenzied, frigid waters below.

As if on queue, the typhoon resumed its full fury and suddenly, Charlie found himself on an impromptu roller coaster ride. The simple act of holding onto the winch demanded all the stamina that remained to the cat, and even indebted him further.

He would soon fail; the crew would die, their ship destroyed, and his humans would never hear from Charlie again.

It was entirely his fault. His greed had swept him away from them, but he had been a willing accomplice. He ought never have elected to reject the life that he had been given, and gone against the wishes of those powers that held authority over his fragile feline future.

Charlie decided that it would actually be quite proper to condemn the cat to face the ultimate penalty, and seize from him that which he risked so frivolously, but to take the lives of the humans and destroy their ship would be a grave injustice.

Indeed, it would be grossly unfair to punish those members of the crew that had committed no such wrongs, and thwart his efforts to save them. The feline must be permitted to make right the terrible events that he was convinced had occurred on his behalf.

With all of his heart, he prayed that his plea would be heard, and that the storm would provide him with such an opportunity. The cat only wanted to know that, regardless of his fate, he could be confident that his indiscretions would not result in the deaths of those who had made the trivial error of welcoming him aboard their floating home.

His petition was summarily granted. Much to his tremendous relief, the sea grew eerily silent, but he knew it would be only for a moment. The court had ordered a brief recess, to allow the cat to leap up onto the control panel, and press the 'emergency release' button, the switch that would send the weight that shackled the vessel into the depths far below, and free the ship from its bonds.

Charlie sardonically mourned the loss of all the tuna.

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When his respite came to an end, judgment of him was summarily delivered, a verdict rendered, and a sentence declared.

Violently thrown free of the winch, he was cast towards the deck. His awareness of reality concluded with one final painful impact with the unforgiving iron plating.

The calico dreamt then. His visions were of a great celebration. To praise him for his heroic efforts, his mother was there; his guardians stroked him gently and, happy to see his homecoming, informed the errant cat that they had forgiven him for running away.

For saving the lives of the 'Bait and Tackle's' crew, they were all so very proud of Charlie.

He had a profound sense of peace; his brief, but extraordinary struggle had come to a close. The winch was under the strain of its burden no longer, and the ship did not face the danger of being broken apart; the storm had eased, and the vessel returned safely to port.

Charlie was sheltered within his home in the village above once more, the feline to never stray away from it again.

The particulars regarding the release of the winch comprised a curious mystery to the relieved crew. The storm had passed over them, and the sun happily shone upon their aimlessly drifting vessel.

Regrettably, their celebrations were stifled when the sad muddle of a cat was discovered on the aft deck, bleeding and battered; the feline was unconscious but still breathing. Conjecture as to his part in their survival became rampant, but unproven.

The humans performed all the miracles of which they were capable in order to stop his bleeding, and make the

broken creature comfortable but, in their veterinary expertise, the crew was quite limited.

Furthermore, the storm-ravaged ship could only limp its way back to port at a much-reduced speed, and its wireless facilities were rendered irreparable by the tempest it had been so fortunate to survive.

Additional aid was not forthcoming.

Unable to find any other, more plausible explanation, Charlie was quickly established to have been their saviour, and the comatose feline was graced during his triumphant voyage home with a constant companion by his side.

His crewmates told to him tales of previous battles the ship had endured with the sea, recounted fairytales regarding mermaids or serpents, and related whatever else the humans could think of in order to pass the time while they waited for their cherished cat to revive.

The crew all took their turns stroking Charlie gently whilst they prayed for the poor cat. They pleaded with the powers above that the stowaway that had fought so hard to rescue them would himself be saved.

That their hero would regain his strength and wake up, to eat and drink the rewards that they would hoist upon him for his valiant endeavours in keeping them all secure from the ills of the sea, was a wish the crew unanimously shared.

Meanwhile, Charlie remained in his perfect world, with his mother and his guardians, where there was never a thunderclap or a lightning bolt, neither wind nor rain. The sun always shone, the bird's songs never ceased, and there would always be a lap nearby, one upon which the happy calico could catch a quick nap.

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His slumbers were to occur both before, and after a tasty meal of beef, or chicken, but never fish.

The ships came and went from the pier below, but he paid them little heed, choosing instead to focus on savouring his wondrous life within the walls of the house he called his home, and enjoying the existence he had a newfound appreciation for, one that he would never consider turning his back on again.

Perhaps that perfect world was his reward, for it was where he would live out the rest of his days. The cat that was the hero of his seafaring village never made a return to consciousness.

However, the retelling of his brave tale to any nautical soul would result in their great adoration and respect, and soon the calico became known to the maritime world as Charles, the patron saint of hapless fisherman.

It quickly became a common myth that, should a crew inexplicably survive certain disaster, the spirit of the feline was the entity responsible for their fortune, and he should be thanked for his aid in a proper fashion.

Those that he saved were to recite a poem.

Down to the sea did the calico go,
To be tossed about, thrown to and fro.

The seafaring cat was lost in the night,
Unwilling to surrender to woe nor fright,

He would take to task what need be done,
The courageous feline would be the one,

To save the ship, and rescue its crew,
St. Charles may, one day, save you.

- Eighth -

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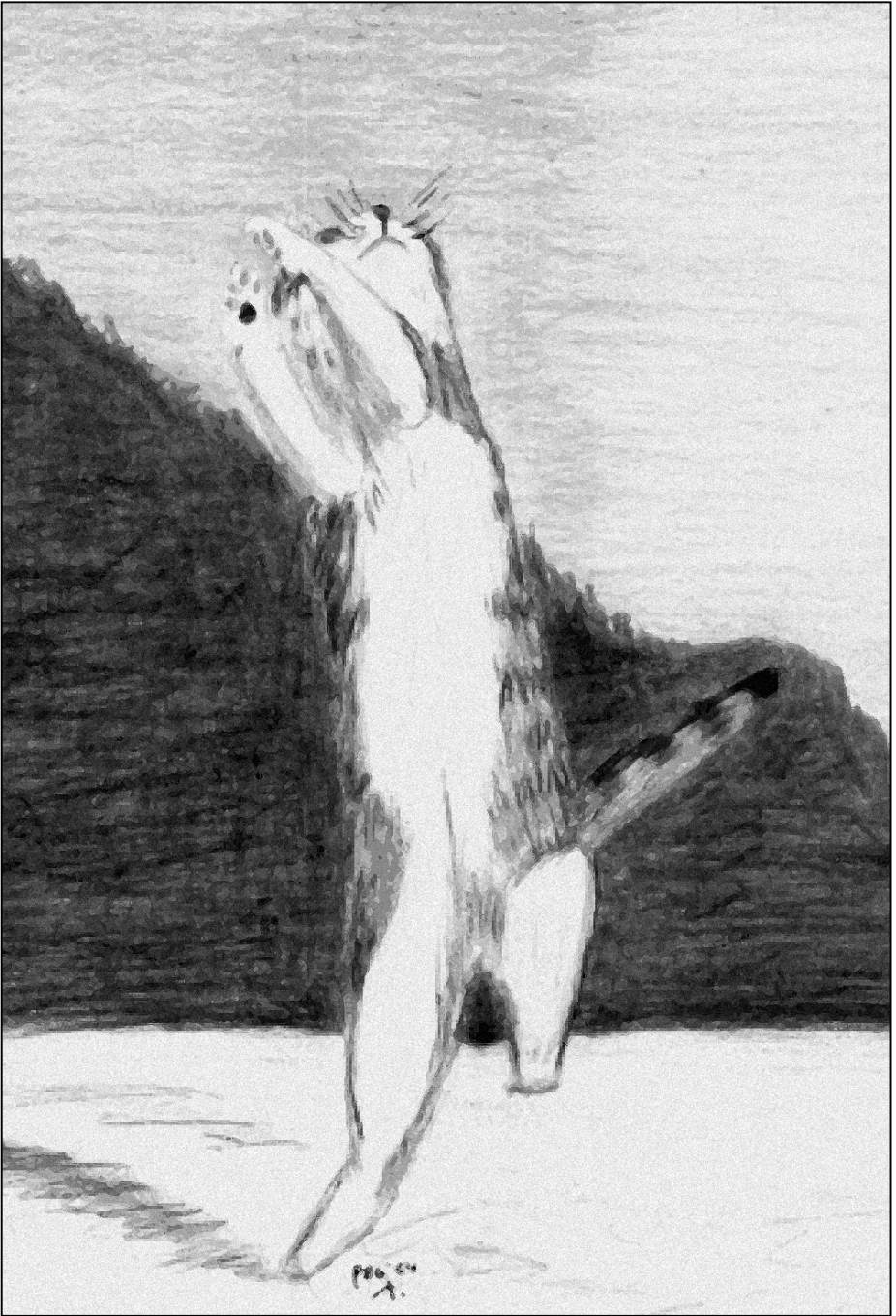
IT WAS RAINING.

Beneath the sheet of wrought iron, under which he was serving out his final days, the old dog in the alley, struggling to find some comfort on the cold, concrete laneway, sighed sadly. The arthritis, in his paws and legs, did absolutely nothing for his demeanour for it made his life quite painful.

The not-that-large, but not-too-small mostly-Doberman and some German Shepherd, with a dash of ten different other breeds of canine was not by nature an angry dog; however, that he was quickly and easily exasperated was ensured by the hurt and grief his own body constantly suffered upon him.

By the cat, he was particularly incensed. He was not provoked to such rage by just any feline, but one horrifying little demon in particular; a cocky British tabby had recently found it amusing to spend his time taunting the unfortunate old dog.

The nuisance would drive him into such fury that the tired canine would be swiftly prompted into taking part in a painful chase down the alley.



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Never able to seize the young rascal, the exercise would serve to achieve nothing, other than to place further strain upon his aged muscles, and the dog was rewarded only with a little more agony, his supply of which was already held in great abundance.

There was absolutely no sport in the exercise. It appeared that the feline, just barely more than a kitten, was being cruel to the decrepit canine just for the sake of it. Still, as far as the dog was concerned the cat, for his boorish, juvenile behaviour, could be partially forgiven.

That was, were he to pass judgement himself, he would grant the animated annoyance a modicum of lenience -- a very small modicum, indeed.

Of course, were the dog actually capable of ever capturing the scoundrel, he would not be adverse to teaching the little ruffian a lesson, and attempt to scare some empathy into the inconsiderate little hooligan.

The weary beast, cheered with that thought, had laid his head down, between his paws upon the frigid, unforgiving cement. He went to dream, to fantasize of the joyous day when he would finally catch that insolent cat, and delight in the picture of justice then obtained by frightening the arrogance right out of the furry little devil.

Those musings improved upon his mood slightly, and he chortled, quietly, or did whatever dogs do to express their mirth while he happily drifted off to the pleasures of sleep; the rhythm of the rain falling on his wrought iron roof encouraged an easy transition to his intoxicating slumber.

He dreamt of a wonderful world, one in which he was a youthful, stronger dog with no cursed arthritis to inhibit his movement, or cause him his accustomed anguish. The canine was king of this realm; he would chase all number of cats down the many garden paths and then, while his warm

breath caressed the nape of their tender necks, laugh -- as well as a canine could -- with his powerful jaws mere inches away from their lethal embrace.

Rather than sponsoring their end by such vile means, the beast would allow the horrified little creatures to escape, and roam free for another day upon which he would feign to hunt them once more.

The dog would never intend harm upon a cat, for he had long ago befriended one such feline; he had served as its defender and protector. He had loved that cherished creature very much, and he could not hurt another of its kind -- if he had any choice in the matter.

However, the brash, young tabby had a talent for inciting him into such a great rage that, should he succeed in trapping his eternal infuriation, the dog was deathly afraid he might unwittingly one day inflict some rather serious injuries upon the cat; that would indeed be quite unfortunate.

He so desperately wished that the juvenile cat would see, even that it could, for but a mere instant, experience the tremendous suffering that the pitiable canine was forced to endure. Then, it would know what cruel torments the naughty feline was promoting in the pursuit of his childish pastime.

It was certain to cease such activities, then -- the enlightened little cat would stop its taunting, and the canine would again be left to his own devices. Free to while away his twilight days in slumber, the dog would dream of a world wherein he was in no pain, where he would run, chase and very nearly capture his imaginary herd of cats, but always let them loose once more.

An odd sound, one not quite a howl, nor a meow but some combination thereof, a strange, unearthly noise somewhere between the two had roused the dog from his

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peaceful, pain-free slumber. The agonies of reality wasted no time in their reassertion, with his various ailments each patently declaring themselves to the old dog's addled mind.

He slowly lifted his eyelids, an effort to groggily observe just what machination of Hades had wrested him so spitefully from his magnificent paradise only to see, mere inches away from his nose, a rain-soaked tabby, the same that had so faithfully served as the bane of his existence, challenge him to a contest.

If it were not for his excruciating pain, the dog would likely have opted to ignore the menace, and revisit his wonderful dreamland. Unfortunately, his partially conscious canine psyche had already associated his returning anguish with the provocative mass of wet fur that brazenly stood before him.

His instinctual mind sought swift revenge for the tribulations that the foul creature had imposed upon him and, before his higher reasoning had the opportunity to object, the aggravated animal was prodded to act.

As had happened so many times before, the dog leapt to his feet with all of the might that his weary, worn carcass could assemble, and then dashed after the fleeing feline, down the rain-sodden alley.

Barking behind his prey in anger, the frustrated old beast proclaimed his rage, his screams describing in exacting detail those horrors that, should the beleaguered canine succeed upon wrapping his gigantic teeth around the irksome feline's delicate torso, he would unleash upon the depraved vermin.

The tabby paid absolutely no heed to his threats, instead making light of the pursuit with which, through the repeatedly demonstrated helplessness of the crippled canine, it obtained vast delight. The huge, feral killer was constantly

eluded by the adorable, little house-pet; of that tale, the entertainment value never seemed to diminish, with applause always following the revelation that the brave cat had once again bested the ferocious dog.

Reaching the end of the dripping wet alley, the bouncy feline made a graceful leap up onto a decaying crate, and then jumped to one atop of that. All the exhausted old dog could do was lunge at it weakly, and growl despairingly; with each subsequent, fruitless effort, his well-worn paws only became slightly more dilapidated

As had happened on far too many prior occasions, devastating fatigue would soon overwhelm the dog, and he would be incapable of persisting; his rage would subside, and the impossible hunt was abandoned, the canine making a despondent return to his place under the piece of wrought iron.

He would then curl up on the rigid floor of concrete, curse the fiend that had tormented him yet again, and fall back into his slumber, to dream of a land in which he felt no pain, a paradise where he eternally chased cats, and chose to set them free.

He had lived in a human's household once. The dog shared that residence with a cat, one to whom he had become a great and loyal friend. The feline had adored him as well; she would curl up against his sleeping belly and purr, her expression of appreciation for the protection, comfort and warmth her canine companion had cheerfully offered, equally contented himself by the camaraderie that she provided.

The two comprised an illustrious pair; her superior mental faculties and his exceptional brawn made short work of any adversities that they faced in their exploits within the harsh urban landscape that lay beyond their sheltered home.

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Together, they would see to the old woman, with whom they shared their abode, watching over her when she fell ill and, for her increasing pain, providing comfort.

One day, after many joyful years together, their mistress had failed to rouse; soon, strange men invaded their dwelling, spirited her away. They imprisoned, and then removed his friend the cat; they condemned him to the cruelty of the world outside.

Too old to be wanted by anyone else, he was destined to conclude his life simply by fending for himself.

The dog suffered such unimaginable loneliness. He longed to be with his friend so very much. She would provide immeasurable comfort for his incalculable misery.

He had learned mortality that day; he had seen the death of the human, and soon he begged for it.

However, all the canine would do was pass the subsequent days patiently, by foraging for scraps in the alley and sleeping as much as he could. He dreamt of better places, happier times and waited for the end that he knew would eventually come, then blissfully relieving him of his miserable life.

His tormentor, the tabby cat, had provided the only disruption to his tedious existence, creating the only chaotic component in his daily routine. Everything else ran 'like clockwork', even the chronically rainy weather.

The unwelcome interloper should keep his distance, and allow the unwanted, forlorn canine, while some measure of his dignity remained, to modestly fade away.

That, on countless occasions, it had persisted in such a cruel diversion by rousing the dog from his serenity, and thwarting the efforts of the wretched animal to succumb to the crushing weight of reality, was the greatest disgrace that

any one, or thing could ever suffer upon him, the dishonourable act of keeping him alive.

Night marched into the sky, and the old dog made his daily forage for food; he found a meal in discarded human rubbish, and then he slept again, this time generally undisturbed.

Soon, a faint barking, from the distance, emerged.

A youthful dog proudly trumpeted the pursuit of his prey; the dozing canine endeavoured to disregard the noise, and shut his mental door upon the disturbances of the world. He fought to remain within the solitude of his dreams, and steel himself inside the metaphorical box in which he hid, the place where his pain kept itself at bay while he frolicked in the sun-drenched garden, and bit at butterflies in the tall, green grass.

Unfortunately, the unsolicited barking chose to move closer and, the old dog becoming furious at the sustained assault upon his precious hours of respite became louder still. The unrelenting commotion increased in intensity, and focussed in upon the alley until the prey in question was observed, fleeing desperately past his hovel under the sheet of wrought iron.

It was a familiar quarry, the same creature that he had chased on so many occasions as to make difficult the recollection of any memories from a time before.

The arrogant, obnoxious, irritating, annoying, frustrating, insolent ruffian of a tabby cat staggered wearily to the end of the alley. His fur, saturated with water, having undergone a prolonged pursuit by an immense brute of a monster, was matted and soiled. Exhausted, the feline was granted neither the luxury of the time, nor the strength required to leap up and escape his aggressor, left without any means to find safety upon those crates.

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His only remaining, although ill-advised course of action was to turn, and face his opponent. The tabby cat would then hiss, growl, and make as much of his small size as his nature would permit.

In turn, his attacker moved to assess the strengths, of which there were few, and the many weaknesses of the profoundly disadvantaged feline. His heartless mind worked to determine the optimum method of dispatching his prey, while keeping the risk of personal injury, by way of the creature's razor sharp claws, to a minimum.

While he persisted to snarl his incessant threats of egregious bodily harm towards the doomed animal unwillingly sequestered in front of him, the beast evaluated his many options carefully; nevertheless, it was plain to all parties, both involved and in witness that, regardless of the mechanism, the dog shortly intended to execute the cat.

This brief list included the quietly observing, elderly canine that remained in obscurity beneath his makeshift shelter of wrought iron.

His recollections temporarily drifted away from the macabre scene before him, and made a return to those days when he had resided with the cat and the old woman in their pleasant, cheery home. The old dog thought of the companionship he found with the feline, and reminisced about the love and affection that she had shown him in partial exchange for his promise to protect her at any cost.

Well aware that she would have wanted him to defend the forlorn cat presently trapped at the head of the alley, he knew that it would have hurt her quite deeply to know that, while such a cruel monster mercilessly dispatched one of her kind, her great protector had chosen instead to lie still, and do nothing.

This would be seen as a grave betrayal, a blatant abandonment of a 'fellow in need'. That it would be one she would have never forgiven, the dog was certain.

The tabby was indeed such a compatriot in distress; that was the sincere truth. Two species, feline and canine, were united by their service to humanity, and the old dog felt that, without question, they were equals. They ought never to harm each other, working together when they were outcast and, whenever the other was in need, provide aid.

Two kindred spirits who should find joy together, they should not act as the instrument of pain, or death to that who should be called friend, not for sport, amusement or, this example in particular, psychotic pleasure.

Taking notice of the gruesome spectacle preparing to unfold in front of him made the old dog so very sad, for he wholeheartedly knew that those two could find great camaraderie with each other if given the chance; such shameful violence was nothing more than a tragic waste of that love, which the world had in minute quantities.

Regrettably, the gloomy reality was that there was precious little he could do about it.

It would be a definite understatement to declare that he was a pathetic, decrepit specimen of an aged, crossbred mongrel. For the magnificent young predator that stood proudly before him, he would unquestionably be no match.

Undeniably, this time the annoying little tabby had taken on more water than he could bail, and his ship would consequently sink -- promptly.

When it had demonstrated such a critical lack of judgment, there was no proper reason for the old dog, which had been plagued by it for such a long time, to come to the

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rescue of one so foolish. It would fly in the face of natural selection.

Stupid creatures die.

In rebuttal, the smiling eyes of his old friend stared up at him, from within his memories, and his argument was then decisively trounced. Her loving, kind gaze emanated from deep within his own soul and, while concluding that he was destined to disappoint her, he whimpered quietly.

Sadly, the old dog no longer possessed within him the spirit required to confront the younger, stronger beast. He was uncertain that he cared enough to combat his own cowardice; his broken heart seemed incapable of facing such a task.

Upon the frightened creature, caught in the end of the alley, the monster of a dog slowly began his advance -- a dramatic increase resulted in the pitch and the volume of the tabby's cries.

That cacophonous trumpet sounded the harbinger of its own inevitable demise.

Meanwhile, the old dog struggled to conceal himself from the remembrance of his friend, his shame striving to become hidden from her devastating gaze.

It would be suicide to defend the cat; even further, to spare the life of that implement of his everlasting torment would take a flight of utter madness. He did his utmost to defend his position, and make his case to that court which resided inside his own mind, but his petitions were futile.

His friend was the judge, and she would never approve of his behaviour, nor would she ever give credence to his selfish arguments.

After the events of the evening had concluded, he would have relegated himself to the status of worthless mongrel, with no morals left to him and no friends, not even in memory. With the demise of that tabby, he would be free, to finally fade away into the annals of meaningless history -- the alley would have functioned as the last station on the pointless track of a forgettable railway.

His insignificant life would have been met with no lessons learned, and no actions of note taken; the dog was destined to be remembered by no one. He would have his much-desired, silent finale, his mortal decline hampered no longer by the egocentric actions of the intrusive entity presently cowering in horror at the wrong end of the alley.

Ironically, if it were not for that cat, he would never have been present to witness its execution, for the daily turmoil incited by the imprudent feline was the only reason that he had failed to slip away from the tenuous embrace of life. Without it, his wish to join the chronicles of obscurity would have long since been granted.

Basking in her loving smile, the thoughts of the old dog returned to those of his one true friend from so long ago. He had promptly come to understand that the increased longevity inspired by the cat was not endowed upon him merely so that he could be present at its demise. Rather, it appeared gifted to permit him the opportunity to rescue what had been his only companion in recent memory, the tabby that had so dutifully kept his spirit alive.

It would be remiss of an old dog to doubt the profoundness of such a purpose.

All of his muscles, bones and associated cartilage protested the abuse that, through the mere act of standing up, he then chose to inflict upon them. Emerging from his safety beneath the wrought iron roof, he barked his

A Friend In Need...

challenge to the monster of the dog before him and, despite the foolishness that such an act of charity entailed, proudly announced his intention to defend the tabby cat.

In stunned silence, the younger animal stopped. Completely disbelieving of his ears, he failed to comprehend the motives of the elderly third-party that had seemingly just appeared from nowhere. His only conclusion was that this antique example of the canine persuasion had lost his mind. Little, if any sense was made by the modern adolescent of that obviously crazy old dog.

Pausing his grisly activities, the youngster anxiously inquired off his elder as to the nature of his relationship with the tabby cat, and why, the elderly canine would place his own life at risk to merely postpone the insignificant creature's demise, in particular.

The lone answer that the old dog could provide was preceded with a heavy sigh. He stated the truth; the tabby cat was his only friend.

Of course, the great beast laughed at him, or engaged in whatever means by which canine's express their mirth. The pitiful relic disregarded as a threat to his massive superiority, he turned away, to resume his preferred method of annihilating his hapless quarry.

Lunging towards the tabby in a murderous assault, the monster initiated his attack, intent on crushing the life from the unfortunate animal with his massive jaw. The fearful, but solemn feline prepared himself for his looming, painful demise, resigned to the woeful anti-fortune that he evidently faced.

Regarding the old dog's intervention, the cat had been appreciative. Surprised by the aid of the canine that he had, as part of his daily routine, teased into combat ruthlessly, although unable to spare him his fate, he would be proud to

consider the dog, for as short a period as that may be, his friend.

That old dog was to reiterate their friendship in a remarkably theatrical fashion. A cry leapt from the enraged predator's muzzle, and the bloodied monster then slowly turned around to face his new quarry, the old dog that had just deigned to bite him upon his hindquarter.

He had held no previous malice towards his elder, but the frail fool had since succeeded at placing himself upon the lethal side of his sensibilities. The event was one of little significance; the youthful fighter would have no qualms about assisting the old dogs aspirations to leave this world behind.

The matter of the cat would conclude soon after.

The old dog fought with a renewed strength of heart. He battled for the memory of his old friend, the canine striving to maintain his honour. He went toe-to-toe with the younger, stronger animal and dedicated his remaining physical assets to campaign emphatically against the needless death of his latest associate, the tabby cat.

His adversary was taken aback by the ferocity the old dog showed, and the sheer intensity of determination that the smaller dog brought to the scuffle. There were injuries sustained by both sides, and the beast eventually elected to withdraw, daunted by his elder's continued display of stamina -- his opponent was mortally wounded, but still insisted to fight.

He would dispose of the cat another day but, for now, he would respect his elder, and leave the noble old dog to die in peace, with the dignity that he deserved.

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The old dog permitted his adversary to go, and then collapsed victoriously upon the concrete in the alley for his task to save his new friend had been successful.

Pleased with what he had accomplished, his companion of long ago smiled at him from her place in his mind, and, the tabby, licking at his face, purred a song of gratitude and love. In affection, the cat then chose to curl up against the abdomen of his mortally wounded comrade, doing his best to comfort his dying saviour.

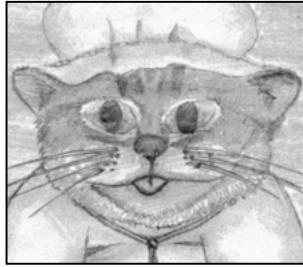
Having persuaded the world to spare the life of the little tabby, in return for the sacrifice of his, the canine had fulfilled his purpose. With the knowledge that his existence held meaning, he would die, and depart this life with the comforting certainty that his old friend would have been so very proud of him.

The dog would pass on in the company of newfound camaraderie, of a cat who held resounding respect and admiration for the one who had rescued him.

With satisfaction and great joy, the dog then died, there in the alley. He did not slowly fade away under a piece of wrought iron alone, but rather left quickly, at the glorious conclusion of a righteous war in the defence of a friend, one who would forever miss his brave old acquaintance, quite dearly.

The End.

Thanks for reading...



When Caroline Hawthorn, the famous Victorian romance novelist, frustrated by writer's block spontaneously types tales she rapidly suspects are the fantasies of her blue-eyed ginger-tabby, Fatticus, these conclude with nonsensical sentences that soon draw the undesired attention of clandestine forces.

Written as if by Caroline herself, **FATTICUS FACES THE WOLF** details the events that follow when, after the stories are published in a children's literary periodical, an unsavoury character draws the widowed author and her cat into a web of conspiracy and intrigue.

An account of love, war, betrayal and loss, Fatticus and Caroline will discover that their world is far greater than they could have ever imagined, and that sometimes what is missing can be found once more.

You may never look at a ginger-tabby in quite the same way again.

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