

PISU'S REVENGE

Prequel to the series The Fairy Gifts



By Susha Golomb

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SAMPLE FROM:
THE FAIRY GIFTS, BOOK ONE
MAGIC SUCKS

OTHER BOOKS BY SUSHA GOLOMB

PROLOGUE



Tefnut as a kitten

ANCIENT HISTORY

I was a pretty happy cat when I was young, born and raised in Ailuria, a little country by the sea, tucked into a small corner of The Greater Elf Kingdom.

Because of the strict laws in The Greater Elf Kingdom about not eating other people--and everyone here counts as people: fairies, animals, even bugs--my mother never taught us to hunt, but all our games were about catching stuff and destroying it. The shredding and ripping was the best part, the climax to an intense game of stalk and pounce. We loved it.

There were four of us, but my brother Pisu was the biggest, the strongest and the most fun to be with. I adored him. Now he's in trouble, nothing new for Pisu, but I don't know if I'll be able to help him this time.

It was easier when we were younglings. Not being able to eat anyone leaves a lot of wiggle room, especially for kittens, and Pisu wiggled better than anyone. There were always 'accidents'. I usually got blamed for the 'accidentally' squashed beetle, and Pisu got off the hook. I didn't mind.

As we got older and more independent we spent more time apart. Once, while I was sneaking around practicing my stealth mode, I caught a flash of Pisu's orange stripes through the bushes and heard a chirpy little cricket voice begging for mercy. There weren't any squashed crickets afterwards so I assumed that the game finished and the cricket had moved on.

When we were six months old, Mom kicked us out. It was time for us to move on, too. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I became a barge cat.

**PART I
SIX MONTHS OLD**



Tefnut learns to swim

**CHAPTER 1
LIFE ON A BARGE -- DAY ONE**

My paws were sore after two days of nothing but walking when I arrived at the mouth of the Cattywampus River where the river barge Grimalkin was unloading bags of dried kibble-fruit into the ocean.

Sitting on the rocky shore, my tender paws tucked under me, I followed with my eyes as each bag went over the side and into the arms of the waiting sea fairies. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the tail of another sea fairy under the boat checking the engine and getting it ready for the trip upriver.

I spent most of my kittenhood watching the long flat boats with their loads of kibble-fruit sail up and down the river and now I was about to become a barge cat. There was an opening on the Grimalkin and I had been accepted as an apprentice.

“Hi! You must be Tefnut,” a patchy tricolor cat called from the deck of the barge. “I’m Felix. Welcome to the Grimalkin.” Felix, was already friendlier than most of the other grown cats I met. He jumped off the boat and walked over to where I was sitting.

“We’re loaded and ready to start back,” Felix said after we touched noses. “Come and be introduced to the rest of the crew.

“Just one thing,” he said as we were about to jump onto the deck. “Our senior cat is called Pussytoes...don’t ever ask him about his name.” The automatic ‘why not’ stayed in my throat. Felix was already back on the deck where three more cats waited to greet me.

“Hello, Tefnut. I’m Pussytoes,” the long yellow cat said, “and this is Neko and Hatooli. Our fifth crew member, Anu, is nesting. She will be back in four or five months when her kittens are grown.” Neko and Hatooli were spotted cats, something I’d never seen before, but then, I hadn’t seen that many cats, just my family and the cats I passed on my journey to the Grimalkin.

I nosed each of them in turn and waited to be told what to do. Any questions I had were gone, pushed out by the ‘why not’ even though I already know the answer to ‘why not’. It’s because Pussytoes is a stupid name.

“Come up top,” Pussytoes said. “The only hard thing to learn is piloting the boat and everyone has to know how to do it. I’ll show you the basics. After that, it’s just watching until you get the hang of it.”

Pussytoes took me up to the roof of their den, a wooden cabin near the back of the barge. Off to one side, a tree trunk with stubs of branches still attached was set into the deck up against the cabin and rising above it. There was a wicker basket nailed to the top.

“Who’s in the cat nest today?” Pussytoes called to the three still on deck.

“I am,” Felix called back, scrambling up the tree trunk and into the basket.

“Running the barge only needs two cats,” Pussytoes told me, “one to pilot and one in the cat nest. Felix will let me know if anyone has a flag for pickup or drop off in plenty of time for me to steer us to shore.

“He also usually sees any sandbars or shallow spots before I do. We all know this river by heart, but rivers change. An extra pair of eyes comes in handy.

“First off, we need to reset the Grimalkin for the trip upriver.” He turned his head and looked, and I followed his gaze to two large buttons set into the floor.

“The button on the upriver side reverses the engine and switches over to the forward rudder which will become the aft rudder when we get started. Got it?”

“No, but I will.”

“That’s the spirit. Now press the button.”

I stared at the two identical buttons waiting for one of them to wiggle so I could pounce on it. Nothing happened, however I did notice that one button was taller than the other.

Trying to look like I knew what I was doing, I walked over, sat down and put a paw on the tall button. I waited. Pussytoes didn’t say anything so I leaned, adding a little weight.

“You’ll have to press a lot harder than that if you want to get this old boat moving,” he said.

I stood up, put both front paws on the button and leaned some more. Slowly, the big button began to sink.

Interestingly, as I watched, the second button began to rise up. By the time the first button was flush with the floor, the second one was just as tall as the first one had been. Fascinating.

“Can I do that again?”

“Go and tell Neko and Hatooli to cast off. When they yowl back ‘All Aboard’, you can push the next button.”

That was when I realized that Neko and Hatooli were not busy doing anything. They weren’t talking. They were both watching me...intently.

I looked up at the cat’s nest. Felix was watching me. Pussytoes was watching me. I was starting to feel like one of Pisu’s bugs.

I thought about our mother’s commanding voice. When she told us to get back to the nest, we got back. Fast. Even Pisu.

I am going to need the mother-voice. Stepping to the edge of the roof of the cabin, I looked them right in the eye, just like Mom did.

“Cast off,” I said. It worked. Neko and Hatooli ran to the edge of the deck, jumped to shore and began undoing the ropes that held the Grimalkin steady.

“I’m ready for the next button, Pussytoes.”

“You don’t touch it until you hear ‘All Aboard’,” he said. His mother-voice was way better than mine. I waited.

Pretty soon I heard Neko call out the ‘All Aboard’ yowl. I thought I understood what the ‘All Aboard’ call meant, but I couldn’t see Neko or Hatooli anywhere on deck. I was confused.

“Is there a problem, Tefnut?” Pussytoes asked.

“What happened to Neko and Hatooli?”

“Look in the water.”

There they were on the river side of the barge, swimming side by side. I was shocked.

“Neko and Hatooli are fishing-cats. They were born next to the river and learned to swim as soon as their eyes opened. Their way-back ancestors were fishing-cats and they love being in the water. They even like it when it rains.”

I shivered at the thought.

“I know how to swim, but it’s not something I do for fun,” Pussytoes said. “What about you? I assume you don’t mind the water or you wouldn’t want to be a barge cat.”

“I like playing with water,” I said, “and I like watching the river but I never thought about being *in* the water. It feels wrong.”

“You’ll have to learn how to swim if you’re going to be a barge cat,” he said. “There will be plenty of times when you won’t be able to get on and off the barge without getting your feet wet, but that’s all. Getting all the way into the water is up to you. Personally, I don’t get it,” Pussytoes said.

“Next time we’re docked, you can try getting into the water from the shore. Don’t do it alone. Make sure one of us is with you. We’re all good swimmers. Now, here’s that button I promised you.

“Those two sets of pedals over there are for steering.” He walked over and put his paw on the nearest pedal. “This pair,” he said “is for the upriver rudder and the other pair controls the downriver rudder. That’s your button on the side. Step on it and let’s get moving.”

This button had a raised rounded top. I slid my paw to just touch the edge. It had a bumpy soft feeling. I moved my paw to the middle. Definitely squishy. Lovely.

I pushed.

I jumped.

There was a new noise. Really new. Something I never heard before...and my feet, I could feel my feet vibrating.

“Feel that,” Pussytoes said. “That’s Grimalkin. She’s purring. Sweetest sound in the world. Nothing beats a nap on the deck when Grimalkin’s engines are at full speed.”

“I knew that,” I said quickly to cover my embarrassment. Pussytoes was too polite to say anything. I decided to clean my shoulder, a good way to avoid eye contact. But my eyes were drawn back to the new button. My paw followed, reaching but not quite touching the new button. I looked up to Pussytoes.

“Press it again and the engine goes off,” he said. “Don’t ever touch any buttons unless I tell you to. Understood?”

“Understood,” I said, looking longingly at the soft squishiness of it.

“Not many cats are able to become barge cats,” he said.

My heart thumped in my chest. Maybe I’m not a barge cat yet, I thought, but I will be. I sat at attention, ignoring all buttons and keeping my eyes on Pussytoes.

“Watch my paws” he said. “Watch the river, and watch the boat.”

I looked down. He was standing with his front paws on the two upriver pedals. I looked out to the river. Grimalkin was turning away from the river bank and moving slowly to the middle of the river. My chest swelled. I was on a real barge and we were underway.

“Your job now is watching,” Pussytoes said. “Watch my paws. Watch the river and watch the boat,” he repeated. I will let you know when you’re ready to start steering, but don’t expect it to happen anytime soon.

I settled down into a relaxed-alert posture and started my apprenticeship.



It had been a long day. The sun was warm on my back and I could feel Grimalkin purring in my ears and in my bones. I watched the pedals. I watched the river. I watched the boat--

“--Wake up Tefnut!”

“Never, never, never go to sleep when you’re piloting the boat. Never take your eyes off the river. Never!”

“But--”

“--When you are a watcher, you watch,” he growled, “and you are a watcher. You will never be a barge cat if you can’t learn to keep your focus. It’s not enough to just look. You must ‘hunt’ the river. Stalk it. Learn it. Never look away.”

I sat up straight, swished my tail, and pretended to be Pisu. I ‘hunted’ the river.

CHAPTER 2

LIFE ON A BARGE -- HUNTING

I ‘hunted’ the river until dusk. I watched how the river curved around and back on itself. The Cattywampus River curves and twists so much that even though technically it runs north to south, sometimes the sun was in front of us and sometimes behind us.

I watched the steep hills that rose up on either side of the river, the hillsides covered with kibble-fruit vines hanging on wooden trellises.

I watched stretches of the river where the water was fast and where it was slow. I watched the places where the river bank was steep and places where it was shallow.

Felix warned us about big rocks in the river and I watched Pussytoes steer around them. I watched until the sun was low in the sky and I watched as Pussytoes steered the Grimalkin closer to shore.

“Time to step on that button again,” he said.

“Why are we stopping?” I asked, even though I was more than ready.

“Don’t dawdle or we’ll drift,” he said. “Hurry up. Just one hard push. You don’t want to let it go off and on and then have to turn it off again. It’s bad for the engine.”

I was already up and at the button pushing it sharply and quickly releasing it. It wasn’t as much fun as the first time, but it was satisfying.

“Am I finished watching?” I asked, trying not to whine.

“Drop anchor,” Pussytoes yowled out to the deck cats. “We are done for today, Tefnut. You did a good job.”

As soon as I heard the word ‘done’ I dropped to the floor, lying on my side, four paws out, and closed my eyes.

“If you’re interested, there are buttons that work the anchors,” Pussytoes said.

“Can I do them tomorrow?” I asked without opening my eyes. I didn’t hear his answer.

It was night when I woke up. No moon, but more stars than I had ever seen from my birth nest under the trees. There was no sign of Felix or Pussytoes. Neko was stretched out on top of the bags of crushed sea-fruit that the sea people had given us in exchange for our dried kibble-fruit.

When kibble-fruit gets old, it goes from moist and crunchy to smooth, shiny and rock hard. I came close to breaking my teeth once when I tried to eat a dried out kibble-fruit that had accidentally got mixed in with the fresh. We all learn to avoid it.

The sea-fairies call our dried kibble-fruit power-nuts. We use them to run the engines on our barges. They use the energy from the dried kibble-fruit to power their lights.

Their eyes are like ours. They can see pretty well in the dark but there are places in the ocean where the dark is way past cat eye or sea-fairy eye ability. Our old dried-out kibble-fruit let them live anywhere in the ocean they want and the crushed sea-fruit they give us in exchange gives our nutritious but bland kibble-fruit a most delicious fishy flavor.

Hatooli was sitting at the edge of the deck staring down at the water. Except for a small twitch at the end of her tail, she was perfectly still.

After a carefully executed and delicious stretch, I jumped down to the deck to see what it was that had captured her attention.

But before I got there, she was suddenly up in the air and over the side. I raced the rest of the way, pulling up short when I got to the edge of the deck. Hatooli was in the water talking to a big silver fish.

“Bye, Fred. Thanks for the game.”

“Bye, Hatooli. See you next time.”

She swam over to the steps that all barges have built into the sides for drinking water, pulled herself up the first two steps, jumped from the middle step to the deck and started to tongue dry her fur.

“Welcome to barge life, Tefnut,” she said between licks.

“Who’s Fred?”

“He’s a fish I know. Usually, I just catch the fish and let them go. Fred likes to play a bit after I catch him.”

“You hunt fish?” The fur on my back started to frizzle. This was very exciting news.

“Only if they’re big enough to catch without teeth or claws.”

“What about ‘accidents’,” I asked, thinking about the occasional squashed bug from my kitten days.

“No accidents, no mistakes allowed...ever. Our mother taught us to swim and fish. She also taught us claw control. We weren’t allowed to fish until we were perfect.

“Will you do it again, so I can watch you?”

“Again? Haven’t you had enough watching for one day?”

“I’m rested. Do it again, so I can see.”

“Fine. Don’t come too close. I need lots of room.” She sat at the edge of the deck, hunched over, staring down at the water.

“Night fishing is a little tricky,” Hatooli said. “It works best when the moon is out, but a clear night like tonight with plenty of stars is good, too. The night light makes the fish shine, especially the big ones.”

I could see lots of little flashes of silver light in the water.

“Are those fish?”

“Those are little ones. Look here comes a small school of big fish now.” She was tensed and ready to pounce.

I could see almost the whole body of each big fish shining in the starlight. There were five of them coming right to the barge.

Hatooli leapt into the air, all four legs stretched out almost sideways. There should have been a big splash, but the water hardly moved as she landed right on top of the biggest fish, wrapping her legs around it.

“Gotcha,” she said as it wiggled out from between her paws, hurrying to catch up with the rest of the school.

“Thanks, fish,” she purred, managing to swipe its tail with one paw just before it swam out of reach.

“Hmpff!” said the fish, with an extra burst of speed.

My whole body shivered with excitement. I crouched at the edge watching for more fish, ready to leap into the air and capture my prey.

“Uh, Tefnut. Do you know how to swim?”

I snapped out of it and sat up.

“Neko and I will be happy to teach you--”

“--and fishing. Will you teach me to hunt fish like you do?” I held my breath, waiting for her answer. This was nothing like killing dead leaves or poking at poor innocent bugs. It was worth any amount of wetness.

“Mom used to tell us that Ailuria is a special place,” Hatooli said, “and that we were lucky to live here. I think she’s right and I teach my kittens to fish like true Ailuricats. Absolute and perfect claw control comes first. Take it or leave it.”

“But I already know how to control my claws. I’m really good at it,” I said, pushing the memory of the small scar on my sister’s nose and how it got there, out of my head.”

“Not ‘Good’,” Hatooli said. “‘Perfect’. Nothing less is acceptable for an Ailuricat.”

“Anyway, how about learning to swim first, youngling?” she said.

“I’m not a kitten. I am six months old,”

“Right. How about first light before we sail?”

“I’m ready now,” I said enthusiastically.

“I’m ready for a nap,” Hatooli said. “Be on the shore at first light.”

CHAPTER 3

LIFE ON A BARGE – SWIMMING

Hatooli had joined Neko at the top of the sea-fruit pile. I stayed on deck for a while but the sky clouded up and it got harder and harder to see the fish. Walking the short distance to the edge of the cargo pile, I curled up with my back against the soft sea-fruit bags and closed my eyes.



I may have been asleep, but my ears were awake. I heard Neko and Hatooli padding down the cargo pile. I was at the edge of the shore side of the barge before they got down to the deck.

“Good morning, Tefnut,” Neko said. “Are you ready to start swimming?”

I wasn't so sure about getting into the water and jumping into deep water to catch fish didn't feel as exciting as it did last night. But Pussytoes said that a barge cat had to know how to swim.

"I'm ready," I answered.

The river came to me a little sooner than I expected. Leaping off the barge I imagined myself landing on the grassy shoreline next to Neko and Hatooli, but didn't quite make it. I landed with my paws in the shallow water of the river bank.

It was cold and wet and muddy and yucky. I lifted one front paw and shook it. Then I lifted a back paw and shook that. I started to tip over into the yuckiness. Putting both paws back in the wet, I prepared to leap the short distance to shore.

"Stop!" Hatooli yowled. "Stay where you are." I stood up, my ears drooping, and lifted one paw out of the water. I looked pitiful and I knew it. It was all I could do to keep from mewling like a kitten.

"Stay in the shallows and keep walking until you get to the back end of the barge," she said.

So I walked along the wrong side of the shoreline, lifting each foot completely out of the water for a moment of 'not water' before I put it back down. The mud was squishy like the bags of sea-fruit, and it held onto my paws for a moment when I lifted them up. Interesting.

The water didn't feel less wet, but it didn't feel cold anymore. I tried pushing down a little harder with my leg to see what happened. Sure enough my paw went a little deeper into the mud. I wondered if I could do that with the sea-fruit bags.

I had a little trouble pulling one of my back legs out of the mud. When it came out, it came out fast and made a little splash. Hmmm. I tried hitting the water with a front paw. Bigger splash. It's still water, but it's also kind of fun.

I passed the back of the barge and, forgetting where I was, I sat down to let Neko and Hatooli know that I was finished.

Big mistake.

My tush was wet. My tail was wet. It was so gross. I jumped straight up, all four feet in the air, out of the water. It didn't last.

I landed back in the water with an even bigger splash and now my stomach was all wet. This was awful.

I was out of the water, trying to decide where to start tongue drying first, before Neko and Hatooli could say anything.

"We're impressed," Neko said. "It took my mother two days to get me to do what you just did."

"It took me four," said Hatooli.

I kept licking the awful wetness. What were they, a week old maybe two, when they had to get into the water? I'm an adult. Six months old.

I could see Pussytoes and Felix out of the corner of my eye. They were sitting on the deck watching. I'm not an apprentice, I'm the entertainment. I wanted to melt into the earth like warm snow. I kept licking.

"You're nice and wet, Tefnut. You're ready for the next part," said Neko.

"Maybe tomorrow," I said roughly, without interrupting my licking.

"By tomorrow, you will have had all day to think about what happened today. You might change your mind," Neko said.

I don't want to change my mind, I thought. I want to be a barge cat and all barge cats know how to swim.

"I'm ready," I said. "What's next?"

"What's next is that you go back to the water and keep walking until you get to the steps at the back of the barge.

"That's impossible. As soon as the water gets deeper than I am tall, I'll fall to the bottom of the river."

"You won't sink. Swimming for a cat is like flying for a bird. They push the air away with their wings. You push the water away with your legs. Just keep your head up and keep walking, only a lot faster."

I stood, walked the few steps back to the water's edge, and stopped. I looked down at the water. It isn't even puddle deep here. I can do this. Carefully, I put one paw into the water. Hatooli was right. My paw was already so wet, I could hardly feel the water. I kept walking.

When the water reached halfway up my legs, a couple of spots that were still dry got wet. It wasn't nice. If I walk any further, my stomach will be in the water.

I stopped again. Even though it's already wet, I really, really don't want to put my stomach in the water.

Gingerly, I lowered my wet tush back into the water until I was sitting down. Then I let the rest of my still wet tail slowly fall until it was under the water too. It wasn't great, but it was acceptable.

The back end of my stomach was now in the water. Taking a deep breath first, I walked my front legs forward, each step putting a little more of my stomach into the water until I was stretched out on the ground with all of my stomach in the water.

This is all right. Not great, but okay. I crawled forward and the water slowly crept up the side of my body until only my head was out of the water.

Having all of me in the water isn't too bad, so I kept moving forward, straightening my legs as I got deeper until I was standing straight with my feet on the bottom.

The barge is only about ten feet away, and yet, the distance seems vast. I looked back at Hatooli and Neko for encouragement.

"Push the water with your legs, Tefnut," Neko said. "It's just like walking. You can do it."

Why did I not feel encouraged?

I lifted my head high and pushed.

This is not walking. I am running as fast as I can, but my head is out of the water and I'm moving forward. In fact, I'm almost at the barge. Who would have thought?

I got to the steps and pulled myself up like Neko did last night. Dragging my body up one step at a time, I flopped down on the deck in the warm sun, too tired to dry myself.

All four barge cats were right there waiting for me.

"That's one boney cat," Felix said, looking over my wet body.

"Don't worry," said Pussytoes, "A season on the Grimalkin will put some muscle and fat on her."

I lifted my head to speak.

"So when do I learn how to hunt fish?"



I napped through our departure and missed getting to push the anchor buttons again. Oh, well, tomorrow.

Most of the rest of the day I spent hunting the river with Hatooli and Neko who were on pilot and cat nest duty.

There was a flag on the river around midday and Felix showed me how to tie off the barge at the dock. I helped unload sea fruit to the waiting cats. I think I looked like a regular barge cat to them.



By the time we had sailed up and down the Cattywampus half a dozen times, picking up kibble-fruit where it was ripe and dropping it off where it wasn't, I had learned the river well enough to help pilot the boat.

I was never officially on duty, but I steered the barge while the cat who was officially on duty watched me. At first I could only pilot for an hour or two.

Eventually I worked up to half a day and by the end of the season, I could spend the whole day without breaking my concentration.

Working the cat nest was just as hard in a different way. The basket was very comfortable and nobody would notice if you had a little cat nap.

Every night after a cat nest day, Pussytoes would ask me how many times I fell asleep. He never got angry with me, he would just say, 'Fine. In five days you'll be back on cat nest duty. You can try again.'

I learned.

Being an apprentice pilot took up most of my time, but when I was free, Neko or Hatooli would wrestle with me. They would sheath and unsheath their claws while we wrestled but I had to keep mine in all the time, no matter what.

If both of them were free, we would wrestle all three together. I had to sheath my claws with one of them and unsheath with the other. That was hard.

I couldn't go by the color of the fur I was attacking because they were so similar. Even worse, I could have one paw on one cat and three paws on the other and I had to be perfect. With all my attention on my claws, I got beat up a lot, so my wrestling strategy tended to be mostly defensive. I didn't mind. It was a lot like growing up with Pisu.

There was a lot of hissing, a lot of growling and occasionally a little blood. It was my favorite thing to do.

Just when I started to get the hang of it, they invited Pussytoes and Felix to join in. Now I have four paws and four cats to keep sorted out. This is going to have a very long learning curve.

CHAPTER 4

LIFE ON A BARGE -- PISU

Like most tomcats, Pisu had no interest in the close confinement of a barge. He had joined the harvesters, groups of cats who traveled all over Ailuria to wherever the kibble-fruit is ripe.

Because the Cattywampus River is so twisty, the vines grow and fruit faster or slower, depending on where they are. Every twist in the river means different amounts of sun, rain and wind. Even the temperatures are different. It doesn't seem that different to me, but plants are fussy that way.

Our varied topography means we have ripe kibble-fruit all year round. As barge cats, our job is to pick up the fruit where it's ripe, and drop it off at the kibble-fruit distribution points where it's not yet ripe.

Even though the harvesters are usually nearby when we are picking up fresh kibble-fruit, I didn't see Pisu until my third trip downriver. It was very exciting.

We were about halfway through the downriver trip and stopping to make a pickup of ripe kibble-fruit. I was on the dock, about to wrap the aft mooring line around a post when I saw him.

"Pisu," I yowled and nearly dropped the rope, which would have allowed the rear end of the Grimalkin to float away from the dock.

"Pisu," I purred. "What are you doing here?" I let go of the rope and sat on it to keep the Grimalkin from drifting.

"I thought I would see how my favorite littermate was managing as a barge cat."

"Oh, I'm not a barge cat yet, I'm still an apprentice barge cat."

"An apprentice? How long does it take to learn to push bags of kibble-fruit off a barge? Harvesting is way more complicated and I learned how to do it in about five minutes."

"We all take turns piloting the barge and I can't do it until I know the river perfectly. If I make a mistake, we could run aground, or worse."

"You should let somebody else do that. It sounds like too much work."

"It is tiring. That's why there are so many cats on the barges. No one can do it all the time."

"Speaking of tired, don't you get tired of never being able to go anywhere?"

"The whole river is our territory, Pisu. We travel through it every day." I finished wrapping the post, passed the rope under the hook to make it secure and let the end fall to the ground.

"I have to help with the loading. Will you come aboard afterwards? I can show you the Grimalkin and I want to introduce you to my companions. I have so much to tell you. Please wait."

"Actually, I thought I might hitch a ride downriver to the next harvest."

"Even better. There's not much loading to do. Wait here. I'll be back soon." I raced happily back to the barge to join Felix at the bag-end of the crane.

The sleeping cabin is on the upriver end of the barge, and the jib crane is at the other end. It's made from another tree trunk and basket plus a long pole at the top, called a jib, that is attached under the basket. The pole can swing up, down, and sideways and has a short rope at the end with hooks for holding bags of cargo. The basket has pedals that control the pole.

Hatooli was in the basket, working the crane, and Felix was already on the cargo pile waiting for Hatooli to swing the first bag from the dock over to the pile.

"Who were you talking to?" Felix asked as we unhooked the first bag and made sure it was in a good spot where it wouldn't roll away.

“Guess what,” I said excitedly. “It’s my litter mate, Pisu. I told you about him, didn’t I?”

“Oh, you told us all right. So, the wonderful Pisu is here. Do we get to meet him?”

“I told him he could come aboard as soon as we finish loading. Is it all right if he comes a little way downriver with us?”

“Absolutely. We often get cats who want a ride. The only rule is that none of us objects. But nobody will. We all want to get to know Pisu.”

As soon as the last bag was safely stowed, I ran back to the dock to collect the rope and Pisu. All four cats were waiting for us on deck.

“This is my littermate, Pisu,” I said. “Pisu, these are my barge mates, Pussytoes, Neko, Felix, and Hatooli.” Each cat stepped forward and touched noses with Pisu as I introduced them. There was no head butting or butt sniffing, it was all very formal.

“We’ve got to get this barge moving before she drifts onto a sandbar,” Pussytoes said. “Tefnut, you can show Pussytoes around and get him settled down before you come up top for watching duty.”

Pussytoes and Felix went up to the roof of the cabin to start the engine. Neko and Hatooli raised their heads to us and headed back to the cabin, presumably for a nap.

I showed Pisu all around the barge and since he would be staying at least overnight, I showed him where we kept our food and how to use the steps to get to the river when he was thirsty. The bottom step was wet and a little slippery. He was uncomfortable.

“What if I fall in?” Pisu said.

“Just crouch down on the bottom step. You’ll be fine.”

“It’s wet.”

“Of course it’s wet, Pisu. We’re on a boat.”

“Hmpff.”

“You sound just like a fish I know.”

“You talk to fish now?”

“It wasn’t talking to me. Come on, there’s a couple more places I need to show you.” I showed Pisu the small hole in the deck behind the cabin in case he needed to squat. He didn’t like that either. Then, I showed him my pillow in the sleeping cabin.

The whole boat is shared territory. Only my sleeping pillow is mine and mine alone. They are made by the sea fairies and are not easy to come by. Every other decent sleeping spot on the boat is shared. Cat piles are not unusual. Those are the rules we live by. We don’t have to like each other, we just have to get along.

“Whatever you do, Pisu, don’t sleep on any other pillow except mine.”

“What are they going to do? Throw me overboard?”

“Probably.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Just don’t do it. Tonight, after the barge is anchored we’ll have more time to talk. I want to know everything.”

I left Pisu and went to resume my watch with Pussytoes and Felix. It was hard to stay focused on the river. I couldn’t wait to see Pisu again.

But Pisu is easily bored and it wasn’t long before he jumped up to the cabin roof and started walking around like he belonged there.

“Pisu, I was going to show you the pilot’s deck after we dropped anchor. It’s not good to come up here while we were sailing unless it’s important.”

“Tell that kitten to get off the forecandle,” Pussytoes called down from the cat’s nest.

“What’s he doing up there?” Pisu asked, hunching up his body to jump.

“Pisu! Don’t do that,” I said. “You can climb the cat nest after we anchor.” He stopped and looked around, spotting the tall button that we used to change the direction of the boat.

“Can I touch this?” He asked, putting his paw on the button and leaning into it. “What’s it for?”

“Move, cat!” Felix growled right into Pisu’s ear. Startled, he jumped back off the button.

“Cat. I don’t care who you are. You don’t come up here when the boat is moving and you don’t ever come up here unattended. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Pisu said and got off the roof fast.

At dusk, we dropped anchor and I went to find Pisu. Pussytoes and Felix headed to the cabin for a nap. I was tired too, but I was all bristly with excitement.

At home, once we were weaned, Pisu preferred to nap near the kibble-fruit. He liked to have a snack when he woke up so that’s where I expected to find him, wherever the food was.

He wasn’t there. Instead I heard terrible screeching coming from the cabin.

“Get...off...of...my...pillow.” It was Felix. I never heard a cat that mad.

“How dare you wake me up!” Pisu screamed.

Pisu! He’s in trouble. I raced back to the cabin. In front of me I saw Neko and Hatooli running into the cabin.

I screeched to a halt at the entrance. All five cats were standing in full battle mode, on their toes, eyes narrowed, tails in rapid swish, fur standing on edge, not just on their backs but all over, and ready to attack.

Nobody’s backs were arched. Nobody’s ears were flattened. Nobody was backing down.

Neko, Hatooli and Pussytoes were facing Felix and Pisu. Felix and Pisu were inches away from each other, eyeball to eyeball, mouths open wide, in full tooth.

Pisu was standing on Felix’s pillow.

“Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine,” Pisu hissed, possessively.

“Move off my pillow now, you stupid fat-assed overgrown kitten,” Felix growled loud enough to hurt my ears.

“Felix. It’s not his fault,” I said. “I forgot to tell him about the pillows.” Felix kept growling.

“Felix,” I yowled, as loud as I could, trying to get his attention. “It’s my fault. I forgot to tell him about the pillows. Leave him alone.”

Felix took a step back but didn’t look away or change his posture.

“Get off my pillow, you stupid cat,” he growled, a little less loudly.

I couldn’t get between them. There was no room, so I stood next to Felix and looked Pisu in the eye.

“Pisu. Get off that pillow,” I said calmly, with no growling no hissing, “...or I’ll cram your teeth down your throat with my head.”

Pisu looked at me and stepped forward, his back feet still on Felix's pillow. His fur softened slightly.

"Get of the pillow, Pisu," I said. "All the way off. Now."

Pisu stepped off the pillow and sat down in front of me. I sat down, careful to not break eye contact with him.

Pussytoes, Neko, and Hatooli sat down. Felix stayed standing. Everybody's fur was starting to smooth out.

"Look," Pisu said calmly as if nothing had happened. "There are five cats and six pillows. Which one is mine?"

"That one," I said, indicating my pillow.

"That's your pillow," he said, making a liar out of me. "Which one is the extra one?"

"There are no extra pillows," Pussytoes said. "The sixth pillow belongs to Anu. She's nesting."

"So, she's not here. I can use her pillow, right?"

"Anu is a barge cat," Pussytoes said in a threatening voice. "Nobody sleeps on her pillow."

"That's a dumb system."

"It's our system," was Pussytoes' only explanation.

It's a very good system and Pisu knew it.

Everyone except me and Pisu moved to their pillows, not relaxing, just settling down and watching us.

"Come on, Pisu," I said, nodding toward my pillow, "Let's get some sleep."

Pisu looked around at the watching eyes.

"I think I'll sleep on the deck tonight," he said.

"Good idea," I said, "You go ahead, I'll join you in a minute." I remained sitting near the entrance.

"We've had lots of hitchhikers," Felix said after Pisu left. "We never bothered to tell anyone to stay off our pillows and we never had to."

"Oh, come on," said Neko. He's only a couple of months out of his nest. He's big for his age so it's easy to forget how young he is. Besides, he's a harvester. They're always moving around. They don't have permanent sleeping spots."

"Well, he certainly is feisty, standing up to all four of us," Hatooli said. "I wouldn't want to tangle with him a couple of years from now."

"He was scared," I said. "How could he not be with all four of you ready to attack? Pisu is good at bluffing. I think he would let you kill him before he let you know how frightened he was."

"Not a smart thing to do," said Pussytoes.

"Pisu is very brave," I said in his defense.

"Tefnut," said Felix. "You didn't forget to tell Pisu about the pillows, did you?"

"No, I didn't forget. But you were ready to kill him. I had to do something."

"For a youngling, just out of the nest," Pussytoes said, "you are surprisingly mature...unlike your littermate who seems like he could use a little more time with his mother."

"I was just like Pisu when I came to the barge. I'm learning a lot from all of you--"

"--and a budding diplomat, too," Pussytoes added.

"I'm not being diplomatic. I mean it."

“That’s what makes it so diplomatic.”

“I’m not being diplomatic,” I insisted. “I just know what I want. I want to be a barge cat and I want to stay friends with Pisu.” I wanted them to understand.

“Being with Pisu,” I said, “is like living on a barge. Life is always interesting and fun. He doesn’t mean to misbehave, he’s just forgetful sometimes. He completely forgot what I told him about the pillows.

“He was invariably forgetting stuff when we were little and getting into trouble. But he’s so funny. He would get all silly and lick Mom until she purred, and wasn’t mad at him anymore.

“I am used to Pisu. I know what to do when he misbehaves. I just pretend I’m Mom. He always listened to Mom.”

CHAPTER 5

LIFE ON A BARGE -- SETTLING IN

You have to be pretty easygoing to be a barge cat. When our boat was full of cargo, there wasn’t a lot of extra room and we were constantly bumping into each other. Hissing happens, but anyone who can’t resolve the issue with a quick conciliatory sniff doesn’t belong on a barge. Pisu did not belong on a barge. There was always tension when he was around.

The next day, Pisu asked to be let off the barge. I was on the cabin roof watching and Neko was piloting. Pisu was on the deck and called out to me.”

“Hey, Tefnut, pull over. This is where I get off.”

“Pisu,” I called back, “We can’t, there’s no place to pull over. You have to wait until we make a stop.” I could see cats on the hillsides moving among the vines. They must be the harvesters.

Felix stuck his head out of the cabin. He had that ticked off look that meant he was napping and not interested in waking up.

“Hey, Pisu. Don’t mind her. You should get off here.”

Felix sauntered over to where Pisu was standing near the edge of the deck. His voice sounded friendly but there was a slow swish to his tail and his whiskers were pulled back in protective mode. He didn’t look friendly.

Pisu noticed too. He stepped back a little closer to the edge.

“Most hitchhikers get off wherever they want,” Felix said, kindly. “We’re pretty close to shore right now. You shouldn’t have any trouble swimming the distance.”

“But I can’t swim,” Pisu said. His eyes went wide and he hunched up a little more.

“Of course you can, Pisu. All cats know how to swim. They just don’t know it.”

There was a loud splash.

“Peeee-sue” I yowled at the top of my lungs. I hit the deck and raced to the side, ready to jump in. He was in the water, paddling back to the steps.

Felix stood on the bottom step with his ears forward, his tail still swishing. He used his body to fill up the whole space.

“Not this way, Pisu. You want to get to your harvester friends,” he said politely.

“You pushed him,” I screeched. I was all fluffed out now and headed right for Felix.

“Nonsense,” Felix said. “It was an accident.”

Even if I believed him, it was too late. I was in the air. I landed on the step and Felix landed in the water. Pisu wisely turned and headed for shore.

Nobody said anything when I jumped to the deck, walked to the cabin and leapt back up to the roof where I quietly resumed my post. In fact, nobody said anything for the rest of the day.

Felix waited until we were all together that evening and everyone was watching. He came over and gave me a head bump. When I was too surprised to do anything, he rubbed my side and purred. I didn't purr back, but I gave him a head bump and sat down. He started cleaning my ears.

That's was when I really learned what it means to be a barge cat.



It was a few months after Pisu's visit that Anu came back. She was a white cat with orange ears and she was even better at hunting fish than Neko and Hatooli.

Anu would sit on the bottom step and watch for a certain kind of fish. When she saw it she would go into the water, head first. She would be underwater for a while and then come up with a fish in her mouth.

It was amazing. The first time I saw her come up with a fish in her mouth, it made my fur tingle. Anu opened her mouth and the fish swam away. Then she was back under the water hunting for more fish. I never imagined that living on a barge could be so wonderful.

This was too much to resist. I slipped into the water, paddling around, keeping my head high, more excited about the hunting than I was unhappy about being wet. But I couldn't bring myself to put my head into the water. It was the only part of me that was still dry.

I tried fooling myself. Getting back out, I crouched down on the bottom step, drank a little water then, accidentally on purpose, let my face sink a little into the water. As soon as my nose was underwater, I panicked.

"Anu," I asked her when she got out of the water, "What do you do about breathing when you're underwater?"

"I don't do it," she said. "You have to hold your breath."

"But just thinking about not breathing makes me want to start pulling my fur out."

"Try not breathing while I'm underwater," she said. "You won't be able to do it as long as me, but if you practice, you will get better."

So now, I thought with a sigh, I'm learning the river, learning claw control and learning not-breathing. I just hope I get to learn how to hunt fish before I'm too old to be interested.

I did eventually learn, and when I birthed my first litter, I found a spot by the river where the water was shallow and still. I made my nest there and taught all my kittens to swim and hunt fish like true Ailuricats. Claw Perfect.



It was a long time before I saw Pisu again. When he did come back it was late at night. He was all wet and smelled like the river. He curled up next to me on my pillow. I licked him dry while he whispered stories to me about where he had been and what he had seen.

Our country is small and harvesting the kibble-fruit is not time-consuming. Pisu, being Pisu, spends most of his time exploring. He got to know every inch of Ailuria, out to the boundaries and well past that, places that few cats were familiar with.

Pisu continued to visit me occasionally, usually at night. I was always happy to share my pillow with him and Pisu was always happy to tell me about the things he had seen.

He told me stories about the halfandhalf human village in the valley below our hills and about watching the dryads, that lived at the top of our waterfall, come out of their trees to dance together.

Eventually, he left The Greater Elf Kingdom and visited the cats who live with humans and the cats that live wild in the human world. I learned a lot about Ailuria without ever leaving my comfortable barge.

Life on a barge is good. It's comfortable and interesting and I was very happy for a long time, but...things change.

PART II SIX YEARS OLD



Claw Perfect Practice

CHAPTER 6 THINGS FALL APART

Queen Snickerdoodle, who was old when I was born, just kept getting older and frailer. It was not long after my second litter, when she was all skin and bones and couldn't keep down more than a little bit of food at a time, that she finally announced that it was time to choose.

Every cat in Ailuria breathed a sigh of relief. For cats to agree on something big, like who should be the next Dominant Female Over All is next to impossible. This is why the last job of the DFOA is to pick the next one. Ailuria works because the only thing we all have to agree on is that the Dominant Female Over All has the final word.

Snickerdoodle had been out of touch for so long, that she didn't know who to pick, so she got her advisors to offer a small selection. Her only input was that they should all be barge cats.



There were eight of us sitting on the grass next to the waterfall that night, watching old Snollygoster slowly walking across the cat-sized swinging bridge that connected both sides of the river.

Snollygoster was gray and white with long fur that disguised the fact that his stomach was so big it dragged on the ground. Arthritis made him slow and careful on the bridge.

I was near the back trying to look inconspicuous when Pisu sidled up beside me.

"Hello, Pisu," I purred. "Are you coming to the interview with me? How nice."

"Never mind that. Go in first, Tefnut," he whispered in my ear.

"Are you crazy? I don't want to get picked."

"I hear she's totally gaga. By the time she gets to the last cat, she won't remember you. Go on."

"Queen Snickerdoodle is ready for the first candidate," Snollygoster announced when he finally stepped off the bridge. Nobody moved.

Pisu bit me hard on the shoulder.

"Hey!

I jumped.

"Ah, Tefnut. Excellent. Follow me."

"I'll get you for this, Pisu," I hissed under my breath and went to meet my fate.



At snail's speed, I followed old Snollygoster back across the swinging bridge to the retired barge anchored in the middle of the river. The cabin was normally used as a receiving room for the reigning DFOA, but Snickerdoodle was now living there full time. No one could remember the last time she walked across the bridge to the riverbank.

We arrived at the middle of the bridge and I followed Snollygoster onto a short connecting bridge to the Royal Interview Platform. He stepped to the side so that I could see Snickerdoodle and she could see me.

"Your majesty," he said, "the first candidate has arrived."

My first impression of our Dominant Female Over All was an assortment of bones poking out of a small pile of dark fur. There wasn't much left of our DFOA. I could see every single bone in her back. Cats live a long time in Ailuria, but Queen Snickerdoodle was the oldest cat I had ever seen by a long, long way.

She was lying on a pillow, her chin resting on her two front paws. The two cats who had been grooming her, stopped and stood at attention when we arrived. So did the cat who had been cleaning the Queen's water dish.

Snickerdoodle looked up with her eyes, lifted her head and crossed her front paws.

"Come close so you can hear me," she said. "What is your name, youngling?" Her voice was weak. I moved closer.

"Tefnut," I said.

"And you are a barge cat?"

"I am."

"Good. Tell me, Tefnut, what made you choose barge life?"

"I wanted to see the ocean."

"Well, you've seen it. Why are you still on the barge?"

"It's comfortable. There are plenty of sunny spots for sleeping when it's cool, shady places to rest when it's hot, and a cabin to keep out of the rain."

"There are no trees to climb. Do you not miss that?" she whispered.

"There is the lookout post, and the roof of the cabin. They are both comfortable and the view is never the same."

"So, you like change. You are indeed young," she said almost to herself. "How do you get along with the other cats?"

"Well enough. We stay out of each other's way."

"Well enough is good enough," she said. "You'll do. What was your name again, youngling?"

"Tefnut." With considerable effort, Snickerdoodle lifted her head all the way and, speaking in a loud, clear voice, said,

"I have chosen. Tefnut will be the new DFOA." A long, raspy exhale came out of her mouth as her head dropped slowly back to rest on her paws. Queen Snickerdoodle spoke no more.

My fate was met and sealed.

CHAPTER 7

QUEEN TEFNUT

Everyone stared at Queen Snickerdoodle for a long time. No one moved. No one spoke. No one went over to see if she was still breathing. We knew.

I stared harder than anyone, willing her to get up and tell us that she changed her mind.

Get up. Get up. Get up. I tried to move her with my eyes. All cats are halfandhalf, half magic and half not magic. It means we can live anywhere we want, in human lands or fairy lands, but we don't generally *do* magic.

In any case, I couldn't will her back to life. Not magically or any other way. This was a disaster. Being the DFOA might be Interesting but it will not be Comfortable.

I looked around. Heads were turning and they were turning to me. No. No. No. Don't look at me. I am not who you think I am.

I ran.

I ran across the bridge, past Pisu and the remaining seven cats. I could feel them all looking at me.

I kept going, at top speed, up the hill, past the vineyards, where cats tending the vines stopped working to watch me race past. Humiliated by the thought of what they must be thinking, I managed to add a little more speed to my pace.

I felt safer when I reached the trees beyond the vineyards and slowed down to a fast trot. I didn't know where to go. Every cat in Ailuria will be looking for me.

Near dawn, I found a flat rock, near the crest of the hill, with enough space underneath to fit one slightly undersized female cat.

There was no scent of other cats under or around the rock. I lifted my head and sniffed the air. There was no scent of a fresh-water spring and the river was too far to be practical as a drinking source. Not many cats would be interested in denning up here.

I crawled under the rock and listened for danger. I could hear Snollygoster talking to the other cats about me. I could hear cats telling cats, telling other cats about Tefnut, the new DFOA.

There is only one cat in Ailuria who can hear everything that's going on in our country. It's true. I really am the DFOA. I stared out at the lightening sky from under my rock until I fell asleep.

That evening, I took my time grooming and when I was satisfied that there wasn't a single spot on my body that wasn't perfect, I started walking back to the queen's barge. Every cat I passed nodded at me without speaking. They knew. Even if they never saw me before, they knew.

When I passed the vineyards, all of the cats tending the kibble-fruit stopped their work and came out to watch me. It was all terribly respectful. I am never going to get used to this.

There were no cats waiting for me at the river bank. No Pisu waiting to commiserate with me. I walked the narrow bridge to the queen's barge, going over in my mind what I wanted to say.

I could see from the bridge that the deck of the barge was empty. The cabin will be where I will make my stand.

They heard me coming because when I entered the cabin, all four cats were standing, facing the door, ears forward, tails raised in welcome.

They all lowered their heads and tails respectfully when I came in. The entire population of Ailuria is going to be permanently submissive to me. It is completely uncat-like. I am so going to hate this.

“Welcome, Queen Tefnut,” Snollygoster said.

I sat on my haunches facing them. They all sat.

“Cut it out,” I said, irritated. I suppressed the low growl I could feel rising in my throat. They lowered their heads again in acknowledgement. I growled. Then they sat up straight, obedient to my command. It was all I could do to keep myself from bolting out of there again. If I thought it would help, I would have.

“Tefnut,” Snollygoster said.

That’s better, I thought.

“There are things that need to be done.” I swished my tail and listened.

“We understand that this is a difficult transition for you--” he said--

Well, I thought, he got that right.

“--but there are a couple of things that need to be done. We will be leaving and you will need to choose new advisors.”

“I don’t know any cats except my barge mates.”

“We understand. That’s why Gubbins has agreed to stay on until you can find suitable cats.”

The largest cat in the group stepped forward. He was the youngest of this group of geriatric cats, but he was way older than me.

“How do you do, Tefnut?” Gubbins said. “I have spent many years advising Queen Snickerdoodle. I will be happy to assist you while you’re learning and taking up your responsibilities.”

“Fine,” I said. “You can come with me.” I’d had all day, between naps under the rock, to think about this,

“I may be the DFOA,” I said, “but I’m still a barge cat and tomorrow, I’m supposed to be on pilot duty. Fortunately, the Grimalkin is not that far away. If I leave now, I can be there before they lift anchor.”

“But this is a barge,” Snollygoster said. “You’re a barge cat. We thought you would like it here.”

“It used to be a barge,” I said. “Now, it’s a floating dock.”

“I think it’s a good idea for Tefnut to return to her barge,” Gubbins spoke up before anyone else had a chance to explain in numbing detail why I couldn’t go.

“Barge cats,” he continued, “are extremely dependent on each other. It’s not like vine-tending or harvesting. They can’t just wander off without notice. Of course, I’ll come with you. I will help you explain your special circumstances to your companions”

Explain? My ‘circumstances’ were pretty clear. A little flag went up in my brain. I started to wonder whether Gubbins had volunteered to be my advisor or my supervisor.

“Let’s go,” I said.

CHAPTER 8

THE PLAN

Gubbins didn't try to draw me into a conversation while we walked and I was grateful. I had done a lot more walking than I'm used to in the last day and a half and I was tired and irritable.

But I breathed a sigh of relief when the Grimalkin came into sight, and my fatigue and anger drained away. That was also when Gubbins realized that the barge was anchored in the middle of the river.

"How do we get to the barge?" He looked a little concerned.

"Do you know how to swim?"

"No," he said nervously.

"It's easy," I said. "Just follow me." I padded into the water and started swimming to the barge.

I was hoping to leave Gubbins behind on the shore, but to his credit, he followed me into the water and started paddling along behind me, not especially skillfully, but well enough to swim the short distance to the barge. I was impressed.

It felt like I had been away for a long, long time and it was good to be back in the river even if it wasn't a fishing expedition. It was hard to resist ducking under the water and looking for fish, but it would be too cruel to poor Gubbins.

I compromised. Turning my head to make sure he heard me, I said, "Keep swimming. I'll be right back."

I put my head down and dove, pushing the water away with my legs, and looking around for fish. There weren't any, at least not nearby. Reluctantly, I twisted my body around and swam back to the surface.

All the cats were awake and active when we got there. I didn't need to tell anyone about the DFOA thing. They knew. No one lowered their head respectfully and no one congratulated me. I raised my tail and let it quiver to let them know how grateful I was.

Everyone was polite and formal during introductions. As soon as all noses had been touched, I turned to Gubbins, lowered my head respectfully and said,

"Please excuse us, Gubbins. I would like to speak with my barge mates privately for a few minutes."

It was a pretence. There was no place on the barge where cat ears could not hear us, but I didn't want him to be a part of the conversation. I regretted not leaving him on shore.

"Of course," Gubbins said and retreated to the far end of the barge.

"I don't want to leave the barge," I said as soon as we were all in the cabin.

"We don't want you to leave either," Anu said.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to train a new apprentice?" said Felix.

"It was all I could do to keep myself from killing you on at least three separate occasions," Pussytoes said with feeling.

"Really?" I was aghast. "Don't tell me, I don't want to know..." ...but I knew that I would lie awake days trying to figure out what I did.

"Queen Snickerdoodle is already dead," I said. "I'm stuck with the job. I even have the special hearing.

"If I listen the right way, I can hear everything that's going on in Ailuria. I heard everybody talking about me after I became DFOA. It was awful."

“Actually,” Pussytoes said, “It sounds useful. Could you tell in advance where along the river cats are waiting for pickup or drop off of kibble-fruit?”

“Of course,” I answered. “Look. I don’t know how time consuming being the DFOA will be. What if I can’t do my share of the work?”

“We talked about that, Tefnut,” Pussytoes said. “We don’t know either. We decided that if you were willing, we would try and adjust. We also discussed adding a seventh cat, although we are not all in agreement--”

“--I’m not in agreement either,” I said. “It’s already too crowded when the barge is full.”

“We’ll just have to see what happens,” said Pussytoes. “Does anyone object?”

None of us did.

“I have another favor to ask,” I said. A big one.”

“Bigger than having the DFOA on the Grimalkin?” said Hatooli.

“Almost,” I said. “The DFOA is supposed to pick cats to be her advisors.

“Can I pick all of you?”

“It would mean I wouldn’t have to leave the Grimalkin just to listen to a bunch of cats I don’t know, telling me what to do.”



Gubbins didn’t pretend he hadn’t heard every word when we came out. He didn’t pretend to like our plan either.

“I understand that as barge cats you need a little time to rearrange your schedules and that’s fine. But the CC...

“Cee Cee?” I interrupted. “Is that something else I’m supposed to do?”

“That would be you, Your Majesty. The Chief Catalyst.”

I cringed. Anything would be better than Your Majesty but that didn’t mean it was good. I glared at my barge mates. Two more items on the list of things I am not to be called. I didn’t have to say it out loud. They completely understood.

“It doesn’t need to be on the Queen’s barge, but the CC needs to den in a location that stays put so we can find her.”

“*We*?” Pussytoes asked.

“*We*. Her advisors.”

“Tefnut’s advisors will be traveling with her,” Felix pointed out.

“Of course. Of course, but that’s just temporary, isn’t it?” We were silent. “It is, isn’t it? I heard you talk about it.”

“If we can make it work,” Pussytoes said. “It will be permanent.

“Surely,” he continued, before Gubbins could object, “you can see the advantage of having a mobile DFOA. She is much more accessible to any cat who wants to see her.”

“But no one will know where she is.” Gubbins was starting to whine.

His plan of coming with me to the barge so that he could control the situation was rapidly breaking down.

“On the contrary,” Pussytoes said calmly, and I know at this point that he wasn’t feeling calm. Pussytoes doesn’t like difficult cats.

“Everyone knows where the Grimalkin is and where it’s going to be next. Tefnut can see cats on the barge when it is docked, and, as you have already observed, none of us has a problem getting to shore to see petitioners when we are anchored.”

“What we need, Gubbins,” Neko purred softly, “is someone knowledgeable who knows how to get the word out so that everyone in Ailuria understands how easy it is going to be for any cat who wants to see the DFOA to do so. Perhaps,” she said shyly, “you could help us.”

Gubbins sat up a little straighter.

“Well,” he said, speaking with authority, “when her hearing declined and it became difficult for Queen Snickerdoodle to travel, we set up a network of cats to report back on conditions throughout Ailuria.”

“Perfect,” Neko said. “Can you get them to let everyone know?”

This is Ailuria, I thought. Everyone already knows.

Gubbins turned to me and lowered his head.

“I would be delighted to assist you, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you, Gubbins,” I said. “Is there someone who directs or organizes this network?” I asked.

“There is, Queen Tefnut. A cat called Elgar.”

“Please ask Elgar to come to the Grimalkin,” I said, as graciously as I could.

I realized that Gubbins wasn’t going to go away unless he thought that there was a real queen, or at least, his version of a real queen in place. I need to sound regal.

“Gubbins,” I said. “Why don’t you spend the rest of the night with us. You can walk off the barge when we dock and you won’t have to get your feet wet.”

“Oh, thank you, Your Majesty,” he said. He lowered his head and stretched out on his belly. I thought he was going to roll over, he was so grateful.

“I am on pilot duty today and I need a nap before we start at dawn. So, if you will excuse me, I will say goodnight.” That was my cue to exit before Gubbins realized just how much we all had manipulated him.



Anu came with me to the cabin. She’s on cat nest duty in the morning and probably needs a nap as much as I do.

We left Gubbins with Hatooli, Neko, Felix and Pussytoes. He doesn’t have a chance.

By the time he leaves tomorrow, Gubbins will be singing the praises of the new and improved mobile DFOA system. Never mind that we have no idea whether or not this is going to work.

I felt kind of sorry for him, having to face old Snollygoster when he shows up without the new DFOA.

CHAPTER 9

TRYING IT OUT

My barge mates were awake and grooming when I woke up. Gubbins was still asleep outside the cabin door curled up next to a bag of kibble-fruit.

Turning belly up, I extended my legs, out and away from me, pushing apart my toes. A huge yawn took over my jaw. Rolling onto my side, I stretched my legs forward this time, stretching out my back as hard as I could, from the top of my neck to my tail.

Finally, I let go of everything and relaxed, ready to start my next important ritual, the morning bath. There were a few spots I had missed last night that still needed cleaning, but first, I listened for downriver signs of activity.

Sure enough, there were cats just a little way downriver talking about raising the flag. I could hear another group of cats moving bags of kibble-fruit down to the dock. I couldn't wait to show off my new superpower.

"We will be stopping for a pickup almost immediately," I announced proudly."

"Nice trick," said Anu.

I thought so, too. I was very pleased with myself.

"Most helpful," Pussytoes, consistently practical, added. "Are there any other stops today?"

I directed my listening further along our route.

"Not yet," I said, "but that doesn't mean there won't be. I'll keep listening."

"Can you actually hear every cat in Ailuria?" Neko asked.

"Not all at once, but I can listen anywhere I want. It's pretty cool."

"What about outside Ailuria," asked Anu. "Can you hear the dryads above the waterfall?"

I swiveled my ears and directed my listening to the waterfall and beyond. Nothing.

Well, not nothing, I could hear Queen Snickerdoodle's advisors still on the queen's barge at the base of the waterfall. They were talking about Gubbins.

They had misgivings about not stopping me from returning to the barge. They were blaming Gubbins.

"No dryads," I answered. "I think it only works for cats."

"Gubbins," I said. "When you get back to the queen's barge, don't forget to remind the other cats that I didn't give them a choice about coming back to the barge last night. It was smart of you to insist on coming along."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." He was immensely pleased by my compliment. I hoped it helped.

"Come on, Anu," I said. "We'd better get up to the pilot deck or we'll be late starting out." Good luck Gubbins, I thought.



We were approaching the first stop. There was a small pile of kibble-fruit waiting for pickup, and a large crowd of cats, just waiting...And so it begins, I thought.

As soon as we reached the landing, Felix and Hatooli jumped onto the dock with the mooring lines. Pussytoes climbed into the jib crane.

I took my time getting off the barge, but eventually I was standing there, facing a whole lot of strange cats, way sooner than I wanted to be. I thought about the shoulder bite from Pisu that sealed my fate. Curse you, Pisu.

I sat on my haunches and looked at the crowd. They sat on their haunches and looked at me. I guess it's up to me to start.

"Does anyone have any official business with the DFOA?" I asked politely.

No one spoke.

“Is everyone here to hello to the new DFOA?”

Ears went up. Tail tips began to twitch in anticipation. I stood up and raised my tail high in greeting.

“I’m Tefnut, the new DFOA.”

They all knew who I was, but I needed to say something. I stood up and started touching noses. It quickly deteriorated into heavy purring with head bumps and shoulder rubs.

Whoa, someone was licking my ears. I pulled back and tried to extract myself from this ‘starting to get scary’ group cuddle.

“So,” I started out.

Not a terribly regal opening, but at least the ear licking stopped. I seemed to have their attention.

“So, what do you think of the new system,” I asked. “Do you have any questions?”

Get them talking was what I was thinking, but, nervously, I kept piling on the questions. “Tell me about this bend in the river. Do you all work together? How many group dens do you have? Are any of you harvesters?” I asked, since there was kibble-fruit ready to be moved to the barge.

An older tomcat shouldered his way forward.

“Most of us tend the vines, but we harvested as much ripe fruit as we could ourselves so that we would have an excuse to raise the flag.”

“I see,” I said. “That sounds like a lot of trouble. You don’t need to have kibble-fruit ready to talk to me. Whenever I’m on the Grimalkin, just raise the flag.” That seemed awfully open ended, so as long as I was making up rules, I made up another one.

“Second, the Grimalkin is still a working barge. We will stop at every loading dock up and down river, until we have made a full round trip. But after that, please don’t raise the flag unless you have DFOA business. Is everyone agreeable to that?”

“That sounds sensible,” the tomcat said. Ah, a sensible cat.

“What are you called?” I asked him.

“I’m Simon.” I looked past Simon to the rest of the cats.

“Any objections?” I asked them. There was general murmuring among the cats, but no objections.

“How do you all feel about having the DFOA on a barge? Does it seem like a good idea to you?”

Simon answered right away. “We all think it’s a good idea. No one has to travel to see the queen and you can help us solve disagreements before they get ugly.”

By ugly, I assumed he was talking about catfights. Normally, by the time cats see the DFOA, they’re pretty beaten up.

I looked over my shoulder and could see Felix and Neko at the dock lines waiting to cast off. It was time to go.

“Thank you all for making me feel so welcome,” I said, “but we need to get underway.

“If you have questions, you can ask Gubbins.” I turned my head to the corner of the dock where he was waiting to say goodbye. All eyes followed my gaze.

“Gubbins was an advisor to Queen Snickerdoodle and is now helping me. He knows a lot more than I do.” I walked to the corner where Gubbins was waiting.

“Thank you for your help, Gubbins,” I said. He lowered his ears and tail submissively.

“The pleasure is all mine, Queen Tefnut.”

“Travel safely,” I answered and hurried back to the barge.



“I know we need to get underway,” I said to my barge mates as soon as I was aboard. “Come to the poop deck with me so we can talk.”

Felix and Neko came straight up after they cast off the lines. I maneuvered the barge away from the dock, not speaking until we were safely mid-river. I still kept my eyes on the river and my feet on the steering pedals while I spoke.

“It looks like we already have a problem,” I said. “Did everyone hear what I said to the land-cats?”

“We heard,” Anu called down from the cat nest.

“If we stop at every landing, we’ll put all the other barges off schedule,” Felix said.

“I know. I know,” I answered, despondently.

“Also,” Anu added, “You should probably cut back on the nose touching.”

“Yeah, I already figured that one out,” I said, only slightly cheered.

“I think we should go ahead and make all the stops Tefnut needs,” Hatooli said, “but how do we get in touch with all the other barges to rearrange out schedules.”

“The first barge we pass will be the Scrimshank on her way upriver,” Pussytoes said.

“Why don’t we talk to them about it? Perhaps we can convince them that it’s worth the trouble. If one barge agrees, it will be easier to get others to agree.”

“Yes, and if the Scrimshank doesn’t agree?” Felix countered.

Nobody said anything.

“Tefnut, can you hear what they’re doing on the Scrimshank?” Pussytoes asked.

I listened downriver. There they were. Uh, oh.

“They’re talking about me,” I said. I could probably tune in anywhere in Ailuria and still be the topic du jour.

“They know I’m back on the barge and they think it’s a bad idea. They’re worried that if I stay on the Grimalkin it will cause problems.”

“Well, they’re right about that,” Felix said.

“Come on, Felix, it’s not such a big deal,” Hatooli said.

“Hey, I didn’t say that we shouldn’t do it,” Felix countered, “but if we’re not careful, there will be trouble.”

“Felix is right,” Pussytoes said. “It means that our first task is to convince the other barge cats that having the DFOA aboard is a good idea,” said Pussytoes.

Except that it isn’t, I thought.

“I know the senior cat, Chester,” Pussytoes said. “Maybe it would be best if Chester and I talked first.”

“Agreed,” Anu said. “As senior cat, you’ll have a lot more influence than a brand new DFOA who is also the junior cat on the barge.”

The term ‘senior cat’ made something click in my brain.

“Wait. I don’t know how to fix the scheduling problem, but I might know a way to get the other barges to cooperate,” I said, thinking it out as I went.

“If I leave the barge, you can’t all come with me. I will have to choose new advisors.”

“You’re not choosing me,” Anu said. “I won’t go.”

“Nobody wants to leave, but I don’t know any terra-cats that I could pick.

“I think that as a new DFOA, the wisest thing is for me to pick other barge cats and the best way to make sure I get the best cats to counsel me is to pick the senior cat from each barge.”

“,” Anu said.

“You do seem to have quite an aptitude for this job,” Pussytoes said in agreement.

“It’s not aptitude. It’s desperation,” I asserted.

“Well,” said Pussytoes. “whatever your motivation is, it seems to be providing solutions. I’ll let Chester know what will happen if the DFOA has to leave the Grimalkin. We are all extremely comfortable on our respective barges. I think Chester will be very helpful.”

CHAPTER 10

PISU RETURNS

That night, Pisu returned.

I was asleep on the poop deck when it started to rain. No, it was not rain. It was soaking wet Pisu dripping on me.

“Pisu! I’m so glad to see you. I had to make nice to half the cats in Ailuria today,” I said with what felt like only a slight exaggeration.

“What are you doing on the barge?” Pisu hissed at me.

I was ready for sympathy, not hissing. I bristled.

“This is my territory, Pisu.” I hissed back. “Did you think I was going to leave just because of some stupid DFOA thing?”

“But Tiffany,” he said, giving my ear a quick lick, “the whole country is your territory. You can go anywhere you want. You can sleep anywhere you want. You don’t have to sneak around when you pass through another cat’s territory.

“We could be denning on the queen’s barge. It’s much more Comfortable than this crowded old boat. We would be the only cats. Plus, we don’t have to push kibble-fruit around anymore. We don’t have to do anything,” he purred.

I let out a small growl of exasperation. Pisu is a romantic. He never sees the practical side of things.

“Pisu, is that why you pushed me to the front of the line at the choosing?”

“Of course, it is. I was doing you a favor. Everyone knows that no one has a more Comfortable life than the DFOA.”

“First of all, Pisu, I am a barge cat. The queen’s barge is not a barge. It doesn’t go anywhere. Second, you’re right. Staying on the queen’s barge would be Comfortable, but it would not be Interesting. It would be boring.

“Besides, I can’t go wandering around the country, like you do, whenever I want. I have to stay in case someone needs to see me. Why do you think nobody wants to be the DFOA? It’s the most not-Interesting position in Ailuria.

“You know how this works, Pisu. I tell cats what to do and they ignore me. This is the most pointless job in Ailuria. Nobody actually needs a DFOA, they just need to know that there is one.”

“But Tiffany, I need your help and you can’t do it from here.” I sat up immediately.

“Pisu, what’s the matter? What happened? Did you get into another fight?”

“It wasn’t my fault. They ganged up on me. Now they’re waiting for me to come back.”

“They?”

“The other harvesters in my group.”

“All of them?”

“All of them.”

Pisu had been chased out of every harvester group he had belonged to. Mostly for silly reasons. The harvesters must be exceptionally fussy cats. But this was the last group. There were no other harvester groups he could join.

“Maybe it’s time for you to think about another activity. You never seemed to get along with the other harvesters.”

“The harvesters are the only group that move around. Everyone else stays in one place. I would hate that. It’s not interesting. I want to be a harvester.”

“I never understood the harvesters,” I said. “How can they be comfortable without a home territory?”

“Our territory is Ailuria. All of it.”

“You’re the DFOA. Tell them. Tell my group that they can’t kick me out.”

“I don’t know, Pisu. I’m not sure that’s what I’m supposed to do. Even if I do, there’s a good chance that they’ll ignore me.”

“Come on, Tiffy,” he said, head bumping me, “you can do anything you want now.”

I didn’t bump back. I was thinking.

“Pisu,” I asked, “did you think that we would be living on the queen’s barge?” Pisu didn’t speak for a moment.

“It’s true,” he said carefully, “I *was* looking forward to spending more time with you.”

“What did you say to the other cats about me?”

“Well, naturally, they know that the new DFOA is my personal friend.”

Knowing Pisu as well as I do, I’m pretty sure he said a lot more than he was willing to admit.

“I can talk to them,” I said. “Bring them to whatever landing is closest to where they are staying when the Grimalkin passes. Make sure the flag is up.”

“You know I can’t do that, Little Big Ears,” he said calling me by my nest name. He only does that when he’s really worried. “They’ll turn me into kibble-fruit.”

However well-meaning he was, it was Pisu’s fault that I was the new DFOA. I was feeling manipulated and not inclined to be cooperative.

“I can’t go to see them like we did when you got into trouble before I was DFOA. Just tell them that Queen Tefnut wants to talk with them. If you can’t do it yourself, get another cat to tell them. Can you do that?”

He didn’t answer me. Pisu gave me a long sad look and left, his tail dragging on the ground to show me how unhappy he was. I wasn’t worried. Pisu would sulk for a while and then figure out a way to deliver my message without getting beaten up. It looks like getting my littermate out of trouble was going to be my first official job as DFOA.

CHAPTER 11

WORKING OUT THE DETAILS

The next day, after stopping every few miles for ‘meetings and greetings’ we crossed paths with the Scrimshank on its way upriver. We signaled the pilot. Both barges stopped and dropped anchor.

I watched Pussytoes walk down the steps, delicately lower himself into the water and, head held high, swim the short distance to the Scrimshank. He disappeared into the Scrimshank’s cabin with a gray cat, presumably Chester, while the other five cats sat on the deck, watching us.

The Grimalkin cats were actively ignoring the Scrimshank cats. They were intentionally sitting and reclining comfortably, ears alert, tail tips wiggling. I was the only one still standing, my tail swinging nervously from side to side.

“Pussytoes told me he knew how to swim,” I said, “but I didn’t really believe him.”

“He hates swimming,” said Neko, “but he knows how to do it. We all thought you would be the same.”

“Speaking of swimming,” I said. “Those cats are making me nervous. I’m going fish hunting. We might as well enjoy the stop.”

“I don’t blame you, Tefnut. It’s rude of them to stare at us like that,” she said. “Unless, of course they’re looking for a fight.”

“It’s not you they’re staring at,” I said. “I’ve been learning that the DFOA isn’t considered a real cat and it’s perfectly acceptable to stare at me. Let’s see how well they can stare underwater.”

“We’ll join you,” Hatooli said.

Neko and Hatooli walked to the edge, crouched into pouncing position, watching the water intently, and waiting. I walked down the steps and slid into the water headfirst. I couldn’t hold my breath as long as Anu. but I was pretty good.

My nervous energy drained away as I concentrated on pushing myself through the water. Looking around, I saw a couple of big fish near the surface.

Containing my excitement, I swam carefully under and behind the two fish. Once I was in the right position, I swam closer, herding them toward the barge.

Neko pounced. In one swift move, she was in the air landing perfectly on top of the biggest fish. Holding it with her legs and paws, she hung on while it wriggled in her grip. The wriggling is my favorite part.

She let it go with her customary “Thank you, fish,” giving it a final bat on the tail as it swam away.

I’m not too bad at pounce-fishing, but Neko and Hatooli never miss. I came up for air. Neko swam for the steps while I went back down to look for another fish for Hatooli.

I didn’t see any other fish nearby, but I did see four legs paddling in my direction. I surfaced and saw another spotted cat like Neko and Hatooli.

“Hello, I’m Moonshine from the Scrimshank.”

“I’m Tefnut.”

“I know.”

“Are you related to Neko or Hatooli?”

“Hatooli and I have the same mother, but she’s from an older litter. I saw all of you pounce hunting, so I came over. Is that all right?”

“Of course. I’m sure that Hatooli will be glad to see you.”

“Hi, Moonshine,” Felix said when we reached the steps. “Visiting Hatooli?”

Hatooli came over and head bumped Moonshine. Moonshine responded by licking Hatooli's ears.

"Naturally," Moonshine answered Felix between licks. "Can I pounce-fish with you? Who taught Tefnut to swim underwater like that?"

"I did," Anu said, "but Tefnut invented the fish herding game. One cat gets to stalk and one cat gets to pounce. Everybody has fun."

"Except that Anu and I are the only underwater swimmers," I said, "so we don't get to do a lot of pouncing unless we're on our own."

"Don't the fish get hurt when you pounce?" Moonshine said to me. He stopped licking to show his concern.

"Never!" Neko said. "Tefnut is Claw Perfect," she said proudly. "Hatooli and I trained her."

"Really?" Moonshine's eyes went wide. "But she wasn't a kitten when she came to the Grimalkin. How could you teach her?"

"Would you like to see?" Felix said. He stood up, head down and forward, tail in fast swish.

Felix likes to watch when we hunt. The only problem is that he gets excited and takes it out on us instead of the fish. Fortunately we have a system.

Moonshine backed up nervously and dropped his tail.

"Ye-es," he said hesitantly."

"Attack!" Felix yowled.

Surprised, Moonshine crouched and hissed.

Everybody else jumped on top of me.

"Cat pile," Anu screamed.



The game ended when Pussytoes returned. We wanted to hear what he had to say more than we wanted to keep wrestling.

"You had better get back, Moonshine," he said. "Chester is waiting to tell all of you what we talked about."

"Oh, we heard you both talking," Moonshine said. "I thought it was fine."

"You didn't hear everything," Pussytoes said. "Besides, it won't be official until everyone's had a chance to object."

Moonshine knew better than to mess with the barge cat system.

"Bye," he purred and leaping into the river like a true fishing cat descendant, he started swimming back to his barge.

All eyes were on Pussytoes. We sat at attention waiting to hear what happened on the Scrimshank.

"Chester was quite amenable after I explained the situation," Pussytoes said. I think he was grateful that the new DFOA wasn't chosen from his barge."

That was true enough. Queen Snickerdoodle's advisors didn't bother to select candidates themselves. They announced that every barge had to send a candidate to the choosing. Eight barges, eight candidates.

"We agreed to use the standard barge-to-barge communication system. So, both of us, that is, both barges, will pass on the new setup to any other barges we cross paths with,

and those barges will continue to pass the information until everyone is informed and everyone has had a chance to object.

“It was Chester who suggested the clincher. Since all cats must defer to the decision of the DFOA, any barge or barge cat who has an objection will have to bring it to the DFOA.

“That means,” he said, “that they have to leave their barge and wait at one of the landings for the Grimalkin in order to talk to Tefnut,”

“Nobody’s going to do that,” Anu said.

“That’s what Chester thought,” said Pussytoes.



At the next landing we changed my presentation. We all got off the barge together and once I had introduced myself and explained the new system to the waiting cats, I introduced my ‘advisors’.

If I was ever not available for cats who needed me, they could speak with one of my ‘official’ advisors. Everyone seemed to be impressed by the size of my retinue.

So far the new system seems to be working. So far, I am still on the Grimalkin.



It wasn’t long before the barge behind us caught up. They had already crossed paths with the Scrimshank and knew what was expected of them.

They hung the ‘aye’ flag from their jib crane, meaning they had no objections, and sailed past us, leaving the Grimalkin to plod slowly along from landing to landing.

So far, so good.

CHAPTER 12 SHIRLEY

By the time we finished the complete round trip, I must have met every cat in Ailuria and I’m pretty sure that I met a lot of them more than once. There was one particular cat who raced from landing to landing just to listen to me say the same thing over and over. Creepy.

At night, when we anchored, cats would gather on the shore just to look at the Grimalkin. We stopped fish hunting. We stopped sleeping on the deck. Everyone was getting a little testy.

We were so slow, that all seven barges caught up and passed us and we ended up back in our original position.

The real test came after we completed that first interminable round trip. Now we would see just how much having the DFOA on a barge affected everyone’s lives.



As a species, we prefer to avoid fighting. After Comfort and Interesting, Appearances are everything to a cat and so long as face can be saved, most cats will agree to almost anything.

That's where I come in. As the Dominant Female Over All, it's no loss of face for the biggest meanest or feistiest cat to be submissive to me. Usually it's just enough for me to show up.

When we saw a flag up, no kibble-fruit to pick up and no cats waiting for a delivery, I knew it was time.

A single cat was lying stretched out on the dock, asleep in the sunshine. She looked up when we pulled along side the dock, then closed her eyes again. A single extremely tired cat. I wondered how long she had been traveling.

Pussytoes and I carried the mooring lines to the dock to tie off the barge.

I looked at Pussytoes questioningly as we walked off the barge.

"Would you like to stay?" I asked, not pleading, but almost. "Please?"

He looked me in the eye then at the sleeping cat. She was a very pregnant older queen. This would probably be her last litter. No wonder she was tired.

"Not this time," Pussytoes said. "Good luck." He wrapped his dock line around the post, slipped it under the hook, then slowly and deliberately Pussytoes walked back to the barge.

One cat. How complicated can it be? I stretched, relaxed and walked over to the sleeping cat. Crouching down next to her in a relaxed, friendly posture, tail and ears up and forward. I was ready to listen.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Tefnut. I think you're here to see me?"

"Oyyy," she yowled. "It's time. I have nowhere to go. I don't know what to do. Fix it," she demanded.

"Don't worry. We'll figure something out. What are you called?" I asked, trying to inspire calm and comfort with my voice and posture.

"Shirley."

"What happened, Shirley? Why can't you go to your regular den?"

"They won't let me in. Oyyy."

"Who won't let you in? Where?"

"The other queens. They won't let me into the nesting den."

Any place with a fresh water spring, even just a trickle, is desirable as a nesting site. The higher up on the hill you are, the harder it is to get the kittens down to the river to drink after they're weaned.

Over time, multiple dens and group dens tend to develop around the fresh water springs. They are considered choice nesting sites. "Are you saying that there is only one spring in your colony?"

"Yes, and the other queens say there's no room."

"Is there?"

"There are three queens there now and seventeen kits."

"That's a lot of kittens for three queens to keep track of. Aren't there any rivulets coming downhill from the spring where you could nest? What about along the river? There must be lots of good nesting sites?"

"Nooo. Not the river. That's what the other queens told me to do, but, I'm afraid of the water," she whispered.

“Surely, there must be places where the water is shallow enough to be safe for you and your kittens, or maybe where the spring water runs down the hill. I could help you find a place.”

“Maybe, but I don’t want to look. I don’t want to be alone.”

“I don’t understand?”

“It’s too hard,” she was whispering again. “I need help.”

Now, Shirley’s despair made sense. Many queens choose the companionship of a den, but most prefer a secluded spot to raise their kittens alone.

I had never thought about how many cats like Shirley might wish to be in a group den, not because they preferred it, but because they needed it.

“Do you feel strong enough to take me to the spring?” I asked Shirley.

“Only if I don’t have to go somewhere else afterwards,” she answered realistically.

“If you were a bird and you were going to fly straight to the den, which way would you go?”

Shirley lifted her head and looked towards the top of the hill and a little to the north. I swiveled my ears in the direction she was pointing. I listened hard and heard at least a dozen young kittens mewling their little hearts out. That’s got to be the place.

“Tell me, Shirley, how many kittens do you usually have?”

“When I was young, my litters were large, but my last litter was only three kits.”

“What do you know about the cats who are in the den now.?”

“Just their names. Tascha, Mascha and Bascha. They’re littermates. I think this is their first litter. I did know their mother, Silvia. I trained her for the pruning crew when she was young, but I never met the kittens from this particular litter.”

“Stay here, Shirley. I have some ideas, but I need to talk with my advisors first. I won’t be long.”

“Thank you, Queen Tefnut.”

“Just Tefnut is good.” She didn’t say anything. Maybe I can get people to call me Q.T. instead.



“Ready to go?” Felix said when I got back to the barge.

“No,” I answered. “This is going to take a lot longer than I expected.”

When we were all together, I explained Shirley’s problem and my solution.

“If you think that there will be too much of a delay,” I said to everyone, “You can go ahead without me. I’ll cut across the hilltop and catch up with you later.”

“What if someone has a flag up to see the DFOA,” Pussytoes asked.

“You’re my official advisors. You deal with it.”

“I think we should wait,” Felix said right away. He was not interested in becoming a DFOA substitute.

“Me, too.”

“Me, too.”

“Me too,” Anu, Hatooli and Neko quickly echoed Felix. Pussytoes didn’t bother to respond. It was decided.

“I want Hatooli and Neko to come with me,” I said, “and someone to stay with Shirley. Let’s go.”

Using my new DFOA hearing, I was able to take Hatooli and Neko right to the den. The spring was in a small clearing in a wooded area.

The trees were close together. There was not enough sun reaching the ground for anything to grow but moss. The clearing itself was grassy, but not tall enough or thick enough to provide shelter for a litter of kittens.

Most of the clearing was taken up by a single massive rock. The spring came out of the ground from underneath the rock on the downhill side.

The water filled a shallow cat-dug pool alongside the rock face and then drained back into the earth. There was no stream or rivulet flowing down to the river so no downhill possibilities for additional nest sites.

The uphill side of the rock was shorter and wider. That’s where the den was. Generations of about-to-give-birth queens had gradually dug out the earth from under the rock, lining it with moss. It was barely big enough for the three litter mates and their kits.

They heard us coming and were watching the opening when we came into sight. The nearest cat gave a low growl when she saw us, loud enough to let us know that they were ready for action if we didn’t behave.

I decided that a more formal introduction might be advisable.

“Hello,” I said. “I am Queen Tefnut, the new DFOA, and these are two of my trusted advisors, Neko and Hatooli.”

Problem solved. We were now looking at three very young very surprised and completely speechless cats.

“You must be Tascha, Mascha and Bascha,” I said.

“How did you know who we are,” said one of the even more surprised cats.

“A friend of your mother told me I could find you here. Her name is Shirley.”

“Shirley? How does she know our mother?” one of the cats asked, her curiosity overcoming her speechless state.

“She was your mother’s teacher,” I said. “She trained her to be a pruner after she left her birth nest.”

“Oh,” said the first cat

“We didn’t know that, but there really isn’t room for anyone else.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “I can see how crowded it is with all those kittens. It’s going to be tough when the kittens get a little bigger, keeping them rounded up.”

“It will be, but we’ll manage. This is a pretty safe spot.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” I said, “but a fourth queen with a small litter would certainly even up the odds, wouldn’t she.”

The three sisters looked at each other.

“...but that’s not why I’m here.” I delivered the clincher. “Your mother’s teacher, Shirley, is worried that she won’t have the strength to birth and care for her kits. She needs help.”

“Oh, dear, what can we do?”

“My kits are almost ready to leave the den,” said the sister with seven kittens, “but there are so many of them, maybe if you,” she said to her sisters, “would help me keep them together, we could move closer to the entrance.”

The whole time we had been talking, I was looking over the den. Neko and Hatooli knew what I was going to suggest and they had been looking too.

“What do you think?” I said to my companions.

“I think you were right,” Hatooli said. “That moss looks deep.”

“Agreed,” said Neko.

“We think,” I said to the sisters, “that it will be easy to make the den bigger. Tell us what you did to prepare the den before the kittens were born?”

“It was easy. We just added fresh moss.”

“Did you clear out any of the old moss?”

“What for?...Oh!” Her ears went up and her eyes widened as she understood what I was suggesting.

“Nobody else did either,” said Mascha. “I bet the original den was a lot bigger.”

“So,” I said to them, “if you can keep the kittens out of the way, the three of us can dig out the old moss and make room for Silvia. Is that agreeable to everyone?”

They weren’t just agreeable, they were ready and willing to take in Silvia and give her all the help she needed. We got right to work, piling the old moss in a line starting at one side and curving around the front.

When we finished, there was a tiny courtyard at the entrance to the den protected by a kitten height wall of moss. Herding wayward kittens just got a lot easier.

Once we were done, I sent Hatooli to bring Silvia back to the spring. Bascha left her four kittens with her sisters and helped Neko and me to collect fresh moss.

When we left, the kittens were all mewling for attention, because the three sisters were busy grooming Shirley, who was lying on the clean moss stretched out and purring, telling the littermates stories about their mother as a young cat.

CHAPTER 13

HAZEL THE HARVESTER

The next day there was another flag raised. I listened, but couldn’t hear anyone talking. When we arrived a single cat was waiting for me.

Mostly black with a white chest and paws and a scar over her left eye, I recognized her from Pisu’s description. This was Hazel, the senior cat in Pisu’s harvester group.

I jumped down to the dock with Anu and Neko who were carrying the landing ropes and went to greet her, keeping my tail high, the tip curled in friendship.

“Hello, I’m Tefnut,” I said. “You must be Hazel. Thank you for seeing me.”

“You’re welcome,” she said formally and a little coldly. “I received your royal command from one of the cats in Archibald’s group. I thought it would be a good idea to meet with you before you spoke with the rest of us.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised at the mistranslation of my instructions.

“It was a request, not a command,” I said. “As a barge cat, I would never override a group’s decision. I only wanted to hear the other side of Pisu’s story. I apologize for the misunderstanding.”

I noticed the small twitch of irritation in her tail. She didn’t look like she believed me.

“In any case,” Hazel continued, ignoring my apology, “it was not possible to bring everyone here to talk with you. The time of perfect ripeness for kibble-fruit is very short.”

Hazel's ears and whiskers were attentive, but the end of her tail was now thumping up and down on the ground. She was not enjoying this conversation.

"Of course," I answered, curling my tail around my body in an effort to keep it still.

"Tell me about Pisu."

"Pisu is a good worker," Hazel said politely, "but he can be annoying--"

--Annoying, I interrupted, "you're kicking him out because he's annoying?"

"Well, maybe extremely annoying. He is normally an annoying cat. It's not an unusual trait among harvesters, but since you became DFOA he's been intolerable."

"Let me guess. Bragging?"

"Endlessly. He now constantly tells his co-harvesters that he is too good for us and that he will be leaving us behind when he becomes chief advisor to the DFOA."

"Most harvester cats," Hazel continued, "are very independent. They're also not very tolerant of what you as a barge cat might think of as a minor annoyance. There is normally a lot of bickering in our group but Pisu is at the root of considerable additional dissension."

"He has many admirers among the younger cats, who are now at odds with the rest of the harvesters who would like all of them to go away."

It sounded serious.

"We certainly would not permit that kind of divisive behavior on a barge," I said, "and as far as Pisu becoming my advisor goes, you should know that we have stayed close since we left our birth nest and have become good friends."

"Pisu's an amazing cat. His stories always get my tail twitching, but I don't think I would ever make him an advisor."

"He's not a barge cat," I said. I thought that summed it up pretty well.

"From what Pisu told me," I continued, "I assume that the group has decided that he needs to leave."

"Not exactly," Hazel replied. Her tail finally stopped thumping and I relaxed a little.

"We don't make group decisions the way you describe it. Most disagreements are easily resolved by the cats involved deciding to avoid each other."

"The more cats that are involved, the more complicated it gets. Sometimes enough pressure is put on one or more of the cats that they decide to move to another harvester group."

By 'pressure' I suspect she was referring to serious cat fights. Pisu did seem to be genuinely scared.

Somehow, I needed to get this standoffish cat on my side if I was going to help Pisu, so I told her about my encounter with Shirley the day before. Hazel was both sympathetic to Shirley's plight and impressed with our solution.

"Queens with kittens are usually willing to help another queen with kittens," she said, "but I don't think you'll find harvester cats that easy to work with."

Hazel was still unconvinced that anything I said or did would make a difference, but her tone had softened.

"Frankly," she said, "I would love to get rid of Pisu, but if he goes, he's liable to take a lot of the younger cats with him. It will destabilize the whole group."

"Tell me, Hazel," I said, still trying to figure out what it means to be harvester, "why do you stay? Is it worth it?"

“I like the change,” she said. “I like moving around and seeing new things. It’s true we fight a lot, but in the end, we’re all free to go our own way. I just wish Pisu would go his.

“I’d rather fight it out with the other cats than be trapped on a barge where everyone has to agree on everything.”

Not so different from Pisu, I realized.

“Maybe if we gang up on him,” I said, “you and I can get Pisu to help with the young harvesters. Do you know where he is?”

“No idea, but I suspect that one of the younglings might know.”



The next morning, Hazel and Pisu were waiting for us at the first landing we passed. We didn’t bother to dock, but dropped anchor close by and I swam over to the dock.

I got right to the point.

“Pisu,” I said. “I am not leaving the Grimalkin and I am not going to make you my advisor.

“If you want to stay with Hazel’s harvesters, you are going to have to make peace with them. Is that clear? We can try to pave the way for you, but it won’t be easy. It’s your choice. Make peace or leave.”

“But, how? They hate me.”

“Tell them the truth. Tell them you were wrong.”

He cringed at the thought of showing this kind of submissiveness to other cats. I’m sure he was angry at me for confronting him in front of Hazel, but she needed to hear this if she was going to help him.

“I can’t do that, Tiffy,” he pleaded. Hazel opened her eyes a little wider when she heard his pet name for me. I only hoped she would not spread it around.

“You don’t know those other cats like I do.”

“Hazel gave me a pretty good idea of what it would be like for you,” I said, sympathetically, “but unless you want to try to return to one of the other harvester groups, it’s the only way.”

“If I can’t be an advisor to the DFOA, I want to be a harvester,” Pisu said. “You know no one else will take me. Tell me what to do, Tiffy, but don’t make me give in to the other cats. Please.”

“You have one small advantage, Pisu,” I said. He raised his ears and flared out his whiskers. “You still have a few admirers besides me. I’ll let Hazel explain. She understands the dynamics of your group better than I do”.

“A lot of the younger cats admire you, Pisu,” Hazel said. “They resent the way the other cats have been treating you.

“Fights have broken out while you’ve been away. Some of them were serious. There are at least two cats who won’t be able to work until their wounds heal.”

“If you leave our group, many of the young cats will leave also. Cats are always coming and going in the different harvester groups,” Hazel said to me, “but it will be difficult to have so many leave at once.

“I haven’t said anything to them yet,” she said turning back to Pisu, “but one of us has to let the younglings know that you will not be leaving us to live with the DFOA. It can

be me or you. I don't care. I don't care if they continue to admire you or not, so you might want to tell them yourself."

"Pisu, I interrupted, "if it helps, you can tell them that I couldn't leave my responsibilities as a barge cat and that I'm only able to take on other barge cats as advisors.

"But whatever you tell those younglings," I growled, "if you don't say it in a way that resolves their differences with the older cats, I will come and speak to them myself.

"Is that clear? Because as much as I love you, I will say what they need to hear and you won't like it."

"You wouldn't."

"You know I will, so get it right or I will do a lot worse than ramming your teeth down your throat with my head."



"Pisu is not what I would call a subordinate cat," Hazel said after he left, "I'm impressed."

"You just have to be firm with him," I replied.

"I've been very firm," she said. "It doesn't work."

"It works for me," I said. Maybe it's because he values my friendship."

"Perhaps," Hazel said. "He certainly doesn't value anyone else's."

CHAPTER 14 TWIDUM AND TWIDEE

Last I heard, Pisu was still with Hazel's harvesters. I'm guessing he was able to ingratiate himself back into the group without any physical fights. Pisu is remarkably unscarred for a harvester.

In any case, it was good practice. Dealing with difficult cats is my new life.

We had a whole week of just being barge cats before there was another call for the DFOA. It was the end of the day and we were almost ready to drop anchor for the night when we saw the flag.

Three very big tomcats were waiting for us on the dock. I didn't need to turn on my DFOA ears to hear the loud hissing and growling of two of them. They were standing, ears flat, mouths open, on either side of the third cat, who was sitting quietly washing his paws. He was probably the reason that the pair were only hissing and growling and not screeching and spitting.

I was not liking this job.

They stopped hissing and grooming, all three now standing, to watch us dock, anger still radiating from the hissing pair. Unwilling to show any sign of fear from this triple stare, I stayed on the barge and watched them back, while Pussytoes and Hatooli tied off the boat.

Once Pussytoes and Hatooli were back on board, I reckoned that sufficient time had passed to establish a calm sense of superiority on my part.

I jumped down to the dock. My five companions lined up on the edge of the barge to observe. They were satisfyingly intimidating. I didn't need advisors at that moment, but I might need bodyguards.

Resisting the urge to puff up my fur for this trio, I also refrained from raising my tail in my usual greeting. Sitting down in front of the three still standing cats, two of them still flat-eared, I permitted myself a small tail-tip twitch and continued the silent cat-staring contest while I waited for someone to speak.

"I'm Arnold," the paw licker in the middle eventually said, sitting back down. "I'm the senior cat in this colony. You are Queen Tefnut?"

"Yes."

"Queen Tefnut," one of the quarreling pair blurted out, "my territorial rights are being violated by Twidum. He must be punished."

The other cat hissed.

"Be quiet, both of you," Arnold said. "You agreed to let me speak. Now do it." There was an undertone of a growl in his voice, just enough to let them know who was the boss. I felt safer.

"I agreed to come with Twidee and Twidum to see you," Arnold said to me, "because they're fighting when they should be pruning, everyone is drawn into it, and nothing gets done."

Twidum and Twidee? They had to be littermates.

Twidum had a freshly torn ear and, Twidee's right eye was partly closed and runny. How could whatever was bothering them get so vicious?

"You say that Twidum is trespassing on your territory," I said. "I thought the whole colony between the bends in the river is a shared territory, like the barge is for the cats who live there. What kind of territory are you talking about?"

"My drinking spot," both cats said simultaneously.

"I see."

I didn't really see. Except for nesting queens, the river, like the vineyards, is off limits to territorial claims. In the vineyards, everyone shares the labor which means that everyone must have equal access. The river is where everyone goes to drink. Same deal. Equal access.

On the other hand, it's true that some spots are more comfortable for drinking than others.

Taking turns is not something that cats do naturally, but there's so much river, that no one needs to wait if they don't want to. As a result, lots of arguments start at the river, but they're usually just small spats.

Claiming territory, on the other hand, is a primary need among cats, even in Ailuria, where it's not about hunting-territory. The only prey we have are the kibble-fruit vines.

A special spot like my pillow is usually enough for most of us. I didn't even consider asking them to share their drinking spot. It would be like asking me and Felix to take turns on the same sleeping pillow. Not going to happen.

"This is not a new argument," Arnold said to me. "It's just gotten worse since they moved into the same pruning group."

"How far is this drinking spot?" I asked.

"Not far," Twidum said.

"Not far at all," Twidee said, "but it's hard to find."

“Show me,” I said.

“What,” said Twidum.

“No,” said Twidee.

“It’s a secret,” said Twidum.

“You can’t come,” said Twidee.

“Arnold,” I said, “do you know where this drinking spot is?”

“No. They gang up on any cat that tries to follow them. The only thing I know for sure, is that it’s on the wrong side of the landing.”

Interesting.

Arnold’s colony is at the end of Ailuria, where the Cattywampus widens out before it spills into the sea. The river water mixes with salt water and gets briny. Half salt, half fresh, all undrinkable. Curious, I ignored Twidum and Twidee’s protests.

“Arnold, you stay here,” I said.

“I won’t make a decision until I’ve seen your drinking spot,” I said to Twidum and Twidee. “Why don’t I have my advisors come with us?” I said. “That way, I know you will behave.”

“No!” said Twidee.

“No, no one else,” said Twidum.

They looked at each other and growled. Arnold, moved back between them. A brave cat, I thought.

“We’ll behave,” Twidee promised.

“You can’t walk along the shoreline,” Arnold said, “The shrubbery is too dense.”

I took a better look at my surroundings. The vegetation was different south of the landing. There were a few feet of rocky shoreline on both sides of the landing, and then thick and tangled mangroves on the south side. Behind the mangroves, the shrubbery was even denser.

It would be slow going, but nothing a persistent cat couldn’t get through given enough time and a willingness to get their feet wet.

I would be ready to bet that Pisu has explored Twidum and Twidee’s special spot. There wasn’t anywhere in Ailuria that was safe from his burning curiosity.

I followed Twidum and Twidee off the landing and away from the river. The trees to the south of us started to thin out when the land began to slope uphill.

“Do you see that big pine tree that sticks out above the others?” Twidum said.

“That’s our marker,” said Twidee.

They both sat down and began to vigorously clean their paws, scrupulously removing any extra smells that might make them easier to track.

“Clean your paws,” they said in unison, interrupting their scent grooming. Both cats finished at the same time and headed for a narrow path through the trees directly opposite the tall pine, bumping into each other as they each tried to go first.

So much for promises to behave. They backed away from each other, growling and hissing. Another standoff in the making.

“My way,” Twidee hissed.

“No, my way,” Twidum growled. “You go a different way. If we all take the same path, the scent will be too strong. Someone will follow us.”

“You can follow me,” I said, “or you can go different ways. Whatever. Now get out of my way.”

Taking an example from Arnold, I walked between the two posturing cats and stepped onto the narrow grass path.

The hissing and growling stopped. Nobody seemed to be attacking me.

“If you plan on killing each other, wait until I’m gone. When you’re done, I’ll be at the pine tree.” I started walking.

“Clean your paws,” they cried out after me.

CHAPTER 15

THE RIFLE

I found the pine tree easily enough and sat down to wait. They weren’t long. Twidum and Twidee came into the small clearing under the branches of the tall tree almost simultaneously, but from different directions.

Since there were no fresh wounds on either of them, I assumed that they were more worried about me finding their secret spot on my own than they were about each other.

I had already figured out which way to go and wanted to avoid a repeat of their last disagreement, so I got up and headed for the river before they could stop me. There were no more arguments about who goes first as they both hurried after me.

I couldn’t see the river, but when we reached the mangroves, I knew we were close. I found a kind of opening through the roots and branches. Twidum and Twidee didn’t say anything, so I kept going. They hadn’t said a word since we left the pine clearing but I could hear them moving behind me walking in careful, clumsy stealth mode.

The path through the mangroves was tight and I could smell Twidum’s and Twidee’s scents on the roots and branches where they had rubbed against them. It helped me to pick my way through.

The mangrove trees ended at a wide rock. It wasn’t very high and I jumped up easily. Twidum and Twidee were right behind me

The flat topped rock was much longer and wider than it was high. Half of it was on land and half was in the water.

“I know this rock!”

“You don’t!”

“It’s the one next to the funny tree. The water is shallow here and we have to maneuver around it when we tie up at your landing.”

“Nobody knows about our rock. It’s a secret.”

“I’m sorry, but every barge cat on the river knows about your rock. It’s our job. We have to know where the water is deep and where it isn’t. We have to know every rock in the river or we wouldn’t last a day without running aground.”

There was silence for a moment while Twidum and Twidee absorbed this news.

“Well, nobody else knows.”

“Probably,” I agreed, although I doubted it. “I didn’t smell any other cats when we came through the mangroves,” I reassured them. “Did you?”

“No. Nobody knows.”

“Probably,” I said again.

Even though I was on the river end of the rock, I couldn’t see the landing. I could just see the edge of the Grimalkin, but nothing else.

Because the mangroves between us and the landing were growing out into the shallow water, and because this part of the shoreline was set back, the landing was completely blocked from sight.

The mystery of the invisible drinking spot, solved.

The mangroves crowded up against the south side of the rock, but on the north side, the landing side, where the flowing water dead-ended up against Twidum and Twidee's rock, the current had carved out a tiny sand-filled cove. A funny little pine tree, almost as crooked as the Cattywampus grew in the middle of the sandy strip. Its wide canopy must be what kept the mangroves from taking root here...I think.

Once I was back on the ground, I put my head down to the water and sniffed. It didn't smell salty. I lapped.

The water tasted fresh and delicious...and different. This was not regular river water, It was better.

"Delicious," I said.

"We like it," said Twidum.

"It tastes really good and you don't have to clean the mud off your paws afterwards," Twidee said.

The water was moving faster than I would have expected. Looking out, I could see a line of rocks under the water.

"Hey!" I meowed. "It's a riffle.

"Can you see that line of rocks on the river-bed from where you are?" I said, excited.

"Look how the river-bed is built up between and on top of them. Look at how that big one is split in half and filled with silt. It's not as deep as the water on either side of the rocks."

The two cats looked confused.

"Come down here. You can see better," I said to them. Twidum and Twidee jumped down and stood on either side of me looking for rocks.

"What's a riffle?" Twidee asked.

"See how the water ripples where it passes over the rocks?" I said. "The water on top of the rocks is faster. Those underwater rocks are channeling a current of freshwater coming from upstream. It ends in a little eddy when it bumps up against the side of your rock. See it?"

"That's a riffle," I purred, pleased with my discovery.

Not particularly thirsty, I lowered my head and lapped more water just to keep the lovely taste in my mouth. There was something else here, a taste or a smell. I wasn't exactly sure, but I *was* curious.

Twidum and Twidee did not look impressed.

"It's the reason that the water here isn't salty," I said.

"Oh," Twidee said.

"How interesting," said Twidum, making it perfectly clear that it was nothing of the sort.

I looked at the two bored cats, remembering why I was here. At least they weren't fighting. I would be willing to bet that this was the first time they had ever been here at the same time without getting into a fight.

"Go back to the landing," I said, "and wait for me there."

Twidum and Twidee didn't move.

“Go. Get going,” I said again, thinking they didn’t hear me.

They still didn’t move. Instead, they were beginning to bristle, displaying their displeasure.

“Relax,” I said. “I have no interest in peeing all over your rock. The only scents I’ll leave are the ones that come off accidentally.”

That was when I realized that the rock and the sand didn’t have any territorial markings. I should have noticed it right away. Two tomcats fighting over territory and not scent marking?

“How come you didn’t mark your territory,” I asked.

There was a pause. I think they were each waiting for the other to answer. They looked at each other, then at me.

“It’s a secret,” Twidum said.

“We don’t want it to be too easy to find,” said Twidee.

“That’s very sensible,” I told them, “but I want you to go back to the dock now. There is something I want to investigate,” I said, intentionally vague, “and I want to do it alone. When I return, I will give you my decision.”

“But...”

“But...”

“But you haven’t heard why this is really my territory,” said Twidee.

“No, it’s not. It’s mine,” Twidum said.

I decided to ignore their protests.

“Did you know that I can hear every single cat in Ailuria whenever I want?” I said. I didn’t mention that it’s more trouble than it’s worth and I never bother to listen to anyone.

“I’m letting you go back to the landing on your own. I don’t want to hear a single hiss from either of you. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Queen Tefnut,” said Twidum.

“Yes, Queen Tefnut,” Twidee said.

“We wouldn’t anyway,” Twidum said. “Someone might hear us,” said Twidee.

“That’s right,” Twidum echoed his littermate. “We wouldn’t.”

I waited. They finally got the hint and left.

I was not interested in uncovering the root of their disagreement. What I was, was extremely curious about the extra flavor I had noticed before.

CHAPTER 16

OREN

“Hello, tree,” I said as soon as Twidum and Twidee had left.

“Hello, cat,” the tree said, lowering its branches in my direction.

I could see her face and twiggy fingers first as, bit by bit, she pulled herself out of her tree. The faint smell of magic that I noticed when I tasted the water was stronger now. A foot came next, reaching for the ground, then crooked knobby arms and legs.

She was shaped like a human with fingers and toes instead of paws but, unlike a human, she had bark and pine needles instead of skin or fur. Dryads walk upright on their back legs like humans and this one was no exception.

Moving stiffly and gracefully, she picked up a mangrove seed that had drifted into the shallows and carried it over to the mangrove trees on the landing side of the sand.

“There you go, little one,” she said, lowering it gently into the shallow water under the tangle of roots and branches.

“I need a lot of sun,” she said to me by way of explanation as she walked back to her tree. “The mangroves would quickly shade this whole area if I didn’t move them away.”

“Do you also need fresh water? I asked.

“Salty water doesn’t bother me, but I prefer fresh.”

“I don’t suppose you had anything to do with that perfectly straight line of rocks in the water?”

“That big one with the split down the middle was already there. I moved the rest myself.”

Another mystery about this place solved.

“Can you tell me why the water tastes different from regular river water?”

“It’s from a spring.”

“There’s a fresh water spring in the middle of the river?”

“Yes. Out at the end of my rock-channel where the river-bed is worn down to the bedrock. There’s a crack in the bedrock where the underground spring comes out into the river.”

“Now I understand why the water tastes different here. It’s really very good.”

“Thank you, I enjoy it and the current has helped to build up the sand more deeply. I don’t like it when my roots are wet all the time. Growing in sand is much more comfortable.”

I felt a strong connection with a tree who values Comfort.

The last piece of the fresh-drinking-water puzzle finally fitted into place.

“My name is Tefnut,” I said. “I live on the barge that you can just see at the end of the mangroves.”

“I know. I often see you on your barge on its way to the sea. I didn’t know your name, though. I call myself Oren.”

“You must know all the barge cats by sight.”

“I do. I like to watch.”

“Me, too,” I said. “I love watching the river.”

Oren had moved back into her tree while we were talking. Just her face was still visible. She was probably waiting for me to leave so she could finish settling back into her tree. I remembered that I also had to be somewhere.

“I had better go,” I said. “I still have to fix Twidum and Twidee’s argument.”

“Goodbye, Tefnut,” Oren said. “I’ll watch for you.”

“Goodbye, Oren. I’ll watch for you, too.”



The last bit of Oren dissolved back into her tree. I like to see things for myself, so I stepped onto the rock-channel to find Oren’s spring.

The rocks were close enough to the surface that I was able to walk most of way and still keep my head out of the water. A couple of times the current pushed me off the rocks and I got a mouthful of water. Briny. Yech.

The water got deeper at the very end but tasted sweet as long as I was in the raffle. I filled my lungs with air and swam to the bottom. I could see the hole in the bedrock and feel the strong current from the spring just as Oren had described it. I was liking this place more and more.

Swimming the rest of the way back to the Grimalkin, I pulled myself up onto the bottom step and sprang back onto my barge.

Arnold, Twidum, and Twidee were standing with their backs to the barge, watching the woods for my return.

Jumping down to the dock as quietly as I could, I padded up behind them and sat.

“Ahem,” I said.

“How did you get back here so fast?” Twidum said, twisting around.

“We just got back,” said Twidee, turning to face me, “and we know you weren’t behind us--”

“--and why are you so wet?” said Twidum.

Arnold knew. I could see it in his eyes.

“All barge cats have to learn how to swim,” I said to Arnold and began to lick myself dry.

“You will be pleased to know,” I said, between licks, “that I have found a way to resolve your territorial dispute.

“It’s a very nice place.” I took another lick. “I have decided to keep it.”

“Mine,” growled Twidum.

“Mine,” snarled Twidee.

“No, actually, it’s mine. I claim the drinking spot past this landing as DFOA territory.

“No,” Twidum meowed, no longer growling.

“No, you can’t,” said Twidee, plaintively.

“Yes, she can,” Arnold said, “and it’s your own fault for letting your bickering interfere with the care of the vines.”

Arnold knew how to shame these two. Their ears and tails went down, and their whiskers went flat against their faces in a grimace.

“It no longer belongs to you, Twidum,” I said, “and it no longer belongs to you, Twidee. It’s my territory. Is that clear?”

Then, before they had a chance to answer me, I said,

“Of course, since I am the DFOA and can’t be here all the time, I will need two cats to care for and protect my territory. These two cats may spend as much time as they wish in *my* territory as a reward for their services.

“Since you, Twidum, and you, Twidee, know this place best, I appoint you as royal defenders of the queen’s territory.

“But...there is a condition.” I had their complete attention. Their ears were on alert and their expression was all curiosity.

“I expect good discipline from my defenders. If I hear that work in the vineyards is being disrupted, I will find someone else to defend my territory. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Queen Tefnut.”

“Yes, Queen Tefnut.”

“Furthermore, you can argue as much as you want. I don’t care, but there is to be no blood shed on the queen’s territory.”

“What if another cat finds your territory?” said Twidum, conceding ownership to me.

“What if another cat tries to claim your territory?” said Twidee in agreement with his brother on property rights..

“Your problem. You solve it,” I said. “If you can’t, I’ll find someone else to do the job.”

“Yes, Queen Tefnut.”

“Yes, Queen Tefnut.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I called to my companions. Barge life had left me less than tolerant of cats who couldn’t learn how to work together.

**PART III
EIGHT YEARS OLD**



Tefnut on her own

**CHAPTER 17
THINGS FALL APART...AGAIN**

By the end of my second year as DFOA, my reputation as a problem solver was an Ailurian cliché but my ability to function as a barge cat was at an all-time low. Resentment was high on the Grimalkin.

In the rest of Ailuria, cats who were used to working things out among themselves, didn't. They came to me. Everybody had to ask my advice before they did anything.

On the Grimalkin, our comfortable routines didn't work any more. There were schedule changes almost daily, all of them involving someone else filling in for me. It wasn't good for the Grimalkin and it wasn't good for Ailuria.

The Grimalkin felt a lot smaller than it used to. Nobody had time for fishing or wrestling. Everyone was on edge all the time. But we were barge cats. We managed.

Then, it got worse.

Neko and Hatooli came into season at almost the same time. We had effectively been a five-cat barge for the last year. Now we were going to be down to three cats with me helping out when I could.

I tried hard to honor my responsibilities as DFOA and do as much as I could on the barge, but it was frustrating. So many of the DFOA requests were frivolous. I was tired all the time. My naps got longer. My weight dropped.

A stressed cat is not a happy cat. And when cats are not happy, they take it out on each other. My barge mates were driving me crazy.

They were always bumping into me and I don't think it was accidental. I know my bumps weren't, but, hey, it made me feel better at least for a moment.

The main topic of conversation on the Grimalkin was hissing. It was a pattern. Bump, hiss, walk away. Do it again.

It was probably a good thing that we didn't have time for wrestling. No one had the patience for Claw Perfect anymore.

We had just dropped anchor after a long day and were all in the cabin grooming for our first nap of the night.

Mostly we had been avoiding each other, sleeping in different places on the barge. If someone was sleeping on top of the kibble-fruit pile, you didn't curl up next to them anymore. You found another spot.

But for some reason, all four of us wanted the comfort of our own pillow tonight. I decided to interrupt the licky-sucky noises.

"This isn't the life that any of us wanted," I said, sitting up on my haunches. "It's not only not Comfortable, it's exhausting."

"I agree, said Felix. "We need to think about taking on an apprentice."

Nobody wanted a seventh cat on board.

"It won't be crowded while Neko and Hatooli are gone," Felix rationalized, "and when they come back, well, we'll manage."

"We do need another cat," I said, "but that won't be enough. You all know how this is supposed to work. The DFOA should be a last resort, not everybody's mother."

"Today a pregnant queen asked me to co-parent her kittens. She said that I would be a good influence on them. When I said no, she wanted to know why not."

"Yesterday, there was a cat with insomnia."

"That's silly," Anu said. "Cats don't get insomnia."

"This one did. He said the night birds woke him up and that I should get them to stop singing."

"Another cat wanted me to bring him a new pillow."

"But most cats don't even have pillows," Pussytoes said. "They're not practical without a sheltered sleeping spot."

"He had one," I said. "He said it wasn't comfortable anymore. It was probably full of fleas and rainwater."

"I never thought I'd say it...but I need to be harder to get a hold of...and the Grimalkin needs six working cats, not five and a half and not six and a half." I didn't know what I was going to say next. It just happened.

"I need to leave."

Suddenly, all of our built-up tensions and resentments drained away as all of us, including me, heard what had just come out of my mouth.

"Barge cats don't leave. They die," said Felix.

"You can't go," Anu said. "We've all seen how hard you've worked to try and fill both roles. Helping you to do that has kept us together,"

"Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it has kept us from killing each other," Felix added.

"Well, yes, there is that," she admitted.

We all knew that Anu's comment was just a desperate effort to reclaim the easy relationship we had pre-DFOA. We all knew I was right. Even I knew I was right.

"Perhaps you should think about getting two apprentices," Pussytoes said.

Our three heads swiveled to look at Pussytoes.

"Seven is bad enough, but eight cats would be impossible," Anu said.

"Not eight cats," Pussytoes replied. "Four cats and two apprentices."

"Tefnut can't just walk off the Grimalkin and start over," he continued. "All of Ailuria is used to this system and they like it a lot."

"It won't be easy to get Ailuria to accept a change. At least one of us should stay with Tefnut and I don't mind leaving."

"You've all been here since you left the nest. I had a good life before I came aboard the Grimalkin. I have a good life here and I know I can leave and find another place that is Comfortable and Interesting."

"We need to talk with Neko and Hatooli," Felix said.

"No, we don't," I said. "Objections don't count. If I want to leave, it's my decision alone. Same for Pussytoes."

"Do you want to leave, Tefnut?" Pussytoes asked.

“Yes...No...I don’t know. No, of course I don’t want to. This is not about what I want. It’s what I have to do.”

“That’s why you need to speak with *all* your advisors,” he said.

CHAPTER 18

SMALL CHANGES

The Grimalkin was docked at Oren’s landing for a drop-off of kibble-fruit and, as usual, I took advantage of the stop for a visit. I had raised my third litter under Oren’s branches and we had gotten to know each other well.

This time, though, the visit had a purpose.

“Welcome, Tefnut,” Oren said when I stepped onto the sand.

“Greetings, Oren, I said. “It’s good to be back.”

We exchanged scents. I climbed to a spot in her branches where I was surrounded by pine needles. While I scratched her bark, marking it with the scent glands on my paws, Oren squeezed the scent of her pine needles into the air so that it settled onto my fur. Greeting accomplished, I settled down in the crook of a branch to talk.

“We have a new apprentice on the Grimalkin,” I said.

“Has something happened to one of your barge mates?” Oren asked.

“I’m the one who’s leaving,” I said.

She lowered a branch drawing her needles down my fur, a gesture she knew I found soothing.

“As soon as the apprentice is trained,” I continued, “I’m leaving the Grimalkin. I’m going to den on the old queen’s barge next to the waterfall.

“When I leave, the Grimalkin will take a second apprentice and, eventually, Pussytoes will join me as my advisor. Anu will be the senior cat on the Grimalkin.”

“That’s a big change. Have you thought about denning here?”

“A lot. How do you feel about having dozens of cats here, every day, forever?”

“Hmm. Maybe not such a good idea. I think one cat at a time is probably more Comfortable for me. I wouldn’t mind more kittens, though. That was Fun, and Interesting. Your kits still come to visit me occasionally.”

It was emblematic of our friendship that we had immediately recognized our common values of things Comfortable and Interesting. Oren’s principal of Fun, however, is hard for me to understand. We have talked about it and we think that it’s very close to the basic concept of Exciting. But Oren does not have a prey instinct and she does not do anything quickly. She has trouble understand Exciting.

“It’s very kind of you to offer to share your place with me, Oren, but I think we both enjoy how private it is here. I would rather be able to come and spend time with you when all the craziness gets to me.”

“Twidum and Twidee may be annoying,” Oren said, “but they’re very vain about being the defenders of the queen’s spring.”

“Vain and loyal,” I agreed. “No one will ever bother us here unless we’re all right with it.”

‘Annoying’, was another idea that Oren completely understood. She knew that having lots of cats, like Twidum and Twidee, here all the time would be very Annoying.

We watched the ripples on the riffle for a while without talking. I kind of know when Oren is looking at me or at something else

We both love the river and all its changes. It's harder to see them when you stay in one spot like Oren does, but she has taught me to see small changes that even barge cats don't notice.

"I see you've planted some new mangrove seedlings since my last visit," I remarked. I also noticed that there were more than the usual number of fallen pine needles behind Oren.

"Are you feeling all right?" I said to Oren. "That's a lot of extra pine needles."

"I'm fine. My riverside roots got a little too wet in the last storm. I dropped some extra needles on the other side to compensate."

"I thought there was extra sand over by the mangroves," I said, thinking about the storm.

"Yes," she said, confirming my thoughts, "the storm drove some extra sand into my cove. The current from the riffle will eventually smooth it out."

I wondered how many changes will have accumulated before I would be able to visit Oren again.

CHAPTER 19

THE QUEEN'S BARGE

As I expected, the queen's barge was perfectly Comfortable, but not very Interesting. Nowhere to go and nothing to do, I became Oren. Rooted to the spot, I was an observer of the tiny.

In the beginning, all I did was sleep. Once in a while I would wake up and have something to eat. Then I would go back to sleep. Anybody who wanted to see the DFOA would have to wake her up.

But nobody did. The first weeks on the queen's barge were quiet. Even the cats from the colonies on either side of me, who just had to walk over the swinging bridge to reach the DFOA, didn't come. I was suspicious, but grateful.

Gradually, I got fatter and stronger. I started to think about fish hunting again.

My first visitor was the Grimalkin. They anchored in the middle of the river and two cats swam over to my barge.

"I see you've learned to swim," I said to Quentin. Quentin was the new apprentice we had taken on after I finally admitted it was time for me to leave the barge. The other cat was even younger than Quentin.

"This is our new apprentice, Harry," Quentin said. Harry was a tricolor tabby and Quentin was all gray with short, dense fur.

We all touched noses and sat.

"We learned to swim together," Harry said. His wet tail was flicking with excitement. "Quentin was brave. He helped me a lot."

Quentin was all of three months older than Harry and from Harry's point of view, an experienced sailor.

"I always thought the hardest part was getting my belly wet," I said.

"Ye-es," they both meowed at once.

"We hated that part," Harry said.

“We still don’t like it very much,” Quentin added.

“Well, I’m impressed that you swam over, just to talk to me.”

“I really, really wanted to meet you,” Harry said. “Pussytoes said I could come first if Quentin came with me. We only learned to swim three days ago and haven’t had time to practice.”

“So, how was the getting your belly wet again part?” I asked.

“Not so great,” Harry said, “but totally worth it.”

“It was okay,” Quentin, said. “I’ll get used to it.”

“That’s the right attitude,” I said. “I’m sure you will both be great barge cats.”

“Thank you, Queen Tefnut,” Harry said.

It was nice being around younglings. I had actually forgotten who I was for a few minutes.

“On the Grimalkin, I’m just Tefnut,” I said, trying not to snap. “If you want to be a true barge cat, you’ll do the same,” I said, sounding a little more stern than I meant to.

“Yes...Tefnut, sir,” Harry said.

“Pussytoes is letting me pilot the barge,” Quentin told me proudly. “With supervision, of course,” he added. He gave his shoulder a casual lick to hide from Harry just how proud he was.

“And are you learning to hunt the river?” I asked Harry.

“Yes...I am,” he said, struggling to call me Tefnut, and settling on nothing. Nothing was fine with me.

“Tell me, Quentin,” I asked. “How have things been on the Grimalkin since I left. Have there been problems with unhappy cats?”

“You should have been there,” Quentin answered enthusiastically. “We stopped at every landing. Pussytoes demanded to see the senior cat in every colony--”

“--He was scary,” Harry said.

“Pussytoes? Scary? Maybe you mean firm. He could be intimidating when he was strict with me.

“Well, he was,” Harry said. “I was scared, and he wasn’t even talking to me. There were almost always cats waiting to talk with you.

“Pussytoes would lower his head and his ears and growl. Then, if whoever he was talking to didn’t leave right away, he would start lashing his tail back and forth super fast.

“The tail would get them. It sure got me.”

“Some of those cats were pretty big,” said a voice from the side of the queen’s barge, “but it never failed.”

“Pussytoes!” I yowled and ran over to where he was pulling himself onto the barge followed by Neko, Hatooli, Anu and Felix.

Head bumping, shoulder rubbing and ear licking accompanied by the music of six cats purring, lasted until someone, probably Felix, yowled

“Claw Perfect! Attack!”

The resulting cat pile left Quentin and Harry wide-eyed and bristly from watching us wrestle.

Eventually, energy expended, we all settled down on pillows in the cabin.

“When you are Claw Perfect,” Anu said to the two still excited apprentices, sitting up on their pillows, “you can join us. Your lessons begin tomorrow.”

The rest of us were more relaxed, resting comfortably on our stomachs, our front paws tucked under our chests and our tails wrapped around our bodies.

"I gather that even without the DFOA aboard, there still wasn't time for wrestling and fish hunting," I said.

"We have been busy," Hatooli said. "Pussytoes spoke with the senior cat in every single colony in Ailuria. We crisscrossed the Cattywampus on the way downriver and stopped at every landing on both sides of the river. It took some tricky navigating and we nearly collided with other barges twice."

"Needless to say," said Pussytoes, "every cat in Ailuria now knows that you are no longer on the Grimalkin and that you are not to be disturbed until you are ready to start receiving cats again."

"And when will that be?" I asked.

"Whenever you're ready," Pussytoes answered.

"So, not soon then," I said.

"Pussytoes told all the senior cats that when they saw the Grimalkin making the downriver journey again, it would be the sign that you would be ready," said Felix.

"We all decided," Anu said, "that the DFOA is going to need to spend an indeterminate amount of time consulting with her advisors."

CHAPTER 20

CLAW PERFECT

"Why are you all still talking?" Felix interrupted. "You should be fish hunting."

He was right.

As soon as we heard the phrase fish hunting, ears went up. Tails started twitching. We raced to the edge of the barge where, not counting some tiny tail twitches, we became instantly immobile. We watched the water. We listened for fish.

Even Pussytoes who was tensely hunched in ambush pose, was enjoying the moment although he had no intention of throwing himself in the water.

As always, Anu and I alternated doing the stalking and herding while all four of us--me, Anu, Neko, and Hatooli--took turns leaping into the air and pouncing on the fish who had the bad luck to be swimming near the queen's barge.

Felix, Pussytoes and the two apprentices sat with us, watching all the stalking and pouncing. Harry couldn't control himself. Every time one of us launched herself into the air, Harry would jump in, too. We missed a lot of fish that day.

Best guess was that Harry would eventually be joining the ranks of fish hunters, Quentin, maybe, maybe not. He still had wet belly issues.

Pussytoes shook it off and settled down for a nap when we were done but Felix and the apprentices were way too keyed up to calm down. That was when Felix decided to start the Claw Perfect training.

For the rest of that week on the queen's barge, a Claw Perfect training session, led by Felix, followed fish hunting. We did a lot of fish hunting.

Felix wasn't the most effective Claw Perfect teacher. The three cats would emerge from these bouts scratched up and missing patches of fur, but satisfied and ready for a nap.

By the end of the week, most of the fish were avoiding the barge. We were spending most of our time watching with very little pouncing. We are cats. We were patient, but eventually, the fish won. We lost interest. Everyone was ready to go back to the Grimalkin.



“I have been thinking about introducing Claw Perfect training to Ailuria,” I said to everyone when Felix, Harry and Quentin limped into the cabin after a Claw Perfect lesson. I want to introduce Tooth and Claw Perfect to the rest of Ailuria.”

My two years trying to combine DFOA responsibilities with barge life had given me a lot to think about. Mostly, I needed a better way to deal with silly demands from foolish cats. So far, my basic strategy was to tell them: ‘That’s a stupid problem. Go away and fix it yourself’.

I tried to get my barge mates to help out in their capacity as official advisors. After all, anybody can say, ‘go away’, but they wisely refused.

‘Fix it yourself’, became my motto. Unfortunately, all it accomplished was an increase in the number of discontented cats and when cats are not content, they take it out on each other.

What I thought was a firm and sensible response did nothing to slow down the stream of annoying cats. It just made it worse.

The problem kept getting bigger instead of smaller, driving us all crazy, eventually driving me off the Grimalkin.

“Getting every cat in Ailuria to be Claw Perfect sounds like a pretty major undertaking,” Pussytoes responded.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” said Neko, “but didn’t you leave the Grimalkin so that there would be less pressure on all of us, including the DFOA?”

“You’re both right,” I said, “but we don’t have to train everyone, just the cats who will be the Claw Perfect teachers. Then, they can take over the training of everyone else. Just think, if this works, it will teach the Ailuricats to stop pestering me.

“How?” asked Hatooli. “I don’t see the connection.”

“Couldn’t be simpler,” I said. “Instead of refusing to deal with idiotic requests, I will decree that the best Claw Perfect cat wins the argument.

“Remember Twidee and Twidum? If they thought I was going to make them wrestle to decide who had the rights to their drinking spot, they probably would have figured out a compromise on their own--”

“--or they would have kept fighting until one of them killed the other one,” said Felix.

“Well, yes, there is that,” I answered.

“It’s not a perfect solution,” Pussytoes said. “It won’t work for every unreasonable problem, just disagreements, but that’s what most of the more inane requests are, cats expecting the DFOA to settle their differences.

“All in all, it’s not a bad idea,” he said. “Hopefully, it will help to reduce the number of frivolous requests and it should certainly cut back on resentment. No one will be able to claim that you didn’t resolve their problem.”

“I like it,” Neko said. “After all, who doesn’t enjoy a good wrestle?”

CHAPTER 21

THE EQs

We spent the rest of the week fish hunting and working out the details for getting the new Claw Perfect program started. I think Pisu must have been spying on us, because the day after the Grimalkin sailed away, he came to visit me.

On the third day of his visit, I innocently asked Pisu when he had to be back with the Harvesters.

“Oh, I’m not with Hazel’s group anymore,” he said offhandedly. “I thought I could den here with you. Won’t that be nice, Tefnut? I can be in charge of chasing away the cats you don’t want to talk to.”

He stood over me and puffed out to remind me of just how big he was and just how good he would be as my personal bodyguard. Anyone else would have been intimidated. I knew he was just showing off.

“That’s a very nice idea, Pisu,” I said extra politely. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but, as usual, Pisu had misread the situation.

“I don’t need anybody to get rid of annoying cats. I’ve gotten pretty good at it myself, these last couple of years. Besides, I won’t be on my own. As soon as Quentin is trained, Pussytoes will be leaving the Grimalkin and joining me.”

“He can’t do that. I don’t want any other cats on my barge.”

“Your barge?” I pulled back my whiskers and narrowed my eyes.

“Our barge. I meant our barge,” he said quickly. I knew exactly what he meant, but it didn’t matter. I had been expecting this.

“No, Pisu. My barge,” I said calmly. “It’s mine whether I want it or not. I don’t want it. But it’s still mine. I stood up, looked him in the eye and gave him the mother-stare to let him know exactly how I felt. I let my tail bristle out to make sure he got the point.

Pisu took a step back. I sat down and started to clean one of my front paws.

“I know you, Pisu. You won’t be happy denning in one place all the time. It will be a long time before Pussytoes can leave the barge. Stay here for a while.

“I want to start exploring my territory. We can do it together. You can den on the barge with me, or nearby, wherever you want.”

It was not what Pisu wanted, but he didn’t make a fuss. I had given him extra time to persuade me to appoint him to be my chief advisor.

“I know everything,” he said enthusiastically. “I can show you where all the best hiding places are. I know every lookout in Ailuria.” He lowered his voice. “I can take you to a place where we can watch mice.”

I could feel my fur frizzle with delight.

“Tonight,” he said. “On the downriver side of the Cattywampus, past the kibble-fruit vines, at the top of the hill. I promise you will see mice.”



It was just after sunset and Pisu had led me to a spot very close to where I had hidden the day that I ran away from Queen Snickerdoodle’s advisors. The day she made me DFOA.

I listened for other cats, but there was no one nearby. We were alone, crouched down, ears up and tail tips twitching, near a pile of rocks.

The spaces between the rocks were terribly attractive. They were calling me to push my paw into those little pockets of dark to see what might be there.

“Want to know what a mouse sounds like?” Pisu said. He made a squeaky chattering sound. It made my mouth water with anticipation.

A small gray mouse peered out from between two rocks and looked around. A moment later, it was all the way out, poking its nose under the dried leaves on the ground, searching for food.

I was torn. I knew I could catch that mouse without hurting it and I was desperate to do just that. But it wouldn't be fair to Pisu.

Between his lack of training and his lack of self restraint, the poor mouse wouldn't stand a chance and we would both be in big trouble. I did the only thing I could under the circumstances.

“Attack,” I yowled, and leapt on top of Pisu. He was a lot rougher than my barge mates, but I kept my claws sheathed. Pisu got the point and did the same, mostly.



“Why didn't you catch that mouse?” Pisu asked me later.

“It didn't seem fair to make you watch me when you can't catch it yourself,” I answered.

“But you could have shared it with me,” he said.

I was confused.

“I wouldn't have eaten more than my half.”

“Pisu! What are you talking about?”

“Relax, Tefnut. I wouldn't have killed the mouse, but you can do whatever you want.”

“What I meant was, that it didn't seem fair because you don't know how to catch a mouse without hurting it,” I said.

“Tefnut, you are the smartest cat I know,” Pisu said. “Ailuria is lucky to have you as DFOA. You're also the dumbest cat I ever met.”

“What would happen if an Ailurian cat was caught killing a mouse or a bird?”

“The cat would have to be banished from Ailuria,” I said. “Forever.”

“By whom.”

“By me.”

“And what would happen if you started killing mice?”

“I would have to leave Ailuria.”

“Why? Who would make you go? Who would banish you? No one. That's who. You're the DFOA. You can do anything you want.”

“You know what would happen if we stopped growing kibble-fruit and started hunting our own food”

“Not everybody, Tefnut,” he said. “Just you.”

CHAPTER 22

COMFORTABLE

The stars had faded from the predawn sky when Pisu and I stepped onto the swinging bridge connecting the queen's barge to the shore. We both noticed the soft breathing of a sleeping cat coming from the cabin.

"Pisu," I said, interrupting his low growl. "There's someone I want you to meet. Behave yourself."

I had been listening for Shade every day since Pisu had arrived. I think I have finally found a place where he can be Comfortable.

It was only a matter of time before Pisu got kicked out of Hazel's Harvesters. My littermate is too charismatic and his influence over the younger cats was eventually going to create problems again.

"His name is Shade," I said. "He's my contact for a network of cats called the EQs. They bring me information about what's happening in Ailuria."

Shade heard us coming and came out of the cabin as we stepped onto the barge. He is the only cat I ever met who is smaller than me. He was the runt of a runty litter, not expected to survive.

Sturdy, small, and sleek, Shade is a truly black cat...black footpads, black nose, black whiskers, even black skin inside his ears. His eyes are huge.

He is invisible at night and pretty good at disappearing in the daytime as well. His tracking skills are legendary.

I shouldered my way in front of Pisu to greet Shade. I could feel the tension in Pisu's muscles.

"Hello, Shade," I said. We touched noses. "This is my littermate, Pisu."

Shade walked over to Pisu and raised his head to greet him. It took a moment before my big Pisu cooperated and lowered his head to touch noses. Then they sniffed each other's butts, separated and sat, Shade in a relaxed alert pose, Pisu, sitting, but still tense. The butt sniff had given Pisu a lot of information to think about.

I got right to the point.

"Pisu," I said. "When you're ready to leave the queen's barge, I thought you might be interested in joining the EQs."

"I never heard of them before. This is something you made up, right?"

"Not at all," Shade answered for me. "The EQs were formed under Queen Snickerdoodle. When she began to lose her hearing and when her arthritis kept her from traveling, her advisors set up a network of cats to keep them informed.

"We call ourselves The Ears of the Queen. The EQs."

I had met Shade when I first became DFOA. He would visit me occasionally on the Grimalkin and tell me about the other EQs, where they were and what they were doing.

The truth is, I didn't need their help. I'm perfectly capable of going anywhere I want in Ailuria and I have my DFOA hearing to let me know if there is anything that needs my attention. But I never disbanded the EQs and stayed in touch with Shade. Like Pisu, he always had interesting stories to tell.

Over time, a lot of the cats moved back into their original colonies. The ones that stayed were cats that, for lots of different reasons, didn't belong to any colony.

Disbanding the EQs would have left me with the task of finding places for each of them and, frankly, I wasn't interested. So the EQs stayed.

It was a good thing, too, because the more I learned about the cats in the EQ, the more I saw it as a place of last resort for cats like Pisu.

“A lot of the EQs went back to their colonies after Queen Snickerdoodle died,” Shade said. We can always use more cats, if you’re interested.

“Tefnut told me that you have already explored most of Ailuria, so you would be a perfect fit.”

“All of Ailuria,” Pisu said. “I know every inch of this country.”

“Perfect.”

“Can I go anywhere I want?”

“Of course.”

“Doesn’t anyone tell me where to go or what to do?”

“No one.”

“Can I come and tell Tefnut what I find or do I have to tell you?”

“Most of the EQs prefer to be on their own and let me deal with the DFOA, but it’s not necessary.”

“You can come to see me as often as you like,” I said to Pisu. “That will never change.”

“I should probably go,” Shade said, “but I’ll be around for a few days if you decide to join us.”

“How will I find you?” Pisu asked.

“Don’t worry,” said Shade. “I’ll find you.”



“I think I’ll check out the EQs,” Pisu said that night. It sounds like they could use someone like me.”

“Good idea,” I said. “Some advice before you go. Most of the other EQs are pretty independent, and some of them can be a little feisty. Be careful.”

“Hey, when do you ever have to worry about me?” Pisu said as he sauntered off.



Pisu continued to visit me occasionally. He still talked about the places he visited and the cats that lived there, but now I could see that he had more of a sense of purpose beyond entertaining me. For the first time, Pisu seemed Content.

I suppose you could say that I was Content on the queen’s barge. Certainly my life was calmer.

Sometimes there would be cats, with some petty disagreement they expected me to resolve, waiting for me when I returned from exploring my new territory or woke from a nap. But for the most part, I was alone for the first time in my life.

I wasn’t used to having so much space to myself. I could sleep wherever I wanted and run crazy from one end of the barge to the other without bumping into anyone or anything.

I began to enjoy being alone, but I missed my companions. I looked forward to seeing my barge mates each time the Grimalkin finished the upriver trip.

Eventually, Quentin’s apprenticeship was complete and Pussytoes came to join me on the barge. I was Comfortable.

**PART IV
TWELVE YEARS OLD**



Tefnut treed

**CHAPTER 23
IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT**

I had birthed two more litters since moving to the queen's barge, both litters raised under Oren's branches. They were all fine swimmers and Claw Perfect like true Ailuricats.

Not many cats in Ailuria attained true Claw Perfect, but most cats now enjoyed Claw Perfect practice as an alternate form of wrestling, especially because everyone knew that if they bought their problems to me, they were liable to need Claw Perfect skills.

Twidum and Twidee would probably never be Claw Perfect, but they practiced more than anyone else. On the other hand, learning to be Claw Perfect was never something that Pisu could be bothered with.

He claimed that he was exactly what he should be and didn't need anything extra. I tended to agree with him. More than anyone I had ever met, Pisu was his own cat, something the DFOA could never be.

But now he is in trouble again and this time I don't know if I will be able help him.



There were four of us that afternoon. Pussytoes and me, Pisu, and Gregory Green who was from the halfandhalf human village just past Ailuria.

We were all there to hear what Gregory Green had to say. I was not happy. Pussytoes and Pisu were not in such great moods either.

"It was such a dark and stormy night," Gregory began, "that I couldn't resist going down to the pond for a swim. The whole world smelled so wet and wonderful that I danced out the door and down the hill. The rain was heavy and warm and perfect, but diving into the water was more perfect--"

"--Mr. Green," I interrupted. "Would you please get to the point?" My tail started to twitch.

Gregory Green had a head-full of dark frizzy hair, a long face, a long, skinny body to match and oversized hands and feet that didn't. The beautiful smile on his face also didn't match, since his whole right side was covered with enough bandages and tape to suggest that he was at the minimum extremely uncomfortable.

He was sitting on the grass with his knees pulled up to his chin, enjoying this part of his recollection.

“We don’t need a description of the weather,” I said. “Can’t you just tell us what happened?”

“Well, really,” Mr. Green said. “I just meant that normally I would have noticed, but it was dark, and...it was a very private moment. I wasn’t expecting to see anyone.”

“We understand. Now tell us what happened,” said Pussytoes.

Pussytoes, Pisu and I were sitting with Mr. Green in a hilltop meadow just outside of Ailuria. Looking down one slope, we could see row after row of kibble-fruit vines and the Cattywampus River.

The other side of the hill had a scattering of trees that thickened to a forest near the bottom. Gregory Green’s village, built on a slight rise in the middle of the woods, could be seen in the distance. The pond under discussion was not visible.

“I was floating on my back, enjoying the rain on my stomach. The contrast, you know--”

“--Mr. Green! Please!” My eyes automatically got bigger and my ears widened. It indicated a more aggressive posture and a change in temperament that was completely lost on Mr. Green.

“As I was saying,” Mr. Green finally said, “that was when he attacked me.” He pointed to Pisu.

“But Mr. Green, your injuries,” I said. Pisu is big for a cat, but still...perhaps another human...”

“I was a frog at the time.”

No one spoke for a moment.

“Oh. That would explain it,” I said. “Your name doesn’t indicate your ancestry. Of course. Your love of water. It makes perfect sense. But how did you escape from Pisu?”

I was talking to Gregory Green, but I was staring at Pisu. Pisu stared back.

“I can change really fast when I have to,” Gregory said.

Gregory Green’s village was inhabited by humans with animal ancestry. Most of them had a tendency to change to their animal shapes without warning, and frequently found themselves in embarrassing situations when they lived in the human world.

The people in Mr. Green’s village were an impulsive group who had never learned good control over their shape-changing tendencies. They preferred an isolated life in The Greater Elf Kingdom to the kind of treatment they got from other humans when they inevitably were found out.

“Pisu,” I said. “What were you thinking? Only a desperate cat goes out in that kind of weather. Were you hungry? Did you have the runs?”

“I know a dry spot near the pond. I like to watch. Especially at night.”

“Watch? You call what happened watching?”

“I got carried away.”

“Just how often do you get carried away?” Pisu’s left shoulder suddenly needed attention. He licked and bit vigorously, his mouth too full of fur to answer.

The menacing growl I heard was from Pussytoes. He was standing up with his fur fully bristled. Harry was right. He *was* scary.

“I can’t believe you’ve been hunting,” Pussytoes hissed. “If this gets out, every last cat will be forced out of Ailuria. Our way of life here will end. We will all be forced to live in the human world.”

“This is fairyland,” Pussytoes said in a low growl. “No one is allowed to eat anyone. You know that. Everyone knows that. I am never going back to live with humans again. Never. And I’m not going to let you mess things up. You are so exiled.”

Pisu licked his front paw and looked slowly up at Pussytoes.

“You can’t do that, Pussytoes. You know you can’t. Can he, Tefnut?” He turned to me and purred.

“You’re right, Pisu. He can’t,” I said quietly. “But I can.”

“My sweet Little Big Ears. You can’t do that. Not to your litter mate. For pity’s sake, we share a pillow.”

My tail was no longer twitching. It was in full swish. How dare he use my nest name in front of other cats. I may be on the small side. Maybe my ears *are* a little big for my head, but *I’m* the DFOA. Nobody, but nobody, is allowed to talk to me like that. My ears went flat. I narrowed my eyes.

“Is that what you’ve been counting on Pisu? Because I can’t help you.”

“That,” Pisu said, “and the fact that you knew. You knew where I was and what I was doing,” Pisu said. “If I go into exile, you do, too.”

“I knew you were watching. Everybody likes to watch, but I never imagined you would take it this far.”

I was so sure he would have told me if things got out of hand.

“How could you not tell me?” I said. “But you’re right. I should have guessed what you were doing. Perhaps it’s time for me to step down.”

“Oh no, you don’t, Tefnut,” Pussytoes said. “You did nothing wrong and you’re not going anywhere.”

About once a month I find a reason to resign my position. Unfortunately, nobody ever pays any attention. I have been DFOA for what seemed like forever.

Mostly, the cats who come to me listen politely and then do exactly what they want. It was annoying, and I do not like to be annoyed. The only time I have any real power are times like this when nobody else wants anything to do with it.

Everyone in Ailuria would sympathize with Pisu. Hunting your own food was the romantic ideal. But even in the human world it rarely worked out.

Cats who choose to live the fantasy in the human world had short, nasty lives. On the other hand, living with humans involved compromises that most Ailuricats are not willing to make.

All cats are halfandhalf and can come and go to and from fairyland as they please, but only if they obey the rule. No one in fairyland is allowed to eat anyone.

“Pisu,” I said. “You’ve been found out. There’s nothing anyone can do. You have to go.”

“Mr. Green, will you please tell the other people in your village that the cat who attacked you will be banished and never permitted to return anywhere in fairyland. As the DFOA, please accept my apologies on behalf of my people and we wish you a speedy recovery from your injuries.

“Come, Mr. Green. I’ll walk you home,” Pussytoes said. “You can show me Pisu’s dry spot when we pass the pond and I will arrange to have it covered over to remove the temptation.”

Ever the diplomat, I knew that Pussytoes had no intention of letting Mr. Green be in charge of passing on such sensitive information. Pussytoes would make sure to see the

mayor himself and explain the situation in the best possible light. Even if Pisu was properly punished, rumor alone could destroy Ailuria.

CHAPTER 24

A PARTING OF THE WAYS

“It’s who I am, Tefnut,” Pisu said after Pussytoes and Gregory Green were gone. “It’s what I was born to be.”

“It’s who we all are Pisu. It’s no different from being an indoor cat in the human world. You would have to settle for pretend hunting, just like we do here.”

“I would never become an indoor cat. Not ever.”

“Exactly.”

Privately, I completely agreed. I couldn’t think of anything worse than being a human pet.

“You can be a wild cat with no rules if you want, Pisu, but you can’t be one here. You have to leave.”

My heart was breaking. What would my life be without Pisu? I hate this stupid DFOA thing. If I was still a barge cat, we could go together.

“Pisu,” I said. “Who else knows what you’ve been doing?”

“No one.”

“Then I think that you had better leave now.”

“Don’t be silly, Tefnut. I don’t need to go anywhere. We belong here. We are halfandhalf. That means we can live anywhere we want...”

“...and we’re also cats. Eating other creatures is what we do. It is who we are... wherever we live.”

“No, Pisu. That’s only what you say to justify your unbelievably self indulgent behavior. We are half-magic and half not-magic. You could just as easily say that that means we don’t completely belong anywhere.

“We live in both worlds on sufferance. On sufferance of humans or of fairies. This is an ancient community. Your selfishness could destroy it. You have to leave. Now.

“I’m going to miss you so much, and it’s all your fault.”

“Well, I won’t miss you. You’ll be sorry for this.

“You’re a traitor, Tefnut. A traitor to our friendship and to all of catdom. I will be back and you’ll be sorry you betrayed me.”

“Goodbye, Pisu,” I said firmly. I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I wonder if whatever happened to Pussytoes before he came to Ailuria hurt this much.

Pisu turned and walked away. As he walked, he faded until nothing was left but the tip of his tail. A moment later there was nothing at all.

Pisu was an idiot.

I still had to put a binding spell on Pisu to make it impossible for him to return to Ailuria, but I could do that later. Besides, I didn’t really want to.

I went home.

I settled on my sleeping pillow. Pisu was the only cat I had ever allowed to share my pillow. No one else ever would. I went to sleep and didn’t wake up for a long time.

CHAPTER 25

THE REST OF THE STORY

Pussytoes and Gregory Green picked their way downhill carefully. This part of the back slope was steep and rocky. There were easier routes, but this was the fastest way to get Mr. Green out of Ailuria and into the woods, out of sight and hearing of curious cats.

“You understand, Mr. Green,” he said, that this kind of situation is extremely rare. Cats are very strict about enforcing ‘The Rule’.”

“Oh, sure. Used to go fishing all the time when I lived in the real world. Now, I can’t even eat flies when I’m in frog shape. Kinda miss it.

“The flies?”

“A little, but mostly the fishing. That’s one smart cat. Rainy weather’s the best time to catch fish.”

“I was never a fishing cat, mostly mice.”

“Hah. Mice? I’ll introduce to Tim Grey. You two could have fun together and Timothy needs the exercise. He’s a regular house mouse. Hardly ever goes out.”

“Really? How interesting.” In Pussytoes’ opinion it would be beyond difficult to keep a pretend game of cat and mouse pretend, and although it was an ongoing source of friction, quarreling with other cats was a much safer way to relieve tension. Most Ailuricats carried numerous scars from play-fighting.

Better that no one in fairyland knew just how easily the cats of Ailuria could be stirred into a rampaging mob by someone like Pisu. Just as well, also, that no one here knew what cats did when they occasionally went ‘on vacation’ to the human world.

They had come to a clearing in the woods with a small pond in the center.

“Is this where Pisu attacked you?”

“He was hiding right there, under that rock.” Gregory pointed to a flat top rock overhanging the water. “Used to be a family of water rats living there. I don’t know what happened to them. I guess they moved on, but it’s well dug out, goes back quite a ways.”

Pussytoes refrained from making any suggestions regarding the fate of the water rat family. “Unless someone from your village wants to move in, I suggest it be filled in to prevent temptation.”

“We’re all basically humans with just a little bit of something else. Our preference is for walls, windows and soft beds. I’ll come by in the morning with a shovel and take care of it.”

“Thank you, Gregory. That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s no trouble, but there’s something I want to tell you before we get to the village.” They had left the pond and were nearly out of the woods.

“Maybe we should stop for a minute. I don’t want anyone else to hear this.”

“Let’s get out of the woods first,” Pussytoes said. “That way we’ll know were alone.”

The village consisted of two rows of houses one on each side of a narrow road. Gregory took them down a path behind the houses. On one side of the path were the back yards and gardens, on the other side there were empty fields. They turned up a narrow track between two fields. When they were far enough for privacy, Gregory sat on the ground crossing his long legs in front of him. Pussytoes sat on his haunches and waited.

“Even though your leader cat --,” Gregory began.

“--That would be Tefnut,” Pussytoes said.

“Right. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone as mad as Tefnut and not doing something about it, but it seemed to me that it was the kind of mad that a parent gets at their kid. Am I right?”

“Yes, you are. Tefnut and Pisu are littermates and they have been good friends for most of their lives. Cats don’t form attachments very often. It was something special they had.”

“Then it was just as well that I didn’t speak up. Let me tell you how it was, and you can decide if Tefnut should know what happened.

“You see, I was still in human form when I dove into the pond. I was still human when I rolled over on my back to float. I never planned to switch to frog. Sometimes when I’m extra relaxed and happy, it just sort of sneaks up on me. Bam, I’m a frog.

“Even in the rain, you couldn’t miss something my size jumping into the water. That cat was on me almost before I was full frog. Look at my injuries. He wasn’t catching me to play with. He knew I was human and he was going in for the kill.”

No one spoke for almost a full minute, Gregory because he was polite and Pussytoes because he was in shock.

“Maybe he has worms,” Gregory finally said to break the silence. “Maybe he was really, really hungry.”

“Nobody in Ailuria has worms,” Pussytoes said. “It’s contagious and we’re careful not to let it get started. This is not about hunting either. That’s just his cover. That cat has some strange ideas and they’re a lot stranger than anyone imagined.

“Let’s go find your mayor.”

Pussytoes was nervous. All his long life, he knew exactly what needed to be done, and how to do it. For the first time, he had no idea.

CHAPTER 26 IN THE HUMAN VILLAGE

They found Mayor Mole in the tea shop. As it was the only restaurant in the village, it also sold coffee, beer and wine, plus home-made cookies, soup and sandwiches. But the tea shop was what everyone called it.

“Gregory! What on earth happened to you?” Michael Mole said as soon as they walked in.

“Fell out of a tree,” Gregory answered.

“You’re no tree climber, Greg. What did you think you were doing?” said Maggie Mag.

“Wanted to see if I could,” Gregory answered.

The tea shop was the only two-story building in the village. Maggie ran the shop and lived upstairs. She was the one person in town who used her animal shape on a regular basis. Most evenings after her assistant, Frank Hoggit, had taken over, she could be seen in her magpie shape flying out the second-story window. The plain black and white bird was a strong contrast to her human shape. Maggie was young, pretty, and beautifully groomed.

Mayor Mole was old enough to be her grandfather and, except for the inch-thick glasses that reduced his eyes nearly to pinpoints, a handsome man with a full head of silver hair.

“Well, you couldn’t, could you?” Maggie said to Gregory. “Ooo, what a pretty cat. Whose is he?”

“Maggie!” Gregory was shocked. “He isn’t anybody’s cat. This is our neighbor Pussytoes from Ailuria. He has business with the Mayor.”

“What’s your business, Pussytoes? What a silly name. Shouldn’t you call yourself something more serious if you’re going to be a business cat? Look at me, for example. My given name was Maggie Magpie. It was just too ridiculous. So I changed it to Maggie Mag. Now I just love my name.”

“Maggie! How could you! Pussytoes, I’m sorry...”

“It’s all right, Gregory. It is a silly name. I was raised by humans who gave me this name. I was very fond of them, so I keep the name.

“My business here isn’t very important, Ms. Mag. As your nearest neighbor, I was sent to bring greetings from Ailuria to your town.”

“Oh. How interesting,” Maggie said and wandered off to the kitchen. Gregory breathed a sigh of relief.

“Let me introduce you to the mayor,” he said, picking up a cushion from one of the chairs. The Mayor was sitting in the furthest-back booth with a mug of tea and a plate of oatmeal cookies.

“How do you do, Pussytoes. Please call me Michael.”

“I’m happy to meet you, Michael,” Pussytoes said. Gregory picked up a cushion from one of the chairs and put it on the table opposite the Mayor.

Familiar with human ways, Pussytoes jumped onto the bench first and then the cushion so as not to walk across the table.

It was his innate understanding of these small details that made Pussytoes the consummate diplomat. He was much better than Tefnut at telling cats to go away without offending them.

Pussytoes settled down comfortably with his paws tucked under and his tail curled close to his body.

“Well, what else do you bring me besides greetings, Pussytoes?” Michael said.

“I bring the most profound apologies, as one of your citizens has been assaulted by one of ours.”

“Gregory can be a little goofy, but I didn’t really believe he fell out of a tree,” Michael said. “What actually happened?” Pussytoes sighed.

“Why don’t you tell him, Gregory.”

“Everything?” Gregory asked.

“Might as well,” Pussytoes answered.



“So, you’re telling me that you have a sociopathic cat running around loose in Ailuria?” Michael said.

“That’s right,” Pussytoes said. “A regular lunatic, a dangerous homicidal crazy cat.” Pussytoes tried hard to emphasize Pisu’s status as an exception to normal cat behavior.

“But he’s not running around loose in Ailuria. By now, Tefnut has sent him into permanent exile in the human world.”

“Can he come back?” Michael asked.

“He shouldn’t be able to,” Pussytoes said, “but it’s not impossible. When Tefnut became DFOA, she was also given a couple of extra magic gifts. She has the power to send a cat into permanent exile if she sees fit, but nobody’s ever tested it.”

“What about restraining him?”

“I don’t think so, but I’ll look into it. On those rare occasions when a cat is sent into exile, that’s pretty much the end of it.”

“How about at least keeping an eye on him?”

“That we would do anyway, mostly to make sure he’s all right. But in this case it probably should be mandatory, and permanent.”

“And what about your leader, Tefnut? How good is her judgment? They being such good friends and all.”

“I don’t know how long this behavior has been going on, but I know that Tefnut had begun to suspect something. I doubt she or anyone could have guessed how far Pisu had gone.

“You must understand,” Pussytoes said, “it’s not that Pisu attacked a human, it’s that he was hunting at all. Frogs, mice, fish, it doesn’t matter who. We are a population of predators in a land filled with prey that we may not hunt.

“Even if nothing was amiss, rumor alone could destroy our country. Every cat who lives in Ailuria knows this and must balance this knowledge with his innate desire to hunt prey.”

CHAPTER 27

EVELYN X

Pisu could not prevent his being kicked out, but he had a lot of control over where he ended up. He knew exactly what he wanted and where to get it. This was Evelyn X’s backyard. He wondered if she would remember him.

He sniffed. There was some foul-smelling stuff on the stove. He hoped Evelyn found the odor as offensive as he did. He sniffed again. She was boiling cockroaches. The woman was a moron.

Evelyn fancied herself a witch. She kept a homemade broom on her front porch, just for show, and wore long black skirts, but stopped at the pointy hat. She made her living selling love potions that didn’t work and telling fortunes that didn’t come true, but they made people feel better.

Pisu knew that there were no such things as witches, but Evelyn didn’t. She must have had some distant fairy ancestor, because there was magic in her. Not much, but enough so that every once in a while something accidentally worked out well enough to keep her believing in herself.

He walked quietly past Evelyn, who was working in the herb garden. Pisu walked up to the back door, made himself comfortable and waited. Eventually she came back to the house, with an arm full of lacy ragweed. Evelyn’s nose was black with dirt and the hem of her skirt dripped with mud.

“Hello, Evelyn,” Pisu said quietly.

“Why, Pisu. It’s been years. I thought I’d never see you again.” She dropped the ragweed and bent down to embrace him.

“Did mumsie’s little oopsie-poopsie miss her? Come and give mumsie-poo a cuddly-wuddley.” Evelyn reached out for Pisu with her dirt-encrusted hands and made little kissing sounds with her mouth. Pisu backed off.

“I think your cockroaches are burning,” he said. Evelyn’s single virtue lay in the fact that she was easily distracted. She grabbed the screen door and rushed inside.

“They’re fine,” Pisu,” she said, lifting the lid. “They have to cook down to a paste before I can use them.” She went out again, got the ragweed, dumped it in with the bug goo, then brushed the dirt from her hands into the pot for good measure.

“A little dirt, wouldn’t hurt,” she sang, wiping the rest onto her skirt.

CHAPTER 28

SHADE MEETS MAGGIE

“Get out of my way, cat.” As DFOA, it was important that I exhibit finely honed social and diplomatic skills.

Shade was sitting at the entrance to my den on the queen’s barge, waiting for me to wake up. He was blocking the breeze.

“What are you doing on my barge anyway? I was sleeping. I don’t like to be disturbed.”

“My queen. I have just returned from the human world. Pisu was nowhere to be seen, smelled or heard.”

“What do you mean, you can’t find him? I want to know where he is.”

“He didn’t use the regular portal when he left Ailuria. He must have taken a different path. Pisu seems to be very experienced at traveling between Ailuria and the human world.”

Pussytoes had sent Shade to the human world to find Pisu. If I didn’t know where he was, I wouldn’t be able to maintain his exile...another one of my special DFOA skills. If Shade could not find Pisu, then he was nowhere to be found.

“If we can’t find Pisu,” I said, “then there’s nothing to keep him from returning to Ailuria whenever he wants. I’ll have to find him myself. Get Pussytoes. I’m going to need help.

“I hate this job,” I grumbled. “I’m going to find a nice quiet human family and retire. I’ve had it up to here with this Queen of the Cats business. I want out.”

“My queen,” Shade kept his head down to avoid even the appearance of eye contact. “Pussytoes is not in Ailuria. I believe he is back at the human village,” he added quickly to avoid my temper.

I’d been mad all the time since Pisu’s left. I was mad at Pisu, but somehow it spilled out onto whoever was around.

“Then go get him. I need him now. Now!”

Shade demonstrated that size was not a deterrent to speed.



Shade listened for Pussytoes. It was the furthest he had ever listened. Once he found the right sound, it was easy to separate out Pussytoes’ smell from all the overlapping scents and go straight to the halfandhalf human village.

For all his exploring, this was the first time Shade had ever left his own country. When he came to the village, he stopped. He had never been among humans before and could see several of them in the street ahead.

Moving into the high grass along the side of the path Shade stayed under cover until he reached the first house. He waited until the road was empty of humans, then sped down the street to the building that by sound and scent contained Pussytoes.

The door and windows were closed. How could he get in? Worse, how could Pussytoes get out. A white breasted black bird with an exceptionally long tail sat on the arm of a rocking chair near the door. Shade went over and offered greetings.

“Hello, bird. My name is Shade.”

“Hello, Shade. I’m Maggie. Oooo, you’re such a pretty cat. Can I pet you?” Shade wasn’t sure how to take Maggie’s comment. He sat down on her haunches and took a breath before continuing.

“My friend Pussytoes is in this house. Do you know how to get in?”

“Of course, I do. Let me get the door for you.”

The poof magic was too fast for Shade to see, but he heard the whoosh as the air was displaced to accommodate the larger form, and besides, this woman smelled just like the bird.

“Thank you, Maggie,” Shade said as Maggie opened the door for him.

“Shade! You’re back. Did you find Pisu?” Pussytoes called from the back booth where he sat with Gregory and Michael. Shade heard the door close behind him.

“Maggie? Would you mind leaving the door open?” he asked.

“Not at all,” Maggie replied, pushing it wide and pulling the rocking chair over to hold it open.

“Thank you, Maggie,” Shade said, grateful for her understanding. “Would you like to pet me?” Moving slowly, Maggie crouched down and gave Shade a light stroke on his head and back. First with just two fingers, and then a second time, slowly, with her whole hand.

“Was that a pet?” Shade asked.

“Yes.”

“It was very nice.”

“You’re a wild cat, aren’t you?” Maggie said. “I can tell.”

“I’m not wild. I’m very civilized.” He was a little surprised by Maggie’s comment.

“Of course, you are. I didn’t mean that kind of wild. I just meant that you’ve never been around people...human people,” she corrected herself.

“You’re my first human. I like the way your face moves when you sound pleased.”

“It’s called a smile,” Gregory said, “and Maggie has one of the best. Hey, Mag. Why don’t you get yourself up off the ground and bring Shade over here so Mike and I can meet him, too?” Maggie got up, took another pillow from one of the chairs, and tossed it at Gregory.

“Hey, Greg. Catch.” He caught it neatly and put it on the table for Shade. Maggie took a chair, one with a pillow still on it, put it at the end of the booth, and sat. Once the introductions were over, Shade finally gave Pussytoes the answer to his question.

“I looked everywhere,” Shade said to Pussytoes. “Pisu wasn’t there. No matter how well he was hidden...I would’ve heard him breathing. Not only that, but he wasn’t ever there. Not even for a moment.

“I checked every scent going back to three weeks before he was supposed to be there. There was no smell of him. I found fifty seven cats. None of them were Pisu and none of them had seen Pisu. I spent four days hunting. Pisu is not there and never was.”

“Shade,” Pussytoes asked. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I was with Tefnut, on her barge. I could hear you.”

“I have often wondered about you, Shade,” Pussytoes said. “Even for a cat, your senses are so honed, so exquisite.”

“I’ve often wondered myself,” Shade said. “I’m not different from other cats, I’m just more. I thought maybe a birth defect?” The three humans looked aghast. Gregory said what they were all thinking.

“A birth defect? I’d hardly call it that. More like a fairy gift, I would say. An amazing fairy gift.”

“No, really. My heightened senses were overwhelming when I was young. Everything and everyone all at once. You have no idea how scary my dreams were, how hard it was to go to sleep at all.

“I had to teach myself to focus, to ignore the background, to let just one smell or sound in at once. I even learned to concentrate in my sleep. I never have dreams anymore. It wasn’t easy. It still isn’t.”

“You’re right,” Maggie said. “It’s a birth defect, all right. I never heard of a cat who couldn’t go right to sleep, anywhere, anytime.”

“I have an idea,” Pussytoes said. “Just a thought. A test to see just how good Shade’s sense of smell is, and maybe find Pisu at the same time. Shade and I need to talk it over with Tefnut first. Maybe one of you should come as well.”

“Can Maggie come?” Shade asked.

“Don’t be silly,” said Michael Mole. “We’re all coming.” Gregory nodded in agreement.

“Right,” he said. “We’re all coming.”

“It’s probably a good idea,” Pussytoes said. “Tefnut’s more likely to hold her temper if there are more of us.”

CHAPTER 29 PUSSYTOES’ PROPOSAL

The queen’s barge was anchored at the narrowest part of the Cattywampus, just below the waterfall that defined the inland boundary of Ailuria. Because the swinging bridge to the barge spanned the river, cats used it to get from one side of the river to the other.

At the moment, and to the considerable inconvenience of large numbers of cats, there were currently signs on both sides that said Keep Off, and Sleeping Cat. Do Not Disturb. Everyone in Ailuria knew that the Queen was in a bad, bad mood.

Michael Mole looked anxiously at the swinging bridge. It was extraordinarily narrow by human standards and had absolutely nothing to hold onto.

Even with glasses, Michael’s eyesight wasn’t very good. His toes had managed to find every rock and fallen branch in the woods on the way over and eventually his almost constant refrain of ‘Ouch, darn it’ was ignored by his companions.

Gregory was also looking a little intimidated, but Maggie knew exactly what to do and a large black and white bird was already in the air.

“Oh. I can do that ,” Michael said with relief. As long as we’re very close to an object, moles have an excellent sense of smell and touch.” A man stepped up to the bridge and a mole stepped onto it and scurried across.

“I was never very good at precision hopping,” Gregory said. “I’ll end up in the river, which I don’t mind, but my clothes will be all wet when I change back.”

“Hop on my back and hang on,” Shade said. “You’ll be fine.”

“I can’t do that. My feet are bigger than your whole body.”

“Not like that, silly. As a frog.”

“Of course. Stupid of me, darn it. Sorry.” And Gregory Frog jumped onto Shade’s back.

“How should I introduce you to Tefnut?” Shade asked Gregory as they walked across the bridge. “I don’t want to say, ‘This is Gregory from the human village’. Do you have a name for your town?”

“Yeah, sort of. It’s not formal or anything, but we like to say that our town is named after our estimable mayor, Mayor Mole, because he’s continually bumping into things. We call it The Village of the Darned.”



I was waiting for Shade and Pussytoes at the far end of the barge next to the cabin. I was not happy to see that they had brought company. I would have to be polite.

Pussytoes was quick to perform introductions and intended to keep things on a formal level in order to further dampen my temper.

“Tefnut,” Pussytoes said, “this is Michael Mole the Mayor of the Town in the Woods.” Gregory smiled at the new name. “Mr. Mayor, this is our Chief Catalyst, our Dominant Female Over All, Tefnut.”

“How do you do, Mr. Mayor?” I said curtly. “What brings you to Ailuria?”

“...and this is Maggie Mag,” Pussytoes interjected, “who has volunteered to assist Shade in his search for Pisu.” My ears swiveled to attention and my tail stopped twitching.

“You have a plan?” I said.

“We do,” said Michael trying to sound Mayoral.

“Please make yourselves comfortable.”

We three cats curled up on the deck. Gregory and Maggie sat cross-legged, but Michael, being older and a little on the portly side, remained standing.

“Mr. Mayor,” I said, “why don’t you sit on my sleeping hut? It’s made to withstand the elements. You’ll find it supports your weight easily.”

“Tefnut,” Pussytoes said. “You remember where we all were the night you sent Pisu into exile?”

“Of course.”

“Shade,” he said. “If we go there, could you find the last spot where Pisu stood before he left?”

“Easily.”

“Could you then,” Pussytoes said, “leave for the place of banishment from that exact spot and follow Pisu’s scent in between Ailuria and the human world to wherever he ended up?” Everybody looked at Shade.

“I don’t know,” he said eagerly, “but I want to try. Can we go right now?”

Michael and Gregory stared at Shade with their mouths open, a look on their faces that was a cross between surprise and skepticism. Maggie was grinning from ear to ear.

“He can’t do that,” Gregory said to me.

“He can, too,” Maggie threw back at him.

“You can’t do that,” Gregory said to Shade.

“I’m going to try,” Shade said.

“And I’m going, too,” said Maggie. “I’m going to be there when my friend Shade makes history.”

“Think about it,” Pussytoes said. “We’ve all of us moved between the fairylands and the human lands, at least a few times.” Everyone nodded silently, waiting to hear what Pussytoes was about to say.

“When you do that, there is a moment, the smallest piece of time when you know that you’re not in either place.” The three humans shook their heads from side to side.

“I know what you mean,” I said thoughtfully. “I’ve felt it.”

“Well...maybe,” Maggie said. “When I travel...I mean, it’s not what you describe, but there is this fraction of a second when I feel...well...not sick, I feel...I feel, weird. I feel weird, and then it’s gone.”

“That would be it, Maggie,” Pussytoes said. “It stands to reason that, if when people travel they leave behind a scent, then wherever Maggie’s weird place is there must also be a trace of those who have been there.”

“That fraction of a second is all the time you will have, Shade, to find and follow Pisu’s scent.”

I stood up.

“If we’re going to make history, we had better get started,” I said.

CHAPTER 30

MAKING HISTORY

We all watched while Shade nosed around a bit choosing the right spot.

“This is it,” he said. “He was almost gone, but there was still a bit of tail left right here.”

“That’s right,” Tefnut said, “but how did you know?”

“By the smells that aren’t here,” he answered.

“Most impressive,” Pussytoes said. “I’ll have to try that.”

“It just takes practice,” Shade said. “The next part is going to take some time and a lot of concentration. You can watch, but don’t talk and don’t move. Pretend you’re a rock.”

“Can we be trees?” Gregory asked.

“Too distracting.”

“What about that tree over there?”

“He’s already pretending to be a rock,” Shade said.

“That’s right,” the tree said. “Tonight, for Shade, I’m a rock.”

“You’re a dryad?” I said. “I didn’t know there were any dryads in this part of Ailuria.”

“There’s a couple of us,” the tree replied. “It’s an interesting country.”

“Can we talk later,” Shade said. His voice squeaked with excitement. “I’m really psyched and ready to start.”

“Maggie, I don’t need you yet. I’ll come and get you before I go all the way.”

Six rocks: three humans, two cats, and a tree watched while Shade moved to the exact position that he thought Pisu must have been in. He then proceeded to disappear and reappear again and again. Each time we could see some slight change in his posture or position. Finally, he came back and stayed back.

“Ready, Maggie?” he said.

“Am I ever?” Maggie answered.

“I want you to get down and sit as close as you can without bumping me. This may take a few tries so make yourself comfortable. Wrap your arms around my middle so we’re in close contact. Clear your mind. Remember, I’m doing the traveling. You’re just coming along.”

“Like a rock?”

“Preferably something lighter.”

“How about a styrofoam rock?”

“What’s that?”

“Inert. Practically weightless.”

“Perfect. Let’s go.”

Five rocks remained to watch. Maggie and Shade disappeared and reappeared four times and on the fifth time did not return. The five remained rocks for a full five minutes, except for Gregory who wiggled his toes twice. Finally, Pussytoes decided it was time.

“They must have made it,” he said



“We made it, Maggie,” Shade said. “Pisu’s smell is everywhere.” They were standing on a weedy lawn behind a one-story wooden house that had once been painted white.

“Who are you and what are you doing in my backyard?” A woman in a long black skirt was standing on the back porch.

“Oh! Hi! I’m looking for my cat... My other cat... I, uh... I live across town. Someone told me they saw him in this neighborhood... big orange tabby. Have you seen him?”

“No. I haven’t seen him. There are no animals in this yard. That’s a pretty kitten. What’s his name? Can I pet him?”

“No!” Maggie scooped Shade up into her arms, holding him close. “You don’t want to pet him. He bites.”

“Oh, I see. What’s his name?”

“His name? His name is... Cloudy. My other cat is called Pisu. It’s on his name tag. So is my phone number. Would you call me if he shows up?”

“Of course.”

“Well, we should go. I want to keep looking for Pisu. Thanks for your time. Bye.” Hanging tightly onto Shade, Maggie fled through the side yard and out to the street.

She didn’t stop or say anything until they were well out of sight. Then she sat down on a bench in a bus shelter and put Shade gently down next to her.

“Oh, Shade. I’m so sorry I grabbed you like that. I hope it wasn’t too awful for you.”

“It wasn’t awful at all. I felt a lot safer after you picked me up. That woman was scary. And she was lying about Pisu. She reeked of his smell. But he’s not there anymore.”

“Let’s go home, Maggie. Finding this place wore me out. We can come back at night when the humans are all in bed. It will be easy to follow Pisu’s trail from here. Wear black and I’ll teach you how to be a shadow in the night.”

CHAPTER 31

CALL HIM PYEWACKET

That night, Maggie wore black.

There were no lights in Evelyn X’s house when they arrived and the backyard was empty. Maggie breathed a sigh of relief.

“Let’s get out of here,” she whispered. “I don’t want to see that woman again.”

“Pisu went this way,” Shade said softly. “Come on.” He padded his way soundlessly across the yard to the next house.

Maggie followed carefully along behind him, feeling large, noisy and conspicuous. A moment later, there was a flash of white in the dark and a black and white bird flew into the next yard and waited in a tree for Shade to catch up.

Shade followed Pisu’s scent across three backyards before it disappeared in a thicket of rhododendrons that filled the rear end of the fourth yard.

“The scent ends here,” Shade said. “He must have gone back to Ailuria. Wait here while I try to find where he went.”

Maggie flew into the rhododendrons, hopping from branch to branch until she was close to Shade, cocking her head to one side as she watched Shade disappear and reappear searching for Pisu’s trail.

“Found it,” Shade said after only three attempts. “Come on.”

“That was fast.” She hopped down next to Shade and stood very still. A moment later, they were standing on a rocky beach, facing the ocean.

“Where are we,” Maggie asked.

“About as far as you can get from Tefnut and still be in Ailuria, but he didn’t stay. He used Ailuria as a shortcut to go somewhere else.

“Don’t move. I’m ready to go now.”

“First try?”

“First try.”

A moment later, they were somewhere else and Maggie was glad she was still a Maggie. It was a dark place, not much bigger than the two of them, with earth walls and ceiling, and a darker spot just in front of them that Maggie hoped was the night sky. She could hear Shade next to her, panting.

“We’ve got to get out of here, Maggie,” Shade said between breaths. “This is Pisu’s den. He’s close. I can hear him.”

“All right,” Maggie said, leaning against Shade. “I’m ready.”

“I can’t. I shouldn’t have jumped worlds twice in a row like that, I’m exhausted. Hurry. He’s coming.”

Something clicked in Maggie’s brain. She thought about her choices if Pisu showed up...getting eaten as a bird or breaking every bone in her body when she changed into her human form in this tiny space.

Maggie flap-hopped for the dark spot in front of her, tumbling out of the den and switching to human at the same time.

She was flat on the ground with one foot stuck in a hole in the ground. She pulled and tugged until it came out, leaving a shoe behind. Shade shot out right behind the foot and plopped down next to her.

“He’s gone. He left as soon as you changed. He could be anywhere and now he knows we’re looking for him.”

“Sorry. I panicked.” Maggie said, sitting up and reaching into the hole to retrieve her shoe.

“Is that why you didn’t go back to Ailuria on your own?”

“Oh... I wasn’t thinking. But Shade, what if you were alone and Pisu showed up?”



Evelyn X woke up early, made tea and took it out to the front porch. There was enough light to see a cat sleeping on the seat of her favorite rocking chair.

“Pisu! I knew you would come back.” She put the mug down quickly and scooped up Pisu before he had a chance to escape.

“Did mumsie’s big boy miss her? He did, didn’t he.” Pisu squirmed and wiggled in her arms, but she held him tight.

“Put me down, Evelyn.”

“Nothing doing, Pisu,” Evelyn said abandoning the baby voice. “As soon as I put you down you’ll disappear again.”

She prodded open the screen door with her elbow, went inside, dropped Pisu, and pulled the latch closed at the same time.

Pisu gave a small symbolic hiss, but in respect to the size difference between them, he left it at that.

“You had visitors, Pisu.”

“I know. A woman and a black cat.”

“Is she a witch? Why was she looking for you?”

“She’s not a witch, Evelyn, and it’s none of your business why she was looking for me.”

“Well, that was a perfect witch-cat, all black and small enough to sit on my shoulder. If that cat belonged to me, I would call him Pyewacket and keep him on my shoulder all the time.”

“I thought that I was your familiar.”

“You *are*, baby,” she cooed. “A black cat would just be for show. My clients would be terribly impressed. It just screams really great witch.”

“Listen, Evelyn. I need you to do something for me.”

“Oooo. Are you going to make something magic?”

“You know I don’t do magic. I am magic. It’s different.”

“I’ll help you find the spell I need. You have to cast it.”

“And the exchange?”

“Maybe we can find something that will get that black cat to stay, next time he comes around.”

CHAPTER 32

TEFNUT GOES FOR A WALK

“So you found him and you didn’t find him,” I said. I was with Pussytoes on the queen’s barge when Shade arrived and told us what happened.

“I won’t have trouble finding him again, now that I know how to follow his trail between here and the human world,” Shade said.

“But he knows that we’re looking for him and he’s really good at crossing back and forth to the human world. It will be hard to catch up with him if he doesn’t want to be caught up with.”

“I think,” Pussytoes said, “that we should leave him alone for a while. Let him think we gave up. He’ll be easier to get a hold of if he’s not looking out for us.”

“No. I don’t agree,” Shade said. “He might spend all the time we give him creating an impossibly complicated trail. He could set up loops, dead ends and all kinds of tricks. I know I can find him again right now, but just because I’m a good tracker doesn’t mean I’ll be able to find him again if we wait too long.”

I looked from one cat to the other.

“You know what? I don’t care. Let him do what he wants, as long as he stays away from me.

“I’m going for a walk.”



That was three days ago. I stayed out of sight, visited the dryads at the top of the waterfall, did a little fish hunting, stalked some squirrels and was currently walking along the ridge of the hill, finally headed back to the queen’s barge.

The trees and undergrowth were thick here, covering both sides of the hill. I enjoy walking the boundaries of my country. This is where I feel most like a true Ailuricat.

I had no idea whether Pussytoes or Shade had decided to take any action in my absence. It was probably a good idea to find out before I got back.

I stiffened my ears and started to engage my DFOA hearing, but before I had a chance to direct it, I realized that there was someone else in the woods.

I stopped walking and turned to face them. Someone was close by. I was surprised that I hadn’t noticed it with my regular hearing. The soft deliberate steps, the shallow controlled breathing that I was listening to. It sounded like another cat.

For a moment I thought Pisu was back. It would be just like him to play hide and stalk with me. I raised my head and opened my mouth. I could almost smell Pisu. But there was no one there.

This was confusing. I looked. I smelled. I tasted the air. No one.

This was a cat in stalking mode. I was practically positive. But, I couldn’t hear it with my normal hearing which is superb. If it wasn’t right behind me, then it must be huge. Maybe a giant? An ogre? No this was some kind of cat. A monster cat.

I know that there are bigger cats in the world, but not here. *Felis silvestris* and its subspecies are the only cats that are half magic, the only cats that can be in fairy land. Whatever I was hearing doesn’t belong here.

This was Interesting. I felt a rising Excitement and a new feeling. I was a little scared. I don’t do scared. Scared is for prey, not predators, but there it was, just past Excitement.

I was nervous, but I wanted to know more. Besides, isn't it my responsibility as DFOA to know what's going on? I looked around for a good climbing tree, one with lots of little branches that a monster cat couldn't reach.

I picked a tree in a clear space where it had room to grow wide as well as tall. Jumping as high as I could on the trunk, I began to climb.

When I was three cat-nests high in my chosen tree, I walked out onto a broad almost level branch until it split into two smaller branches and split again.

Three splits out, the branch was small, but big enough for me. Along with feeling safer, my curiosity increased. I settled down, suppressing the chittery noise in my throat and forcing the swish in my wired tail down to a nervous fidget at the tip.

Just for a moment, there was a Pisu-colored flash of orange through the trees, too far off to get a sense of shape or size. Maybe it wasn't my stalker. Maybe it was another cat...I knew it wasn't. I twitched my nostrils looking for a scent. Nothing yet. I waited.

Again, something moved and again I saw a flash of color, still too far off for smelling or for listening to without my DFOA hearing. Keeping my ears swiveled in the direction of the movement, I listened with my regular hearing so that I could better judge how close it was.

I waited and waited, but I never smelled it or heard it until the big cat stepped into the clearing.

CHAPTER 33

A TIGER IN FAIRYLAND

I finally caught the scent of a mature male cat. Just the head of this monster was three times the size of my whole body. He had a distinctive pattern that I have never seen on another cat, black stripes on a solid orange body.

I scrunched up to my smallest size. An involuntary hiss escaped from my throat. He looked up.

"You don't belong here," I said.

"I go where I wish."

"It's forbidden to eat anyone here."

"I eat what I wish," he said and walked over to the tree where I stupidly thought I would be safe. Putting his front paws high on the trunk he stretched and scratched. The rank smell from his scent glands drifted up to where I had been pretending to be invisible, overwhelming my own sense of smell and fogging my brain.

The giant cat began to climb. Awkwardly but effectively he moved higher until he was level with my branch.

I was a contradiction. My fur was completely puffed out, but I was still trying to make myself as small as possible.

He crouched down and captured my gaze. I remembered enough of who I am to avoid blinking or looking away. I stared back at him, felt my eyes narrow a little, and some of my courage come back.

Then he stood up and started to pad carefully along the branch. He never took his eyes off my face. I forgot that he couldn't reach my narrow branch.

"Hungry! Hungry! Hungry! The beast was speaking from a low growl in his throat.

I stood up, arched my back and bristled impossibly bigger, hissing and spitting for all I was worth.

“Go away. Go away. Go away.” I managed to keep my gaze steady.

He kept coming closer. I felt the branch under me begin to bend from his weight.

“You can’t come here,” I tried to growl back at him but my words came out as a yowl. “It’s too small for you.”

“I don’t have to,” he growled and took another step forward, leaning his weight onto his forward foot.

My branch bent more deeply. I dug in with my claws and hugged my belly to the tree.

He took another step, pushed hard and stepped back. There was a cracking sound. The branch was breaking.

I was almost completely vertical, hanging on with my claws, my body pressed tight against the branch trying to take some weight off my claws. I could hear myself mewling pitifully.

There were no branches below me that were close enough to grab onto when I fell. It was straight down, a lot further than I had ever jumped before. High enough to break all four legs when I successfully landed on my feet. Or maybe I’ll just be stunned long enough for *Catus Giganticus* to climb down and eat me. Next time I’m attacked by a monster cat, I won’t climb this high.

I could hang onto this branch and try to use it to cushion my fall. I could also get my eyes poked out by the twigs when I landed, my ribs crushed when my chest slammed into the wood.

Instead, I scabbled up to the break in the branch and pulled myself up onto the unbroken part so close to the giant cat that I could feel his hot hungry breath.

He was standing very still, not in pounce position.

He started to back away from me.

I pulled myself the rest of the way up onto the branch and took a step forward.

He took a step back.

I looked up. All I could see was the underside of his chin and the tree trunks of his legs. When I started to wobble, I understood. The branch was cracking behind him, too.

I didn’t stop to think. I raced between his legs, leaping over the rapidly widening crack. The wood falling away beneath me as I jumped.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the giant cat jump straight up into the air, twist his body around, his momentum moving him forward, so that he landed with all four feet on solid wood. I was momentarily impressed into immobility.

Taking a moment to steady himself, he started moving slowly in my direction again. I started moving too, at lightning speed, reaching the tree trunk and scrambling dangerously fast backwards down the trunk.

Propelling my body off the tree, I half-fell, half-jumped the last five feet to the ground. I kept moving at top speed, downhill to the river.

There must have been safer hiding places closer by, but all I could think about was my barge. I would be safe there.

Those big feet could never get across the skinny swinging bridge.

The landscape around me was fuzzy, my mind was filled with the picture of the queen’s barge and my sweet spot, the lovely soft pillow at the top of the cats nest.

To the barge. I raced forward, my lungs burning, the slope of the hill giving me the sensation of flying as I bounded over each rock and bump in the ground. Behind me I could hear the confident slow strides of my personal monster, not getting closer, not dropping behind.

Then, I remembered.

There was a reason I was going back today. Today is the second annual Claw Perfect competition. Cats from all over Ailuria will be at the queen's barge for the contest.

I stopped so fast, I fell over, jumping quickly back to my feet to lead the giant cat away from the river.

I didn't know where to go.

It didn't matter.

It was too late.

Even moving cross-slope, I was too close. I broke through the trees and saw dozens of cats on both riverbanks below me. Worse, they saw me and moved aside to make a path for me. We were all doomed.

"Run away! Run away!" I yowled at the top of my lungs without stopping. "Flee for your lives."

My eyes were wide with terror and the drool of absolute exhaustion was pouring out of the sides of my mouth.

I raced for the bridge to the queen's barge. It's too small. It will never hold him. My nightmare broke into a lope, ignoring the other cats and starting to close the distance between us.

I jumped onto the bridge, safe at last, turning only when I reached the barge and saw him leap into the river swimming strongly.

It was over.

"You're a dead cat, Tefnut," he called from the water. "I'm going to kill you and eat you."

"Run away! Run away!" I yowled. "Save yourselves!" That was my last act as DFOA. Too little and too late to save anyone, especially myself. My over stimulated brain started to fail. I couldn't see. I couldn't hear. I felt my heartbeat slow. My legs stopped working and I fell to the deck.

CHAPTER 34

THE MOUSE THAT ROARED

"I never saw a mouse move so fast."

That was the one clear sentence that came through the buzz of concerned sounding voices that were beginning to penetrate my brain.

"What will we do if she dies. She hasn't appointed a new DFOA."

The second sentence I understood wasn't so great either.

I did a body check. I was breathing. That was good. Nothing hurt, but then I haven't tried to move yet. I could feel the warm wood of the deck through my fur and a gentle rocking motion that told me that I was lying on my side on the barge.

"Look. Her feet are wiggling. She's starting to move."

I opened one eye.

“I think one of her eyes might be open a tiny bit. Tefnut? Are you awake? Can you hear us?”

There were furry faces everywhere but I couldn't tell who they were. Their scents were just as hazy.

“Is everybody safe?” I croaked.

“Of course, my queen.” I knew that voice. It was Gubbins. I had promised him that he could present the awards at the end of the competition. I was pretty sure that those were his paws next to my head.

“Nobody got eaten?”

“Eaten? By a mouse? Certainly not, your majesty,” Gubbins said.

“Not a mouse, you kibblehead, a cat, a giant carnivorous cat.”

“We are all carnivorous, my queen, but there weren't any big cats, although the mouse that was chasing you *was* rather large.”

“Almost rat-sized,” another cat said.

I tried to pull myself to a more commanding position, but my legs weren't ready yet so I settled for rolling onto my stomach. At least I was upright.

“Let me get this straight,” I said, holding my head up and looking around, both eyes now open and operating correctly. I still didn't recognize anyone except Gubbins. “No one saw a cat that was so big you could walk between it's legs?”

The silence that followed my remark was answer enough.

“Your majesty,” Gubbins said tactfully. “You are going to need a lot more rest to recover from your ordeal.”

“What ordeal?” Someone asked.

“The Chief Catalyst will explain everything when she is well. Right now she needs peace and quiet. Everyone leave.”

“What about the competition?”

“Officially postponed. Go home.” Gubbins said, nudging my shoulder, with his head, towards the cabin.

I obediently dragged my body into the cabin and onto my pillow. I don't remember falling asleep.



When I woke up, Gubbins was standing guard outside the cabin. No one else was around.

“Where are Pussytoes and Shade?” I asked.

“They went out to look for you this morning, my queen, and have not yet returned. How are you feeling, your majesty?”

“I'm fine.”

I was not fine.

“Oh, good...”

“No. Not good.”

“By now, every cat in Ailuria right down to the last kitten knows I what I said about being chased by a monster. They all think that I was terrified by a mouse.”

“It was a mouse, your majesty. I saw it with my own eyes

“Go away Gubbins.”

“I’ll just wait outside and make sure no one disturbs you, shall I?”

“Just go away.” He retreated to guard duty.

I started on my back, licking and pulling out loose bits of fur. For the next twenty minutes I was totally focused on my personal hygiene.

Every time a not-grooming thought tried to sneak in, I moved to a new patch of fur. Eventually, I ran out of places to clean.

I examined myself carefully. There was a bit under my front leg-pit that could use some extra work. I went over the area again, moving on to my stomach.

The fur here is much too thick, I thought. It needs to be thinned. I started licking and pulling, licking and pulling until I saw a patch of bare skin.

This is not good. I have to go out there and talk to people eventually.

No, I don’t. I’m the DFOA. I can do anything I want. Even Pisu said so. What do I want? I want to see more of this nice smooth skin.

I went back to licking and pulling.

CHAPTER 35

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

“Don’t worry,” Pisu said to Evelyn X. “He’ll be here. I laid a scent trail that even you couldn’t miss. Are all the windows locked?”

“Of course.”

“What about the loose window over the sink?”

“Propped open with a stick”

“And the back door?”

“Tied to the stick in the window.”

“Then, it’s time for you to leave. Stay far away. I swear that cat can hear your heart beating from inside Ailuria.

“Don’t forget,” Pisu said as Evelyn was leaving, “whatever you do, don’t break the spell and let him out of the basket until he agrees to cooperate.”

“Of course. Of course,” Evelyn said, beaming inanely. “Whatever you say, Pisu.

“Pay attention, Evelyn.

“Of course, Pisu,” she said looking at the cat basket by the door and thinking about how she would spend the money from all the extra business she was going to get.

Evelyn left the back door open and drifted down the path, a faraway expression on her face.

Pisu jumped up to the counter, put a paw into the kitchen sink and jerked it back out.

“Stupid woman,” he grumbled, shaking off his wet paw. He used his head to push a pile of clean dishtowels into the sink to sop up the water, then stepped carefully onto the dry towels on top and curled up for a half-nap, sleeping but with ears erect and listening.



Shade stopped when he got to the top of the porch steps. The door was wide open. The soft breathing and slow heartbeat of a sleeping cat tickled his ears. Pisu’s scent wafted out from inside the house.

Curiously, a faint scent of Tefnut was mixed in with the other smells, not strong enough to be the sleeping cat. That was definitely Pisu.

Shade listened carefully, swiveling his ears in every direction. He tasted the air, looking for other scents. A nest of field mice were living under the porch.

There was no one else here. The woman who lived here was gone, he could smell her footsteps leaving through the back gate. There was no sound to suggest that she was close by.

The Tefnut smell was coming from a basket very close to the door. Alongside the basket were two dishes with kibble fruit and water, but he couldn't hear a cat in the basket, just the faint scent of Tefnut and green leaves. There was also a third smell that Shade didn't recognize.

This was confusing. There were not many scents that Shade didn't already know or couldn't figure out. His curiosity increased.

Shade couldn't see Pisu anywhere, but could hear that he was somewhere on the far side of the room, still sleeping. The door was wide open as was a window over a counter top, just a bound and a jump from the door. There was no human to close the door or the window and trap him in the house.

Moving cautiously, Shade padded the few steps into the house to reach the basket. It was too high for him to see inside, so he executed a careful half jump that left his back feet on the ground and his front paws resting lightly on the edge of the basket.

Moving his tail slowly back and forth for balance, he leaned forward, tipping the basket just enough to be able to look over the edge. It was filled with green leaves and twigs smelling slightly of Tefnut and that something else smell that he didn't recognize. Tefnut may have sat on those leaves, but she had never been in this basket or anywhere else in this house.



Pisu waited until Shade was inside the house and distracted by the trap. In one swift move, he was out of the sink and out of the window, making sure to knock the stick as he passed.

Shade was peering into the basket when he heard Pisu jump out of the window. Before he could react, there was an explosion of noise as the window and the screen door both slammed shut. Startled, he overbalanced and fell headfirst into the basket, just as the door latch clicked into place.

That was when Shade discovered what the extra smell was. Some kind of sticky substance was all over the leaves. The leaves were glued in place with it and Shade was glued to the leaves. He was lying on his back with his feet in the air. He wiggled and twisted, but just got more tangled and stuck.

"Welcome to your new home Shade," Pisu said from outside the screen door. "Evelyn wanted a black cat and now she has one. Tell her I said goodbye and thanks for setting up the transformation spells for me. They were perfect. I never knew Tefnut could run that fast. You should have seen her. It was pitiful. She was totally petrified.



By the time Evelyn returned, Shade no longer had any moving parts. One side of his head and both front legs were twisted to the side, stuck firmly to the leaves. He could only see through the topmost eye. His nose was filled with sticky-smell.

His hips and back legs were twisted in the opposite direction and just as thoroughly stuck. Even his tail was pulled uncomfortably away from his body and caught flat on the leaves.

Shade was just wondering if cat pee would have any effect when Evelyn returned.

“Oh, you poor baby,” she said, bending over and patting him on his head like a dog. It was not very nice, but the moment Evelyn touched him the sticky dissolved.

Shade stretched a long and excellent stretch, bringing all four legs onto the same side. Before he could gather his muscles to bound out of the basket, Evelyn scooped him up in her arms and held him tightly.

“How adorable you are. We are going to be such good friends,” she said, squishing Shade against her chest. “I am going to call you Pyewacket. I’ll teach you to sit on my shoulder and hiss charmingly at my customers. You’re going to just love being a witch cat.”

Shade struggled. Evelyn tightened her hold. The tighter she held him the more he struggled. The more he struggled, the tighter her grip became. Breathing was becoming an issue.

“Stop struggling, Pyewacket,” she said hugging a little tighter. “All the doors and windows are shut tight. There’s nowhere to go.”

Evelyn adjusted her hold on Shade and his face was now covered with the heavy material of her shirt. He opened his mouth to get some air and a long yowl came out. His claws unsheathed as he pushed against the huge human body.

Evelyn matched Shade yowl for yowl as he clawed himself up and away from the horrible arms.

They were both screaming as he pushed off from Evelyn’s shoulder, claws extended, landing on the floor and racing across the room. Before Shade reached the far corner, he had left that awful house and was back in Ailuria.

“Pyewacket. Come back,” she wailed but her anger overwhelmed her misery, “Be like that you wretched animal, Evelyn called out to the empty space where Shade had disappeared.” Her shirt was ruined and she was bleeding from deep scratches on her arms. “You’re not the only black cat in the world. I’ll find a better one. You nasty creature. You’ll see.”

CHAPTER 36

THE INEVITABLE ENDING

It was only a dream, but Pisu was asleep, curled up against me on my pillow. His eyes slitted open and, half awake, he started to lick my shoulder. Even in my dream, I was mad at him, but his grooming felt so nice, that I couldn’t bring myself to tell him to stop.

Pisu disappeared when I opened my eyes, but the soft shoulder licks remained, moving gradually higher to the hard to reach back of my head. Sweet.

Then it stopped.

“We need to talk.” Pussytoes said

“Everyone in Ailuria thinks you were scared half to death by a mouse. There are stories of you foaming at the mouth in terror and worse, stories of you pretending that it was a monster.

“Tefnut. What happened?”

I told him.

“The cat you’re describing is called a tiger. It’s the biggest animal in our family. No one saw a tiger. Everyone saw you running away from a mouse. I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.”

“I can’t stay here.”

“You know, no one will ever say anything to you,” Pussytoes said.

“Not to my face they won’t. But I will know what they are thinking and they will know that I know. By now, every cat in Ailuria is convinced that not only am I terrified of mice, but that I made up a bizarre story to pretend that it’s not true.

“No real cat would do what everyone thinks I did. Nobody is going to believe anything I say. Not ever again. I am a non-cat. I’m leaving.”

“Tefnut, you’re the one who told us that no one ever listens to you anyway, that cats end up doing exactly what they want.”

“This is different and you know it.”

“You can’t go, Tefnut.”

“Have you got a better idea?”

That was when Pussytoes noticed the bare patch on my belly.

“Were you in a fight?”

“Emergency cleaning,” I answered.

“A little emergency cleaning is not going to fix this,” Pussytoes said.

“A lot of emergency cleaning is not going to fix this,” I answered. “I have to hide. I have to run away and hide. A long, long hide until everyone forgets. Far away where no one will ever find me...ever. I have to hide forever.”

EPILOGUE



Sanctuary

CHAPTER 37

I AM CAT

I never said goodbye to anyone. That part of my life is over. I know where I'm going, though. It's something I have been thinking about for a while. A place with water and trees, some humans, but not too many.

Greatly influenced by Pussytoes' experience, I have decided to become a human pet. Finding the right family seems to combine the best of both worlds, human protection and plenty of freedom.

For days I flitted between The Greater Elf Kingdom and different human places looking for a good spot.

Eventually, I decided to explore a quiet, wooded neighborhood where the boundary between human and fairy lands was unusually thin. It would be nice to have someone who is familiar with Ailuria to talk to once in a while.

In addition, this part of The Greater Elf Kingdom is nowhere near Ailuria itself. A definite plus.

There were more houses than I would have liked, but a shallow ravine with a stream at the bottom that cut through the neighborhood together with the ease of visiting the fairylands made me decide to spend a little time looking around.

That night, while the humans slept, I prowled the yards of the houses on either side of the stream. The stream was too fast and too shallow for swimming, but it will be interesting, nonetheless.

I spotted a few house cats on window sills, but no one outside. No matter. At the moment, I was extremely happy to be without feline company.

There were also a few dogs, locked away, in fenced backyards. I've never met a dog before. I understand they eat cats. I kept my distance.

At dawn, after the first night's prowling, I went fish hunting. It was easy. Every few minutes, a fish would jump out of the water to catch a low-flying bug. When a fish jumped near to where I sat watching, one good swat with my paw was all I needed to knock it out of the water and onto the ground in front of me.

My fur began to frizzle and my excitement increased. I crouched into pounce position watching the shiny flopping thing with my eyes.

I love to watch.

Maybe it wanted to play. I sat up and raised a paw to flop it higher. Then I thought about not being able to breathe. I should kill it quickly, I thought, but I didn't.

I was hungry, but not entirely comfortable about eating the small silver fish, jerking around on the ground and gasping for air. I've waited all my life to be able to eat someone. Why is this so hard?

"Excuse me, fish," I said. The fish didn't respond, it just kept flopping and gasping.

I raised my paw again and batted it back into the river. It's just as well that it didn't have anything to say, I thought. I'm not sure I could eat anyone I had a conversation with.

"Goodbye, fish," I called as it swam away. It still wasn't talking. I guess I'm just not hungry enough yet.

I spent the rest of the day hiding, watching the humans going in and out of their dens. Sometimes they had dogs with them.

The dogs had long cords tied around their necks that the humans used to control them. All the dogs wanted to run and explore but the humans kept them close.

I never saw any tied-up cats, but I am going to have to be very careful about the family I choose.

There were other animals besides the dogs. I waited for the longest time at a mouse hole.

"Hello, mouse," I said politely when it emerged. It took one look at me and practically twisted itself in half getting back into its hole.

Fine. I get it. Cats here eat mice. I should probably find someone else to talk to. There was a toad that didn't try to run away from me. It sat under a piece of broken pottery watching me.

"How do you do, toad."

It blinked.

"I'm from Ailuria and I was wondering if you know anything about the humans that live in this house.

It croaked and shut its eyes. I think it was waiting for me to go away.

The squirrels' also, wouldn't or couldn't talk. They were noisy enough, hanging from tree branches trying to chase me away with their angry chatter. Eventually I got dive bombed by a screechy blue jay who heard the squirrels. None of them were interested in any kind of conversation except their own incoherent versions of 'go away'.

Cats don't seem to be very popular in this neighborhood. At last I realized that communication between the species does not happen here.

It makes sense when you consider that everyone here is allowed to eat anyone they can catch. I could still talk to humans, of course, but that's not going to happen.

That night, I found my house.

There was a very faint smell of magic around the door. I was intensely attracted to this human place that smelled just a little bit like home. Curling up on the doorstep, I went to sleep breathing in the sweet scent of magic.

By dawn, I was no longer just hungry, I was very, very hungry. It was time to go fishing. I stretched, did some perfunctory grooming and walked down to the stream, I passed a raccoon headed home for the day.

"Good morning, raccoon," I said, not expecting an answer. I didn't get one.

Once I got to the stream, it didn't take long to catch another fish. This time I was ready. I didn't fool around. No playing with my food. No thinking. Just doing. I bit hard just below the head until I felt the spine snap.

The repulsive grinding, cracking sound the spine made when it broke filled my head and made my teeth throb. I nearly dropped the fish. Then, my mouth filled with blood. It tasted wonderful.

This was nothing like kibble fruit. The skin was dry and crunchy, and the flesh underneath was soft sweet and juicy. The tiny flexible bones were a little hard to chew, but I took my time and managed to get them down. The backbone was firmer and easier to chew, with a delicious juice that trickled into my mouth as I crunched each section.

I caught another fish and ate it, and another. I had to make myself stop. I trundled my bloated belly up the slope back to the sweet-smelling house.

I am cat, I thought proudly.

CHAPTER 38

SANCTUARY

I walked around to the front of the house where a large stand of rhododendron bushes provided lots of hiding places.

Picking a spot with a good view of the door, I gave myself a thorough cleaning and made myself comfortable, dozing and waiting to see what kind of humans would come out of the door.

It was late in the day when a man, a woman, and an infant human came outside. I could only smell and hear the infant, she was out of sight in a wheeled box being pushed by the woman. The scent of magic was stronger now. It was coming from the baby in the box. An idea started to form in my head as I watched them walk down the path.

When they returned, I was sitting at attention, in plain sight, on the front step.

“Ben, look,” The woman said as they turned onto the front walk. “There’s a cat at our door. It looks like it’s waiting for something.”

“I’d say it was waiting for dinner,” Ben said.

“It just a half-grown kitten. It must be lost,” she said. “Can you see a collar?”

“No collar,” he said, “but we know all the cats in this neighborhood. This is not one of them. If it’s lost, it’s not local and it looks too healthy to be a stray,” he said.

“Maybe someone dumped it here,” she said.

“Maybe. Let’s see what it wants,” he said.

They had almost reached the front door where I was waiting patiently. I backed away when Ben reached down to touch me. When he tried again, I uttered a very soft mother-hiss, the kind Mom used to make sure we understood her instructions. He stood up and didn’t try to touch me again.

This was good. This human seems to be willing to respect my rules.

I knew from Pussytoes that humans could be affectionate and caring, but that they required very careful training.

“Ben. Why don’t you open the door and see if he wants to come in.”

They went inside, leaving the door wide open. I repositioned myself so that I could see inside but stayed well away from the entrance. If the humans decided to close the door, I would be trapped.

“There’s leftover chicken in the fridge,” she said. Ben was already heading in the direction of food smells. He came back with two dishes. I stood my ground when he put them in front of me to show him that I wasn’t afraid. Besides, his hands were full.

The fresh water was thoughtful and I drank deeply. The other dish held chunks of whitish food. I put my nose closer and sniffed. It smelled pleasant in a watered down sort of way. I gave it a tentative lick. Nice flavor. Nothing like the fish I had eaten for breakfast, but very pleasant. I was still full from breakfast, but I ate a little to be polite.

While I was eating, he reached down and gave my head a short gentle stroke. It felt nice, but rules are rules. I backed off, sat up straight and gave another soft but definite hiss, making clear eye contact so that there could be no misunderstandings.

“Okay, cat. I get it.” Ben moved away and sat down on the floor at a respectful distance.

“I’m going to take Miriam upstairs,” the woman said. “I’ll leave you two to get acquainted.”

I looked over to where Ben was sitting on the floor close to the door. He was just a little way inside the house, sitting very still, with his hands folded on his lap.

I stepped carefully over the doorsill keeping my eyes on those hands. He didn’t move. I walked a little closer. He kept very still. I think he was holding his breath.

When I got close enough, I sniffed his knee and marked it with my chin, giving him the briefest of purrs to say thanks for the food. He never moved.

I turned my back to him when I walked out the door, but I could tell that he was still not moving. I nibbled a little more of the white chunky stuff, curled up next to the food dishes and closed my eyes.

After a while, I heard Ben get up and walk deeper into the house, leaving the door open in case I got curious. I *was* curious, but not ready to risk a closed door. I went to sleep next to the food dishes, confident that this human would not disturb me.

Ben came back at dusk and took the food dish away, but left the water.

“If you’re here in the morning,” Ben said, “I’ll bring fresh food and water.”

CHAPTER 39

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR HUMANS

I stayed with Ben and the woman whose name was Rose. They seemed to be gentle and respectful humans.

I was not, however, prepared to remain in the house with the doors closed. For a while they left a window slightly open and I was fine with that.

One of the first things I taught my new humans was my name. They had been referring to me as ‘The Little Cat’.

“How’s The Little Cat,” or

“Have you seen The Little Cat.”

While that wasn’t too terrible, I was worried that they would come up with something worse. I did not want to be called ‘Pussytoes’ or anything remotely like that.

So, one night, after they were asleep, I joined Rose on her pillow.

“Rose,” I said softly, “My name is Tefnut. My real name is Tefnut.” I spent the night on her pillow, occasionally repeating the lesson.

My new training system worked surprisingly well. After only one night, I was me again. Tefnut, now and forever.

My new house had many excellent napping spots and windowsills that I enjoyed from time to time, but I chose the baby’s room as my primary den. Not only did it have the

best view of the bird feeder, but baby Miriam was always doing something interesting and I liked watching her. It seemed to be mutual.

Once they had ‘given’ me a name, Ben and Rose began to see me as a more permanent part of their household. They decided to install a cat door to the back yard so that they could close my window. This was acceptable, but required some further training.

I had already made it clear that I would not tolerate a dog collar under any circumstances. But that was exactly what they wanted.

“Look, Tefnut,” Ben said for the hundredth time. “The door won’t work without the collar.”

“Stop talking to her like a person, Ben. She’s a cat. She doesn’t understand you.”

I understood Ben every one of the hundred times he explained this to me, but that did not alter the fact I would under no circumstance wear a dog collar. I didn’t care if the door worked or not. I was perfectly happy with my window.

“Look, Tefnut,” Rose said, picking up the collar. She squatted down next to the new cat door and pushed.

“See. It won’t open.” She held the collar next to the door and pushed again. The door opened. She took the collar away and pushed again. The door wouldn’t open. She repeated this process again and again, just like Ben.

“Open. Won’t open. Open. Won’t open.”

Once was enough. I don’t know why they didn’t show me how it worked in the beginning.

I walked over to Rose and took the collar between my teeth, gently pulling it away from Rose. Unfortunately, she wouldn’t let go.

“Look, Ben, she’s going to let me put the collar on.” Rose tried to wrap it around my neck. I ducked out from under and backed away.

These humans are very sweet, but dumb. I tried again. This time I pulled harder on the collar.

“Let go of the collar, Rose,” Ben said. She did.

With the collar in my mouth, I pushed the cat door open, just as Rose had done, went outside, let the door close and then, still carrying the collar, came back in. Dropping the collar on the ground next to the cat door, I went over to sit next to the kitchen table.

They were both staring at me with their mouths hanging open, so I went back to the cat door, picked up the collar and did it all again, once again leaving the collar on the floor next to the cat door and wondering how many times I would have to repeat this performance.

Eventually, Ben broke the silence.

“Well, I guess that’s that. I’m going to close the window in the living room.” He got up and left. I was very happy with my humans.



Most days, Ben and Rose went for a walk in the late afternoon or early evening, pushing the baby in her carriage. I got into the habit of following along, sometimes stalking them from behind, sometimes racing ahead and hiding in the bushes ready to pounce on their ankles when they caught up with me.

It had been a long day for Rose and Ben. They were tired and not paying attention to where they were when they accidentally turned down the wrong path.

“Ben. Have we been this way before?”

“I don’t think so, but that must be the stream that runs through our backyard. If we cross to the other side, we should be able to follow it back to the house.”

“Not with the carriage.”

“Well, no, but look, we can go part of the way. There’s a bridge over the stream, and a path.”

I don’t remember this path either, I thought. Suspicious, I bounded ahead. As soon as I stepped onto the bridge, I understood.

There had been an accident alright, but it wasn’t Rose and Ben’s wrong turn. Someone had accidentally left a gate open. Even so, human’s shouldn’t be able to see it unless they had some magic in their ancestry and unless my nose deceived me, that was something that this family had.

The short wooden bridge was just wide enough for the carriage. The path on the other side took them away from the stream, but Ben and Rose followed it anyway, through a meadow and into a small garden with an ancient tree at the far end.

A broken-down stone bench still went part way around the tree and the tired couple headed right for it. They sat down, gratefully, leaning back against the broad tree trunk. The garden was peaceful, with an abundance of sweet-smelling roses.

It was the time of day that dragonflies were active and the dry rustling sound of their wings added to the soothing atmosphere of the place. It wasn’t long before Ben and Rose were dozing, leaning on the tree and on each other.

I noticed another sound coming from the dragonflies. Realizing what it was, I settled down next to Ben and Rose pretending to sleep. With my eyes closed, I listened to the whispered voices of the dragonfly fairies hovering over baby Miriam in her carriage.

“Look at her ears. She must have elf ancestry.”

“Hush, Poppy. You’ll wake the humans.”

“But Farthingale. She’s one of us. Can’t we keep her?”

“Husshhh,” they all chorused together, like a rustle of falling leaves.

“Elf ancestry,” I thought. “I knew I was right about this family. This is perfect.”

Ben and Rose never found the little bridge over the stream and the garden again but it didn’t matter. I know that my future here with this family, far from quarreling cats, will be both Comfortable and Interesting. I am Content.

THE END



Read [Magic Sucks](#). Baby Miriam is now ten years old and Tefnut’s plans come to fruition.

**SAMPLE FROM:
MAGIC SUCKS
The Fairy Gifts, Book One**



**PROLOGUE
TEFNUT REMEMBERS**

It is not true that cats can't see colors. It's just not that important to us. A cat's world is filled with exciting movements, sounds and smells. I mean, who cares what shade of gray a mouse is?

This is why, for me, the charm of dragonflies is in their mouth-watering quick, darting movements and the appetizing crinkly noise I can hear their wings make. But I have to admit, watching the iridescent shine their wings take on in the light is one of the times that I do enjoy color as part of an overall food display. The group of dragonflies that I was watching that day, almost ten years ago displayed all of these qualities and were very pleasant to watch.

I had been stalking my family. Fun, but not very challenging. They had no idea they were being followed. It was a warm afternoon and their walk had been hijacked by a nap under an impressively large oak tree. Baby Miriam was in her carriage, her parents, heads touching as they leaned against each other, were sitting on the remains of a stone bench that had once wrapped all the way around an ancient triple-trunked oak.

Because dragonflies are so much creatures of the open air, I noticed right away when several of them flew into the shade. I saw how even to me, the colors of their wings seemed to intensify in the shade. In fact, in the shade, instead of losing their sun-colors, I was able to see that each of the dragonflies was actually a different color.

Soft snores came from Miriam's parents who didn't see another unusual dragonfly quality...Curiosity. The `dragonflies' who, on closer inspection, looked suspiciously like tiny winged people, flew around the humans as if examining them and then flew over to see what was in the carriage. The faintest whisper drifted to my sensitive ears.

"Look at her ears. She must have elf ancestry."

"Hush, Poppy. You'll wake the humans."

"But Farthingale. She's one of us. Can't we keep her?"

"Husshhh," they all chorused together, like a rustle of falling leaves.

"Elf ancestry," I thought. "I knew I was right about this family. This is perfect."

**PART I
THE FIRST JOURNEY**



**CHAPTER 1
GET A LIFE**

Yesterday may have been my tenth birthday, but today was still a school day. I left my wet sneakers and socks at the front door and tiptoed down the hall. The Do Not Disturb sign was hanging on the door of Mom's study. Good. She was still working. That meant there was just Dad waiting for me in the kitchen. Maybe he wouldn't notice.

"Miriam, get in here," he bellowed. The risotto is ready NOW." He noticed. I sighed and followed Dad's voice into the kitchen. Having a TV chef for a father is not as great as my friends think it is.

"Here, try this." Dad held out his silver tasting spoon.

I put my school bag on the kitchen table and looked in the pot. Your basic rice, little pieces of tomato, and 'other vegetables', mixture, but I knew better. Nothing Dad makes is ever ordinary.

I forbade him from making me any more school lunches when I was in the second grade. It's bad enough I have to eat this stuff at home, but in the school cafeteria, Dad's fancy food is a recipe for ongoing public humiliation. Of course, he's always allowed to slip a little of any desert he's working on into my lunch bag. That's different. In my world, sugar is power.

I brought the spoon a little closer and sniffed. Nothing terrible yet. I sipped a little. Still acceptable and not too hot or too spicy. I've been burned plenty of times. I ate the spoonful and pursed my lips.

"So, do you like it?"

"It's okay."

"Perfect. I'll use it for Sunday's show." 'It's okay' is the highest rating I ever give to sugar-free food.

"Do you want some more?"

"Mmmm. I guess," I said diffidently, looking around to see if there was anything better going. He ladled some of the rice stew into a bowl, added a fork and handed it to me with a dishtowel. Dad generally anticipates the worst.

I wandered back to my room, bowl in hand, my homework-filled knapsack accidentally-on-purpose left behind.

Mom was finished working and out in the hall, waiting to pounce.

"Hi, Mom." I tried not to sound too resigned. From the time I get off the school bus, to the moment I open the front door, my life is my own. But that's about it.

"Did you taste the risotto?" she asked. "How did you like it?"

"Fine." I said carefully keeping my voice as flat and noncommittal as possible. Any hint of enthusiasm and she demands details.

Mom is a syndicated newspaper cartoonist. Everyone in my class reads Ishtabibel, Mom's cartoon, every day. Everyone knows that the skinny kid with the frizzy hair is me. Some days it's really hard to make myself get on the school bus.

On the other hand, some days it's really hard to make myself get off the school bus. Mom is always waiting for me to do something funny. She hovers without mercy around deadline time. Both of my parents work at home. They are there ALL the time.

I could feel Mom staring at me as I carried my rice-bowl the rest of the way to my room full of new stuff that was already old. Hard to believe that yesterday was my birthday. Even turning ten had already lost its zing. I had made my usual birthday cake wish. The one thing I wanted more than anything else in the world. And as usual, it didn't come true. I don't know why I bother.



Good, she's here. I jumped off the beanbag chair, let my claws sink into my favorite carpet, the one I'm not supposed to scratch, and relaxed into a good, long, spine-tingling stretch. I was ready.

Miriam put her food dish on the floor, went to the closet and took out a couple of old Barbies. Must be The Sister Game. That's the only thing she does with those dolls any more. It's a cute game, but I think she plays it too much.

It was The Sister Game, all right. Very private. I'm the only one allowed to watch. This is a major point in her favor. She's a kid who instinctively knows that cats can be trusted.

While Miriam taped cutout cardboard wings to the backs of Barbie and Kelly, I lurked over to the bookcase. Silently, I jumped to the top shelf and stationed myself next to a big, heavy flashlight ready to push and jump.

CHAPTER 2

FOLLOW THAT CAT

I put Dad's risotto on the floor and got out a couple of old Barbies to play The Sister Game: two sisters go for a picnic. They eat; they talk. Little sister talks; big sister listens. There are no secrets between these two. Big sister always understands. After lunch, little sister gets into trouble; big sister comes to the rescue. That's it. Simple, but satisfying.

I don't use names, because I don't know my big sister's name yet. She's a real person with a real name. I just don't know what it is. It would be too weird if I thought of her as one person and after I met her she turned out to be another.

This time, I skipped the picnic and got right to the adventure. I twisted Kelly's wings so they pointed straight down and put her into my inflatable wastebasket. Then I put Barbie next to the miniature picnic basket that I use with this game.

Barbie has just finished putting the picnic things away when she realizes that little sister isn't there.

"Where are you, little sister?" she calls out. Little sister doesn't answer, because she's too far away. Her teeth are chattering. Her wings are soggy and useless. She can't keep treading water much longer, but the steep slippery mud bank is like glass. Again and again, she digs and pushes her fingers into the mud and tries to pull herself out. But each time clumps of mud come away in her hands and she slides back into the water.

Big sister is getting worried. Her dear little sister who she loves more than anything in the world is gone. Her heart pounds. My heart pounds. She starts to sweat...

Just when I was getting to the good part...

...my cat fell off the bookcase.

She hit the floor with a crash and a bloodcurdling yowl that stopped my heart-pounding in mid-beat.

“Oh my god! Tefnut!” I gasped. “Are you all right?” Apparently not, because she raced out of the room so fast her gray stripes blurred to plaid.

“Tefnut. Wait. I’m coming.” Tefnut threw herself through the cat door into the warm spring drizzle, held up one paw and mewed pitifully.

“Ooooh,” I said using the squeaky tones of my best cat-talk voice. “Tifi-poo, you’re hurt. Let me see.” Pushing open the screen door with one hand, I reached out to pet her with the other.

I always suspected Tefnut didn’t like my mush-talk. That cat was halfway down the street before the screen door swung shut behind me. Three feet, moving at top speed.

Run, run, run. Hop. Run, run, run. Hop. If I hadn’t have been so worried, I would have been impressed.

“Hey, Tefnut, not so fast,” I hollered. I broke into a barefoot jog, trying to keep up and watch where I put my tender toes at the same time. We crossed over to the next block where the creek started.

Her tail started to twitch with excitement and she raced ahead like a kitten.

No limp.

Suddenly, Tefnut cut a sharp right and bounded with all four paws onto a little bridge.

I slid to a halt and stared at my cat. She was sitting at the center of a small, wooden footbridge over the creek, concentrating on her rear end, which apparently was in immediate need of a bath.

I could feel my jaw dropping into fly-catching position. There had never been a bridge or a path through these woods before. I knew that. “More importantly,” I thought. “Why did it look so familiar?”

There was a moldy-but-nice smell in the air that I almost recognized. And the bridge. I loved that bridge because of the wonderful clacking sound the planks would make when the wheels went over it. Wheels? What wheels? I was barefoot and bike-less.

Past the bridge, the new path kept going straight through the trees, making the woods look a lot bigger than I remembered.

Tefnut stopped cleaning and walked over, rubbing my ankles and purring her approval. I barely noticed her. I was so surprised by the bridge, not to mention my cat, who was acting like Lassie Come Home, that my brain had fuzzed over. I walked distractedly through the woods, herded along by Tefnut with an occasional ankle rub that kept me on the path and moving.

The bright sunshine that hit me when I stepped out of the woods put a brake on the whole process.



Miriam is basically a nice kid. A big mouth and a rotten temper, but a good heart. That’s why I like her. Also, she lets me sleep on her feet at night. That counts for a lot when you’re a cat.

Now if I can just get her moving again. Years of planning and just when we get to the important part, the one thing I want more than anything else in the world, she acts like she’s been super-glued to the ground.



DOWNLOAD MAGIC SUCKS TO READ THE REST OF THE BOOK

Dear Reader

If you enjoyed this story, please tell your friends. If you have questions or comments, I would love to hear from you. I don't have a website, but you can write to me at susha.g@bellsouth.net.

The other books in The Fairy Gifts series are:

BOOK ONE
MAGIC SUCKS

Some people control their destinies. Some people are called by destiny. Some people are called by their cat. This is the story of a girl and her cat

Desperate to escape a life of shame after being conned by her best friend, Tefnut (the cat) picks Miriam (the girl) to take her place so she (Tefnut) can spend the rest of her life hiding in the human world.

When she discovers that Miriam's family has elf ancestry, well, that just clinches it. Miriam's fate is sealed. Miriam gets three fairy gifts, and she gets told exactly what to do with them. Everything begins from this...

Magic Sucks is about miscommunication between young people and adults. Not all of the adults in this story are human.

BOOK TWO
OUT OF PLACE

Fitting in is a lot harder when you are not even the right species.

Getting kidnapped was not on the list of things that Miriam Mermelstein had planned for her first underwater trip. She will need to be really creative about how she uses her magic gifts if she is going to escape

Out of Place is a story about choices. Miriam's most important life choice may have been co-opted by her cat, but there is still plenty of room for her to mess up.

BOOK THREE
INVASION OF THE HAZMATS

Anyone who can eliminate their enemies by eating them is a formidable foe. Anyone would be the Hazmats, insaniac shapeshifters whose mindless greed is threatening the continued existence of the Abyssmal Cities.

Is Miriam Mermelstein doomed to follow in their footsteps?

Miriam Mermelstein is changing and it's not puberty. Just what is she becoming? Well, it depends on whom you talk to. According to a certain nasty person, her fate is sealed and there is nothing she can do about it.

Invasion of the Hazmats is a story about getting along with difficult people.

BOOK FOUR

There is one book remaining to be written in this series. The story will be set in Ailuria, (The Kingdom of the Cats). When Miriam arrives in Ailuria she finds out what Tefnut really expects of her. So far, it doesn't have a title, but I am open to suggestions.

Sincerely,
Susha Golomb
susha.g@bellsouth.net

