

CAT AND THE OTHER

by

Marylois Dunn

Cat, who through a series of skirmishes, had won the right to sleep on the castle window ledge in the only spot of sunshine in the great room, woke and opened his eyes widely. He was different. He was Cat and something else.

Laughter rang in the room and Cat sat up blinking, curious to see if it was directed at him. He did not like to be the butt of laughter. The humans were looking in his direction and laughing but they did not seem to be laughing at him.

He licked his left paw tentatively, wondering if he should jump down and check out the readiness of the evening meal. He felt . . . different . . . strange. Frightened. Frightened? No. That was a mistake. He was truly confused. Cat had never in his life been afraid. Startled, on occasion. Upset, once or twice. Angry, often. But frightened? Never!

Yet, what was this cold, churning lump that had settled itself where his digested lunch should lie in easy comfort? It was fear. He opened his small mouth and panted a few breaths, like a great hound, to cool the sodden lump of his innards. Fear. Of what had he to be afraid?

It was not himself. He knew it. There was something Other within him. Something small and terror-stricken had hidden itself within his inviolate person. How dare it? How dare it!

Cat's eyes flashed yellow fire. His dark slitted pupils spread to cover the golden iris and his claws sprang from their velvet cushions.

NO, NO, the terror-stricken voice shouted in his head. SHOW NOTHING. BE CAT. DO NOT LET ANYONE NOTICE A DIFFERENCE IN YOU.

Who are you? What are you? How come you are inside my being? Cat demanded. Interested in this Other inside himself, he blinked his eyes, drew in his claws and stretched out again in the sun, folding his paws under his chest. Cat faced inward, watching the goings-on in the room through slitted eyes.

LOOK THERE ON THE HEARTH. SEE THE YOUTH WHO LIES THERE SEEMING LIFELESS?

Cat flicked one ear. *Is he dead?*

NOT DEAD, the Other said. THE WITCH WOMAN HAS DRAWN OUT THE SPIRIT. SHE SPEAKS OF IT NOW. DO YOU UNDERSTAND HER?

Cat laid back both ears and shifted his hindquarters in impatience. *Of course, I understand.* He focused his attention on the Witch Woman, she who had been laughing.

"Don't you see?" she was saying to the lord of the Keep. "The lad's spirit is flown."

"I see not how this benefits us. The lad is the beloved of his father. Would you have us in a war over his death?"

"Would you have his affection for the maid to become a choosing? She is a witch-to-be. Already she feels a bond to the lad, Kharis. Another month would have found her tainted, her gift gone."

"You suppose this only."

She smiled at him. "Am I ever wrong?"

The lord bent over the seeming lifeless body. "He breathes. Can he waken?"

"Only if his spirit returns to his body before one of the hawks catches it."

"Hawks? I do not understand."

"When I drew forth his spirit, I loosed it and cast it through yonder window. A loosed spirit will enter the first living thing it encounters. It now resides in the fat feathered body of one of those pigeons on the stable roof."

The lord walked to the window and looked out on the pigeons.

Cat remained perfectly still, seeming to be sleeping in the sun. The lord rubbed Cat's ears absently and Cat raised a small purr. Then he turned back to look at the Witch Woman. "Are you sure the spirit reached the pigeons?"

The Witch Woman laughed again, a cold, unpleasant trill. "Into the cat? Not likely. My aim is better than that. Anyway, see how quietly he sleeps in the sun? No. Cat would be running frantically, scared out of his wits by the strangeness within. See how the pigeons stir? They fly. They circle about. One of them is most disturbed and he is upsetting the rest. I assure you, Kharis's spirit will soon fall prey to a hawk and we will be free of him without having to resort to murder. Until then, we must lovingly tend the lad, who has had some kind of a seizure, while we send for the father. There must be no hint of spirit casting. Not now. Not ever."

The lord looked again through the window, and as he watched, the entire flock of pigeons lifted suddenly into the air with a loud whistle of wings. The birds were distressed, beating first one way and then, on some signal imperceptible to human eyes, turning as one to fly swiftly in the opposite direction. Their maneuvering did them no good. A wide-winged, dark shadow swooped from the sky, the wind whistle of his wings audible above the sounds of frantic pigeon wings. A hawk clutched one of them in his sharp talons and soared to the top of a nearby conifer, jesses trailing.

It tore at the pigeon's breast and the lord could see, in the sunlight, the bright blood of its dying. He looked to the still figure beside the fireplace.

"He lives," the Witch Woman said. "That was not the one."

Cat sat up and stretched, first the right hind leg all the way out to the widespread toes; then the left. He arched his back and stretched forward as far as the front claws could reach, scratching the fabric of the needlepointed pillow he slept on as he did.

"Stop that, Cat." The woman made a threatening gesture toward him. "You know better than to tear the pillows."

Cat was insulted to have his stretch interrupted rudely. He leaped down and made his way slowly toward the kitchen, tail haughtily erect. *Who does she think she is? he grumbled. I won the pillow fairly in battle. It's mine to rip if I want to.*

DO YOU DARE DEFY HER? the Other asked. LOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO ME. AREN'T YOU AFRAID OF WHAT SHE WILL DO IF SHE FINDS OUT WHERE I AM?

Who will tell her? Cat said. A feline who keeps his wits about him has little to fear here or anywhere else.

YOU DON'T SEEM UPSET THAT I SHARE YOUR BODY.

Are you going to cause me a lot of grief? Are you going to be afraid all the time or try to make me do something foolish against my will?

WELL, ACTUALLY, I WAS AFRAID AT FIRST, BUT YOU SEEM TO BE WELL IN CONTROL OF THE SITUATION. IF YOU DON'T MIND MY PRESENCE, I'LL ABIDE UNTIL WE CAN DEVISE SOME WAY TO GET ME BACK INTO MY OWN BODY. I WON'T BE ANY TROUBLE TO YOU. I PROMISE.

Very well. I am rather enjoying having someone I can communicate with directly. It is a great burden to live your life in pantomime amongst such dullards.

IS IT JUST THIS HOUSEHOLD THAT IS FULL OF

DULLARDS, OR IS IT THE SAME EVERYWHERE?

I haven't been everywhere. From what I hear from other cats and from those stupid slaving hounds, it is the same everywhere. Humans have lost the capacity to communicate with superior beings.

I'VE HEARD THE FALCONERS KNOW WHAT THEIR BIRDS ARE THINKING.

Nonsense. Birds don't think. They act and react. Definitely a subspecies. And, what is this about "we" getting you back into your own body? I am not a volunteer in this project. I make you welcome because it seems the sensible course, but I have not joined up for any machinations against the Witch Woman. She rules here. I know which way the fur is stroked.

The Other was silent.

Cat stopped at the kitchen door looking around for his favorite cook. When he saw her, he fixed his gaze on her and said, *Have you a preference in food? I can get almost anything I want from that one.*

DOES NOT MATTER TO ME, the Other said. IT SEEMS MY SPIRIT DOES NOT HUNGER.

I see she is plucking geese. Perhaps I can wangle a liver. Cat padded over to the cook he favored, avoiding the other kitchen help as he did. He slipped under her wide skirts and announced himself by first rubbing his head against the calf of her leg, then pressing the full length of his body between her ankles. He finished his performance by stroking the back of her knees with his stiffened tail.

"O-oh, Cat." Cook stomped her feet and whooshed him from under her skirts. "Don't start something you can't finish." She laughed as she reached down to give him a rub.

Cat responded with a loud rasping purr, pushing his back up into her stroking hand.

"You are a love," she crooned. "The dairymen have come with fresh milk. Would you like a bowl?"

Cat responded by standing against her knee and rubbing

his face against her thigh.

"You shall have cream." She chuckled and poured him a saucerful which she placed under a table safe from the passing feet of the other cooks and kitchen help.

You see why I like this one? Cat asked.

DO YOU GET ALL YOUR FOOD THIS WAY, BEGGING?

Cat stopped lapping and groomed his whiskers. *I do not think of it as begging. I pay in affection for what she gives.*

He returned to his saucer of cream unaware of the bustle of feet around the table and the clatter of voices and cooking utensils as they prepared the evening feast. Cook dropped half of a goose liver under the table when no one was watching and Cat pounced on it, chewed, savored, and swallowed it quickly. He waited around for a while to see if any more good things were forthcoming but Cook was too busy to tend to his stomach's desires.

While he waited, Cat washed himself carefully. He gave extra attention to the hair between his back toes which had become clogged with something sticky and distasteful. He pulled, tugged, licked at the toes until the Other said, ENOUGH. ENOUGH. YOU WILL SCRAPE ALL THE SKIN FROM YOUR TOES IF YOU CONTINUE. IF YOU MUST WASH, MOVE ON. WASH SOMETHING ELSE.

I thought you were not going to interfere, Cat grumbled, but he shifted and, putting one forepaw on the tip of his long tail, held it in place for a full wash from root to tip.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU WASH? THIS IS TWICE SINCE I HAVE JOINED YOU.

As often as needed, Cat said. *I wash when I feel the need of it, when I am bored, when some foul hand touches my fur. I wash when I wish to appear disinterested in their doings. Washing is a wonderful way to misdirect their attention. If your kind did more washing, you would have less time to get into trouble.*

The Other chuckled. YOU MAY BE RIGHT.

Then the Other gave such a start that Cat, already unbalanced while trying to wash his lower backbone, almost fell over. *What is it?*

LISTEN. IT IS SHE. THE MAID. LISTEN!

The one who got you into trouble?

HUSH. LISTEN!

"Oh, Hurbis. Please can't you fix a tray that I may take to my chambers? I can't bear to go down to the great hall to eat while I listen to them crow over what they have done to Kharis."

"What have they done to the lad?"

"I don't know. Cast a spell on him, or given him some kind of sleeping potion. They won't tell me. I know he lies in his chamber senseless and still. It is as if he were dead, yet he breathes. He is still warm. But I don't know for how long."

"Perhaps it is a spell that will last only until you are safely initiated into the Way."

"I would gladly give over the calling if it would save Kharis's life. I would not have him die over me."

"You care for him?"

"I don't know. I like him. He is a warm and friendly lad and I like to talk with him. He is the only one in this hall who treats me like a person instead of a witch-to-be. Except you, of course."

"Tosh, Child. I have seen others of your kind come here before. They are all treated the same. If you do not learn to separate yourself from folk, you will not ever be Witch Woman. It is in the separation that the magic comes."

"But that is such a lonely way to live."

"True. And now is the time to decide if you want it or not. If you want husband and family, leave this place at once. Join yourself to a young man. Kharis will do. It matters not who. But you must do that which makes you unfit to be a witch before you take the vows. Once you

cross the line between what is and what is-to-be, there is no turning back. Happiness for each person is a different thing. You are no child. You must decide and quickly where your happiness lies. If you do not want to be a witch, make your choice quickly.”

“I need time to think.”

“I think you do not have time.”

I THINK THE COOK IS RIGHT. THERE IS NO TIME, CAT. WHAT CAN WE DO?

There goes that “we” again. I don’t know what to do. Because I am a male feline in the house of a Witch Woman does not make me her confidant. Cat switched his tail angrily from side to side. She does her spell making under the eyes of a female cat who keeps herself quite removed from the rest of us mere felines.

COULD YOU ASK HER? PERHAPS SHE WOULD KNOW SOMETHING THAT COULD BE DONE TO GET ME BACK IN MY BODY. THEN I COULD TALK TO THE MAIDEN. I LOVE HER VERY MUCH, CAT. I COULD MAKE HER HAPPY AS A MORTAL WOMAN. THIS WITCH BUSINESS DOES NOT SEEM LIKE A NORMAL LIFE TO ME.

“Normal” is like “median.” It depends upon where you are standing when you make the measure.

PLEASE!

Oh, all right. I will go up to the tower and see if her preciousness will talk to me. But, you be still. Don’t distract me. No matter what happens.

I PROMISE, the Other said and subsided to a silent presence which Cat carried inside himself as he made his way silently up the circling staircase to the top of the donjon tower.

It was, as Cat had said, a long way to the top of the tower. On the way they met and avoided the feet of many humans on their varying tasks around the keep. Some were servants, some guards. Some were guests of the castle lord and

some were tradesmen come to sell their wares to whom-ever was interested in their trade. The hounds they met avoided Cat, slinking by him on the outer edge of the stairway. Cats they met were greeted by whisker touching, silent communication of everyday things: *I saw a great rat, just the size you like to catch, down in the cellars this morning.* Some were met with hisses, side-carried tail, and arched back. The Other marveled at how Cat commanded each and every creature he met with an economy of gestures. He was truly a prince of cats whether or not he admitted it.

At the tower's crest, an apartment of three rooms covered the entire upper floor; the largest was a room of books and tables, bottles and leather bags full of herbs and potions. It was obviously the Witch Woman's chamber for preparing the spells she cast. A smaller room was her bedchamber and it was in there they found the cat they sought.

She was not beautiful: White. Lean. Blue-eyed. There was a strangeness about her that made Cat uneasy in his innermost self though he would admit it to no one, not even himself.

What brings you to my chamber? Her thought was as clear to the Other as it was to Cat.

I have not seen you for a long time. No one seems to know much about you. I wondered how you are?

She was amused. *How is the little gray tabby I watched you pursuing down at the stables last week? Should you not have more concern for her well-being than for mine? I will bear you no kits.*

That is not by my choice. Cat said. *The offer is always open.*

La! she said. *It is as good an offer as I have had lately, Cat. I will keep it in mind. Now. What is the real reason you have come up all those stairs?*

So practical as well as beautiful, Cat murmured. *I do*

have a question. There is a maid I have taken a liking to who is witch-to-be. Do you know her?

The white cat's eyes narrowed to slits and she licked one paw to smooth back her whiskers. *I know her.*

Did you know she does not want to be a witch? She is in love with the lad, Kharis.

She stood up and the fur on her back rose. She hissed. *Has she said such in your hearing? I knew the little tart was not fit for the honor. Tell me the words she spoke. I want to know the very words.*

Cat backed off and went from a sitting position to a prone one to placate her. *Honestly, the maiden has spoken no such words in my presence. Perhaps she has not even thought them consciously. But I watch. I see. I understand these humans, sometimes better than they understand themselves. I know this is so but I cannot give you words she has not spoken.*

I wish you could. If I had her very words, I could transfer them to my mistress and she would be sent packing. No one becomes Witch unless they have a true heart for the calling.

Cat licked at his forepaws nervously. *I have heard there is a way to forestall her training.*

She hissed again. *There are many ways.*

An easy way.

The white cat composed herself and sat primly, front paws together, tail wrapped around them. *Yes. You would think that was the easy way. But I know the mistress has cast his spirit into a pigeon. He lies now senseless. Unless he comes to his senses and talks the maiden into his lair, it is not a likely way.*

Cat bit delicately at an itchy spot on his forearm as he appeared to be thinking. *Isn't there some way to bring back his spirit to his body? It seems to me, without that, there is no chance at all to turn the maid from witch-to-be.*

The white cat was silent for some time, her thoughts

hidden. At last she said, *Of course, I know the spell. But you would have to catch the very pigeon which holds his spirit and bring it, alive, to the chamber where the lad lies.*

That would be a lot of trouble, Cat said. But I think I know the very bird. I was watching when she cast the spirit and I saw this one particular pigeon begin to act most unpigeonlike. I suppose I could catch him if you think it worth the trouble.

Of course, it is worth the trouble. Would you have one unworthy become a Witch Woman? She is a stupid girl. If you can catch the bird, I will come to the chamber where the lad is tonight. I will reunite him with his body. At last I have a task worthy of my calling. Can you do that, Cat? Can you catch the pigeon who carries the lad's spirit?

Cat stretched to his full height on the tips of all four paws. *I think I can promise you positively to have the lad's spirit there waiting for you tonight.*

She came down from the bed and gave Cat's ear a thank-you lick and they left her purring happily to herself as they made their way down the long spiral stair to the stableyard outside.

YOU DID IT, CAT. IF SHE CAN REALLY CHANGE THE SPELL, I WILL TRY TO DO MY PART TO MAKE THE MAID GO WITH ME FROM THIS PLACE.

It remains to be seen if the cat can do as she promises or not. Some cats brag above their powers.

PEOPLE TOO. BUT I HAVE A FEELING SHE WAS NOT BRAGGING. I BELIEVE SHE CAN DO AS SHE SAYS.

Oh. I do not doubt for a moment. She is old and wise and she has been with the Witch Woman since they were both kits. I am sure she has the knowledge of the human if only she has the physical ability to use it.

PHYSICAL ABILITY?

Yes. Some spells require the use of a jewel the Witch

Woman wears around her neck. Others do not. I was asleep when she cast your spirit from your body. I don't know which she used.

THE CAT MUST KNOW AND SHE MUST KNOW SHE CAN DO IT.

Cat hummed to himself. He knew that some cats were inclined to believe themselves wiser than they were. He only hoped this were not the case here. If it was, he was going to a lot of trouble for nothing. He took them out the dog gate, an opening in the wall which allowed the hounds and the other animals of the keep to come and go as they pleased. It greatly aided the servants in keeping the floors clean. The stupid dogs knew enough to go outside for their physical cleansings, even if they did not have enough pride to cover their leavings. Outside, Cat made his way to the stable roof and stretched out on the sunny side of the pigeon cote. After dark, when the birds were settled down, he could choose a small one to carry in. White cat would not perform the ritual if he did not bring the bird. Or, worse, she might suspect where the Other really hid and run straight to her mistress with the information. She was just that type.

He slept and the Other did not bother him with conversation. Perhaps he, too, rested if a spirit needed to rest. Cat held down the thought that he would be glad to be alone again and attending to his own business. This carrying around a human spirit was most upsetting. He washed his paws when he woke and gave his face and ears a thorough cleaning. The pigeons were quiet in their cote, making the cooing sounds of pigeons and shuffling as they pushed each other for better position on the roosts.

They sat on the roof until the sounds of the evening feast ceased in the great hall and the last lamps were carried upstairs to the bedrooms. Only the evening torches were lit, flickering in the windows.

Let us go, Cat said at last. It is time.

I HAVE BEEN LONG READY. I WANTED TO LET YOU REST AS MUCH AS YOU COULD. THIS WILL BE DIFFICULT FOR YOU, I KNOW.

Not so difficult. I have caught many a pigeon in my day.

AND CARRIED IT STRUGGLING AND COOING INTO THE GREAT HALL?

Not the great hall, thank the Powers. We go to the lad's bedchamber for which we should be grateful.

I AM. I AM. IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO TO HELP YOU?

Be still and be quiet. Don't distract me. Hunting is not the easiest profession.

AS YOU SAY. I WILL BE QUIET. GOOD LUCK, CAT.

Luck has nothing to do with it, Cat grumbled to himself as he crawled forward on his belly around to the open door of the pigeon cote. His coming did not disturb the birds, who were already sleeping. He lay quietly assessing his prey and deciding which one would be the easiest to catch. When he decided, his leap from the ground was so quick and silent that only the birds nearest the victim were disturbed and they did not murmur for long. Instead, they shuffled around glad of the room on the perch and went back to sleep.

Cat lay on the bottom of the cote, the startled pigeon grasped in jaw and claw. Because it was dark, the bird struggled very little and, gradually, Cat shifted his grip until he had the bird by the back of the neck. Pulling its skin tight had the effect of partly choking it so its few struggles ceased after a short time. It lay as one unconscious in Cat's grip. He stood then, shuddering when he thought of the cleaning he would have to do to his coat when this was done, threw his head back so the weight of the pigeon was on his shoulders and made his way carefully down from the roof, to the fence, to the woodpile, across the stableyard and into the dog gate.

The castle was quiet. Most of the people were gone to

bed and what servants crept about were attending to their own business paying no attention to the animals within the walls. The hounds smelled the pigeon when Cat brought it in and one of them came over to see why the bird was in the castle. Cat, whose teeth were otherwise occupied, glared a baleful yellow-eyed glare at the dog and stood on toes which showed their weapons. The hound went back to the fireplace and lay down to chew on his tasteless bone with nothing more than a sniff. He was smart enough to know Cat could defend himself and his pigeon if he wanted to.

Cat made his way up the stairs slowly. The bird was awkward and somewhat heavy to carry. Dead, it would have been no problem. He would have dragged it up the stairs without ceremony but he could not kill this one until the white cat cast her spell. And, he had to keep his grip on the bird while she did it so he could be in the way when spells were cast. He did not think it would matter from whom the spell were cast as long as she said the words correctly. The Other would leave its present hiding place and reenter its body. That was, after all, what they were after.

He found the bedchamber of the lad and found the door closed. That was no help at all. He stood up against the door, but his weight was not enough to push the heavy portal.

Rat's Eyes, he growled. *They never close a door in this place. Why this door? Why now?*

PROBABLY DON'T WANT PEOPLE LOOKING IN. The Other spoke for the first time in some hours. WHERE IS THE MAID'S ROOM? PERHAPS YOU COULD GO AND LEAD HER HERE.

With a live pigeon in my teeth? She would think me mad and at the least, take it away from me. We need this bird to make the white cat cast her spell.

SCRATCH ON THE DOOR. PERHAPS SOMEONE IS INSIDE.

Cat grumbled but he rearranged the pigeon again and stood as tall as he could to make scratching noises against the door. Someone stirred inside the room and the door opened slowly. Cat dropped close to the floor in the shadows and as the door opened, slid inside quickly and without waiting to see who it was, dashed under the bed. From the safety of its woven covers, he peeped out.

The Other gave a start. IT IS SHE! IN HERE! WITH MY BODY! WHAT IS SHE DOING IN HERE?

I cannot imagine, Cat said.

I can. Another voice spoke from the deep shadows under the bed. Cat turned to look. It was the white cat lying comfortably on a pillow she had pulled under the bed. *I have been here for hours. I was beginning to think you weren't coming.*

Cat swung the pigeon around in front of him where it fluttered briefly when he changed his grip on its neck. *I was occupied with this stupid bird,* Cat said.

Oh? I thought you would charm him into flying into the room on his own. It is for his own benefit.

I have not your talent for charms. I said I would bring him and I have. Now, can you do your spell so I can either let him go or eat him?

All you toms are interested in is your bellies.

Not quite all, Cat said with a leer.

I wish the stupid girl would go. She has been sniveling over the lad's body since everyone else went to bed. If my mistress knew it, she would be furious.

Can't you send her a thought? Cat asked. *Do you communicate with her at all?*

The white cat licked her paw and smoothed her whiskers. *Not really. I know what she is thinking, but I don't think she knows what I think. Or even if I think. She is a wise*

woman but in that, no wiser than any other human.

Too bad. Cat started to say something else but a noise in the corridor interrupted. The door swung inward on its unoiled hinges and leather-clad feet moved angrily toward the bed.

“And what, exactly, are you doing in this chamber, miss?” It was the Witch Woman’s voice.

“I came to see how Kharis fares. I see he still lives but there is no change. Is he going to die?”

“Probably so. Do you care? Are you lovers? Or do you just wish it so? Are you so eager to give up your gift? You ungrateful wench. This is a choice you have to make right now. This instant. I can give you more power than you have ever dreamed possible. He can give you nothing of value. Sex. Children.”

LOVE, the Other said. Cat cringed.

“I know the gift is of great value. I thought I wanted it, but when I see how it is used. I am not so sure. I like the lad. He is kind.”

“Do you love him?”

“I do not know what love is,” the maid cried.

“If he lives and you have the opportunity to find out, will you choose him?”

The maid was sobbing. “I do not know. I do not know.”

“Go to your room. I will have your answer in the morning.”

The girl’s small feet ran from the room and in a few moments the Witch Woman’s leather-clad feet followed. She closed the door firmly behind her.

The white cat hissed angrily. *You see. I told you she is not worthy to have the calling. I knew it all along.*

Well, you may be right. Let’s get on with this spell-making and see what happens. If the lad’s spirit returns to his body, he may make the decision for her and she will be out of your fur.

True. She stood and pushed past the woven coverlets into the room. Her paws disappeared from sight as she leaped onto the bed.

Cat took a better grip on the bird and dragged it from under the bed. He looked at the leap he must make and took an even firmer hold, then made the leap with seemingly little effort. Only the Other knew what it cost him to make the leap. *Where do you want the bird?*

Can you put it on the lad's chest and hold it still?

Cat lifted the bird onto the boy's chest and stepped up after it. He stretched out and held the bird in his paws keeping his grip on its neck.

That's good. Just like that. She began to go through some kind of sing-song words which were meaningless to both Cat and the Other. Cat watched as she closed her blue eyes and began to sway back and forth, mewling, growling, purring aloud, all the time keeping up a stream of magic words in her thoughts.

Cat began to feel strange. Dizzy. He almost lost his grip on the bird and when he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his head, he did let go his mouth grip to shake his head. Then, quite suddenly the feeling was gone. The Other was gone. Cat was alone inside himself. Beneath him, the youth began to stir.

Kharis opened his eyes and, feeling a weight on his chest, held up his head. "Hello," he said. "How come I here to my chamber and what are you doing on my chest? Have you brought me a bird, Cat?"

Cat let the pigeon go and stepped off of Kharis's chest with great dignity. *Too bad. You don't remember a thing, do you?*

What are you talking about, Cat? Would you have him retain his pigeon thoughts? The white cat asked.

The lad curled his legs around the cats and picked up the bird. He carried it to the window and put it on the ledge.

"In the morning you can fly back to your mates." He turned back to the cats. "You are good to keep me company." He stroked both of them. "But I have a feeling that I would do well to leave this place tonight, before the sun rises. The Witch Woman has no love for me."

You have that right, the white cat said. Come, Cat. This person does not have any idea what we have done for him. She leaped down from the bed and trotted to the door asking in pantomime to be let out.

Kharis picked up Cat and held him close for a moment before putting him down. "I feel a closeness to you, Cat. There is something . . . Faugh! I can't remember. But I thank you anyway for whatever it is." He nuzzled the cat for a moment before putting it down. "You smell like a pigeon cote."

Cat looked at him. *Think nothing of it. My pleasure.* He turned to follow the white cat when a gesture of Kharis's stopped him. The lad licked the tips of his fingers and smoothed first one eyebrow and then the other. Then he licked his fingers again and slicked down his hair before he followed the cats into the hall to go seeking the maid he loved.

Cat purred aloud following the white cat down the hall.

Why are you so happy, Cat? It is I who am pleased. Perhaps he will take the little snip with him when he goes.

Oh, I don't know. When we can do a little good here and there, it makes me happy. And perhaps the lad has learned more than he knows. Most humans would be the better for having a bit of cat in them.

You are really a very wise fellow. Come on up to my quarters, there will be a bowl of cream waiting for me. Many things are better shared.

Cat moved up to her shoulder where he could walk beside her, and then in a bold mood, he touched her face quickly with his rough tongue. *So true, he said. So true.*

* * *

Afterword

I have been a denizen of the Witch World for many years but I, like all other readers, have had to enter by casting my spirit into the characters created by the Master, Andre Norton. When I learned Tales of The Witch World was open to other writers I was excited and eager to be allowed to enter through the castle gates for a change.

Cat Himself, an orange and cream tom who drops by my door each morning at breakfast time to cadge a handout, suggested this story to me when his personality abruptly changed. For over a week, he was someone else entirely: sour, cynical, angry, and more than a little confused. One day he arrived with an upright tail and a twinkle in his eyes and announced that Cat Himself was here again. I was certainly glad to see that whatever had possessed him was gone.

When I read him "Cat and the Other"—over a bowl of eggs scrambled with bacon and cream—he licked his whiskers, smiled, and seemed to say, That's just about the way it is, Sis.

—MARYLOIS DUNN

