

## A Cat's Tale

The Boffin didn't much like cats. Well, she tolerated them. They appeared to her to be arrogant, aloof, and self-absorbed. She didn't like the way that they terrorized the local wildlife, occasionally bringing home a nearly dead bird or lizard. If she had to feed them, she hated the disdainful looks that they would give her offerings, and the way that they ate as if they were doing her a favour. Consequently, if the Mage, who did like cats, had one around, she and the animal mostly ignored each other.

She did like dogs, and sometimes the Mage and the Boffin had a dog as a pet. But they were often away for days, months, or even years, which the Boffin thought was unfair to the dog, even if they slowed or froze time for their pet while they were away.

So she was surprised when she looked up from a book that she was reading, and saw a cat sitting on a chair opposite her, regarding her calmly. She locked eyes with it, but after a moment it dropped its gaze and started grooming itself.

"Dear?" she called.

The Mage wandered in from another room. "Yes, my dear?"

Then he saw the cat.

"Where did she come from?" he asked.

"I don't know. She's not one of yours?"

"Mine? I don't 'have' cats. They are just around. No, she's not one that I've seen around here, I believe."

The Boffin pulled her device from her pocket and tried to line it up on the cat, but the cat got up and moved away. She trotted swiftly out of the door.

"Darn it! I didn't get time to focus on her. Did you get anything?"

He had his own way of knowing things.

"Hmm. She looked like a normal cat, and she behaved like one, but ... I don't know. There was something about her. Hmm."

"She didn't have an aura or anything?" The Boffin was obviously tetchy.

"All cats have auras, but they're not like human auras. I can't detect cat aura differences just by looking, like I can with human auras. Has she done something to upset you?"

"Yes! No! She was staring at me. Cats usually ignore me, and I ignore them."

He produced his scrying ball and showed her.

"Yeah, there's your aura, my dear, and there's mine. You can see how harmonious they are? OK, here's a cat's aura. Notice that it doesn't really harmonize well with either of our auras. But if I take your aura out of the picture for a while, like this. See, there are **some** points at which I do harmonize with the cat. I'll remove mine and add yours. This time there are no points where you harmonize with the cat. To a first approximation, anyway."

"Yes, I see. What does that all mean?"

"Why, you are not a cat person, my dear."

"I knew that!" she said, a little sharply. Then she looked at him with suspicion. "You're teasing me, aren't you? It's a good job our auras harmonize, or I could get really annoyed with you!"

He merely smiled.

"I was teasing you a little, my dear. But cats don't always ignore you. What about that tabby, the one that was around when I was away for a week at that Gathering? I came home and she was lying on the sofa next to you, on her back, totally relaxed."

“Yes, well... Back to this cat. You agree that there is something odd about her?”

“Yes. We’ll keep our eyes on her, shall we?”

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The Boffin watched the cat when she was around. If the Boffin looked at her directly, the cat always looked away. If she tried to scan her with her device, the cat walked out of the room. Still, the Boffin was able to get a partial scan. Once or twice she followed the cat out of the room, but there was no sign of her in the next room.

She went looking for the Mage.

“Dear, that cat. I got a partial scan, and while she’s definitely a cat, she seems to have attributes that ordinary cats don’t have.”

She showed him her scans.

“Mmm, yes, I see,” he said. “Have you noticed that she disappears through doorways and round corners? I think she is stepping.”

“Ah, yes, in that case...” She went to her computer and touched a few keys. “Yes, she did step, and we can follow her. I guess that she wants us to follow her, but why doesn’t she just indicate it, by, say, stepping in front of us?”

“That would be like asking us to follow her. And cats don’t ask. Remember that black cat that got the sack caught on his claw? He just dragged the sack around until we noticed. Then he struggled when we tried to get it off.”

“Oh. Yeah. You had to freeze him. Then he was all huffy. So we follow her?”

“Yes. But we won’t be thanked for it.”

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They stepped to the space where the cat had gone and looked around.

“What do think, my dear?” asked the Mage.

“What is it? A gym? A parkour site? A playground?”

“I think it’s a city. For cats.”

They were standing on a platform or shelf looking down at other platforms or shelves. Between the platforms and shelves were narrow pathways or bridges, and in some places ropes hung down. The buildings that supported the platforms and shelves showed open entrance holes, or doorways, none of which appeared to have doors.

An inhabitant of the city emerged from an entrance and dropped a metre or so down to a narrow walkway. She was a cat, a human sized cat. She was unclothed and had a short dense fur coat, coloured black and white in patches like an ordinary cat. Two prominent ears adorned her head. They weren’t close enough to see the creature’s face but if they had been, they would have seen the slight muzzle, the large eyes with slit pupils, and the whiskers.

She landed upright, but dropped to all fours and trotted along the walkway onto a bridge, balancing with the help of her tail. Part way across the bridge, she stepped off the bridge and swung from it by her forelegs into a waiting entrance way. The drop below was two or three dozen metres.

“Well!” said the Boffin. “That wasn’t the way that one of our cats would have negotiated that!”

“Yes, my dear. There are differences.”

They didn’t have long to wait to see the face of a native. One appeared at the edge of their platform, and the owner snarled at them and then disappeared.

“Shall we?” said the Mage.

“I guess we have to.”

The Mage suddenly became a large human-sized male cat, an analogue of one of the inhabitants. He had a noticeable mane, and a mostly ginger and white coat with a few prominent scars. The

Boffin was smaller, as females were in this space, with a black coat with a white patch on her chest and two white booties. Her tail had a white tip, and both of them rippled with muscles.

The face reappeared, but this time it said “Come on! What are you waiting for?”

The Boffin snarled and the face flinched then snarled back.

“OK, OK,” it said.

“Now, now, my dear. Keep it civil,” said the Mage.

“Sorry. I’m the Boffin. He’s the Mage. Who are you?”

“Cleo. Come on!”

“OK, OK,” grumbled the Boffin, as they followed Cleo through the maze that was the city.

Cleo was a tabby. She strode off without looking back, and they hurried to follow her. The walkways now seemed as wide as a roadway to their cat senses, and the drops and swings were easily accomplished. The Boffin had to warn herself against over confidence, as her claws slid a bit on one hold.

“Where are we going?” asked the Boffin.

“To the Queen, of course! Does he have to come?”

The Boffin looked at the Mage.

“Yes. He has to come.”

Cleo seemed to accept this. Since neither she nor the Boffin were in oestrus, his presence was just a distraction. She led them higher and higher into the city. On some ledges females were gathered together in small groups. They snarled at them, which was both a warning and a greeting. There were occasional groups of young males and several solo older males, who just ignored them. The Boffin wondered where all the kittens were. Probably safe inside one of the buildings, she guessed. Watched over by their mothers or aunties.

Their guide led them to the top of the city, and to a cubical room at the very summit. They scaled a nearly vertical wooden surface and entered the cube. The Queen was lying on a tatami or mattress on the floor, being massaged by an individual who was definitely not a feline. His ears flopped and his muzzle was more pronounced than those of the cat people. His coat was tan. The Boffin’s nose said “Dog!” with a sneer. The human part of her mind noted that the sneer was probably a side effect of her current cat shape.

The Queen, who was a magnificent ginger tabby, sat up, and flashed her claws at the dog.

“That’s enough! We’re through for today, Raal!”

The dog, Raal, had recoiled, protecting his nose. “Yes, Mistress, your Majesty.” He disappeared through one of the open doors.

“Who are you?” said the Queen. “You look like cats, but you smell like humans! I wanted intelligent humans! What are you? Cleo, what is this?”

“I’m the Boffin. He’s the Mage. We are humans, and we are intelligent.”

She was irritated by the Queen’s attitude, but the cat part of her was irritated because the Queen was the Queen. Something in her said that **she** should be Queen.

Cleo was cringing away from the Queen. “I did my best. The King ...”

“That lazy bastard! Get out of here, Cleo!” said the Queen, showing her claws.

Cleo disappeared through one of the door holes.

“What’s this about, your Majesty?” asked the Boffin. There was hint of steel in her voice.

“My dear,” said the Mage, warningly.

The Queen looked at her for a long time. She stretched, showing her claws, then she licked her paw, which was closer to a human hand than a usual cat’s paw, and started to groom herself.

“We’re having problems with the humans,” said the Queen. “Annoying bastards. They refuse to give up some land that I need. Something to do with crops and herds. It’s causing me problems with my rivals. If this is not sorted out, I might have to face a coup. I can handle it, of course, but it will cause upset.”

“The humans are under your dominion?” asked the Mage.

“Of course! Though they don’t think so.” The Queen glowered at him.

“What do you need the land for, Majesty?”

“The hunt! What else? The old hunt lands are boring! The same old prey. The same old territory. It’s the same old thing! Time after time!”

“We’ll need to talk to the humans.”

“Why? What has it got to do with them? They threaten a strike! What will that do? We will just go down to their fields and stockades and take what we want!”

“They will fight you, with weapons and fire. They will trap you and kill you. It will be bloody and you might lose.”

“Never!”

The Queen reared up at him and snarled. The Mage knocked her down and grabbed her neck in his powerful jaws and held her until she gave up. She retreated, snarling, trying to swipe the Mage with her claws as she backed away.

“You have my permission to talk to the humans,” she said. Her voice dripped acid. “Raal!”

The dog appeared in the doorway.

“Take these two down to talk to the humans. One of their ... What do they call them? Bosses. Take them to one of their bosses.”

“Sure, Mistress, Majesty. This way, folks, this way.”

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“Have you worked for the Queen for long, Raal?” asked the Boffin.

“Since I was a puppy,” he said proudly. “All my litter were assigned to high-ranking females,”

The route that they were taking was easier than the way that they had taken on the way up. There were ladders and stairs, but Raal still had a little trouble on the ladders.

“She’s been good to you?”

“Yes, yes. But I wish she’d let me have a mate. All my litter have got mates.” He seemed despondent.

“Why don’t you leave her then?”

“Run away?” He was shocked. “Go feral? I couldn’t do that. But I could ask her again, I suppose.”

He grinned at his daring.

“Raal, we’re going to change, OK?”

“Change?”

“We’re going to become humans.”

“Become humans?” He suddenly got the idea. “No! No humans in the upper city! They will kill you!”

“OK, tell us when we can safely change.”

“You really are shape-changers? Wow! I thought it was just a story.”

“Don’t give him ideas!” Cleo had dropped down beside them. “He’ll want you to change him into a guard dog or something equally stupid.”

Raal gave a nervous little growl and shut up. The Boffin decided that there was something about Cleo that she didn’t like, and it wasn’t just the fact that she was a cat.

“Don’t expect too much from the humans,” said Cleo. “They’re not as smart as your humans are. Nowhere near as smart. I had a look around while I was in your space. The cats are still in charge of course, but your humans are smart. They’ve built your whole world to their pattern! Our humans... Pfft! They are only good for growing things and raising food animals.”

“Who built the city? The cats?” asked the Mage.

“The dogs!” said Raal. He cowered back as Cleo snarled at him.

“They did the actual building,” spat Cleo. “But the cats designed it. If the dogs had designed it, it would have been a sprawling mess of kennels! Anyway, I’ll leave you here. I don’t want to go down to the dog and human levels. They make me sick.”

She leapt off the bridge that they were crossing and swarmed up the side of a building and vanished over the top.

“Oh, the cats ‘designed it’ all right. But if it hadn’t been for us dogs, there would have been no power, no sewerage, no water, and only cats would have been able to get up there.” said Raal with feeling.

The Boffin looked at the Mage and he nodded. He’d noticed that Raal had become more confident the lower that they had got.

“Did the humans help at all?” asked the Mage.

Raal looked at him. “Yeah. They carried wood and bricks and concrete. That sort of stuff. Oh, by the way, you can change now.”

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The lower levels of the city were more like a human city. There were roads, shops, cars, and dogs. Down at this level many of the dogs wore clothes, but plenty of them didn’t. They all walked upright. It looked to the Boffin a bit nightmarish, as if in a dream you touched someone on the shoulder and when they turned, instead of a human face, they had a dog’s face. It was unsettling.

“Where do the humans live?” asked the Boffin.

“Out of town,” said Raal. He led them to a small car. “Get in. Get in.”

They all got in, and Raal started to drive out of town. The Mage used a small query charm. Oh, it was powered by electricity! He wondered whether the Boffin had noticed.

Raal looked at them in the mirror. “You’ve been in a car before? Some humans are scared of them. Oh, that’s right. That molly Cleo said that you weren’t from here.”

“She did? When?”

“When she was down here last. She told me she was getting some humans from somewhere else to help with our humans. That’s funny. She said that it made her sick down here, but she’s been down here before, several times.”

They drew up in front of a row of nondescript cottages.

“This is where the humans live?” asked the Boffin.

“Yeah. Tatty, isn’t it? They’re capable of doing them up, but they need a push. Some of the dogs and bitches come down here and encourage them. Even some of the cats, the mollies, that is, have been known to supervise them. The toms can’t be bothered.”

They went up to the first house and knocked on the door. The human who came to the door was wearing well-worn clothes, and had long unkempt hair.

“How can I help you?” he said, quietly. “Hi, boss. Raal, isn’t it?”

The Boffin stepped forward and the man stepped back a pace. He had no choice but to ask them in, and showed them into a dark kitchen.

“Tea? What can I do for you?”

“Yes, please,” said the Boffin. “We’re here because the Queen has asked us to find out why you are opposing her plans to expand her hunting range.”

The man bristled. He made no move to make them tea.

“It’s our farming area, Why do they want our farming area?”

“Could you farm somewhere else, though?”

“That molly! She doesn’t understand. Our crops are just ripening. We can’t hurry them. If we harvest them now, we won’t get much, and there won’t be any food later in the year!”

“Where would you move your fields to, if you had to move them?”

“Huh? Where?” He thought deeply. “I’d move them down to the river. Good soil there. The cats don’t like it much down there. Too wet. They don’t like the water, see.”

“You’re talking about a strike. How would that work?” asked the Mage.

“We’d stop putting stuff in the dogs’ warehouses. Yeah, that would teach them!”

“But what if the cats came down and took the stuff anyway?”

The man’s brow furrowed. “Would they? They wouldn’t, would they?”

The Mage reflected that the man was a leader of the humans. He wasn’t very bright.

“How did you get the idea for a strike?” asked the Boffin. Her mind was obviously running along the same lines as the Mage’s.

“Oh, I don’t rightly know,” said the man. “Oh yeah! I remember. That molly who told us that they wanted the lands. She said that she hoped that we wouldn’t start a strike. When I asked what a strike was, she told us.”

“Did she tell you her name?”

“You know the cats! They never tell us their names. Too proud.”

“Hmm!”

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Raal’s house was a pleasant house, with human style windows and doors. It was not at all like a kennel. There was heavy furniture, great cabinets against the walls, but the seating consisted of mats on the floor. Raal spread a map on the floor between the mats.

“Here are the humans’ fields, here, west of the city. There’s the river. I guess that’s where the humans could move their fields to, if they must.”

“Where are the current hunting grounds, Raal?”

“Here to the east. There’s open areas for chases, and there’s wooded areas for ambush hunting. Rocks, here, for resting and sunbathing. They often meet the toms there too.”

“Why on earth do they want the humans’ fields? They are flat. They would have to knock down buildings and fences, grass it, plant trees, and there are no resting areas. That’s a lot of work!”

Raal looked closely at the map. “Yes, you are correct. That’s strange. Over here, to the north would be a lot better. Look, there’re woods here and here. And there’re outcrops in several places. Or here to the south. There’s a wide open area for chases. I wonder why the Queen chose that area?”

“I’ve an idea, Raal.”

The Boffin explained her idea to Raal and his eyes widened.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, that would explain it.”

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Raal took them back up to see the Queen. She was lounging on a mattress on the roof of the room where they had met her before. Cleo was there too, as well as two other mollies. When Cleo saw them she momentarily unsheathed her claws.

“Have you persuaded the humans to give up their fields?” asked the Queen.

“Well, no,” said the Boffin. She and the Mage were back in cat form.

“Well, get out of my sight!” said the Queen with anger in her voice. “You couldn’t...”

The Boffin snarled at her. She arched her back, and her tail was erect. The other cats started, but subsided when the Mage grumbled at them deep in his throat. One of them opened her mouth to show her fangs, and tentatively waved her claws in his direction, but then sat back.

“I’m sorry, but you will listen, your Majesty,” said the Boffin, with steel in her voice.

The Queen stood up and snarled back. Her back was also arched and her tail was also raised. She walked up to the Boffin with her jaws wide, snarling. Her tail whipped from side to side. She and the Boffin threatened one another for a moment or two, and then as if on a signal both dropped their threatening poses, and sat down.

The Queen nodded. “OK. Tell me, then.”

“We went to see the humans, and they have a good case for keeping their fields. If you force them to go on strike and you seize their fields, as you could, you will lose most of the crops, and that would cause food shortages. You would all go hungry from the cats down to the humans. The humans would fight you, and they would be tougher than you might expect. You would face unrest all down the line.”

“But we need new hunting grounds! Their lands are the best.”

“The best, your Majesty? They are flat and bare. Ideal for crops and herds. There are few trees, and there are no rocky outcrops for resting and ... other uses. It would be a long time and a lot of work before they were even as good as the existing hunting grounds.”

“Really? But I was told that their lands were the best.”

“There’s more suitable land to the north. Untouched grasslands. Plenty of wooded areas. Several rocky outcrops. And maybe to the south though the mountains there constrict the area available. May I? We went over the map with Raal, and we have some ideas.”

The Boffin spread out the map in front of the Queen and pointed out the various areas of interest. The Queen nodded but the Boffin could tell she didn’t really understand maps. The Boffin was careful to describe in detail the areas that she pointed to, so that the Queen would understand.

“Why did you think that the humans’ land was the best, your Majesty?”

“Well, I was told...” She paused and looked at Cleo.

“When we went to see the humans, they told us that they had had no idea about a strike and that it was suggested to them, er, mentioned to them, by the molly who brought them the news. Who recommended the humans’ fields? Who did you send to talk with them?”

The Queen stood up. “Cleo,” she said.

Cleo shot over the edge of the roof and the Queen was instantly after her. They disappeared from view, but not from earshot. Screams, yells, and swearing echoed for a minute or two, then subsided. The Queen appeared over the edge of the roof. She was bleeding on her shoulder and on her flank.

“My daughter will make a good Queen, one day. She’s the best of the bunch. But not yet,” she said. She spat out a mouthful of fur. “She’s got a nick in her ear which will remind her of the risks of challenging me! Raal, please tend to these scratches.”

“Cleo is your daughter?”

“Most of this lot are,” said the Queen, indicating the other mollies, and implicitly including others who weren’t present. Those who were present had barely stirred.

The Queen looked pleased with herself. “You know, these days it’s all about ‘negotiation’, ‘compromise’, and talk, talk, talk. It’s been fun to indulge in a good honest old-fashioned scrap for a change!”

She licked a paw and groomed herself.

“Raal?”

“Yes, Mistress, Majesty?”

“I’ve decided to grant your request to have a mate. You helped the Mage and the Boffin in their investigations, and it’s a reward.”

“Thank you, Mistress. Oh, thank you!” Raal’s tail was wagging furiously.

“Now, get out of here! You’re causing a draught! Take the day off.”

Raal almost literally bounced off the rooftop. They all heard him yell “Woo-hoo!!”

“Well, your Majesty, we will be leaving.”

“Yes. I know that the human way is to express thanks, in such a situation. The cat way is to accept service according to rank without comment. You understand?”

“Perfectly, Majesty. Goodbye.”

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“Cleo underestimated us, didn’t she?” said the Mage. “She thought that we would simply try to negotiate with the humans, and that we would fail. She didn’t think that a human could have enough intelligence to uncover her scheming. The Queen instantly recognized that it was a plan by Cleo to discredit her. I think that the Queen credited us with being at least at her level of intelligence.”

The Boffin merely said “Mmm.”

“My dear?”

“What? Oh yes. The Queen was a lot smarter than her daughter, I think. That might change over time as Cleo acquires some wisdom. But, you know, having now been a cat, I think that I understand them a little better. Cleo came to our space and looked around and concluded that the cats were in charge, and having seen it from the cat point of view, I can understand why she thought that.”

“Well, my dear, it’s quite possible that she is right, of course. It’s interesting, my dear, that you made an excellent cat, in spite of you not being a ‘cat person’.”

The Boffin momentarily changed to her cat form and hissed at him. Then she reverted to normal and they both laughed.

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