

The Adventures of Caterwaul the Cat

Feline Pie



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Prologue

The black cat tiptoed silently as he slid past the green glowing globe. His furry body hugged the cave wall as he moved. It appeared as though the sheen of his coat absorbed the pale light as he went, preventing the casting of his shadow in the dimness.

Caterwaul planned his escape more than a year ago, moving slowly and methodically to avoid suspicion, learning about anything and everything he might need on the outside.

Funny that he chose the expression “on the outside.” He thought about it a moment and allowed himself a sort of half-smile. After all, he hardly remembered what his life was like as a kitten, before she’d gotten hold of him, so he really couldn’t know what to expect.

Peering back over his shoulder, he saw the old woman who had been his companion these last few years. She was frail and ancient-looking. She sat, as she often did, asleep in her favorite rickety chair. Her head slumped back against the broken mesh of woven grass, mouth open to reveal a collection of yellowed and missing teeth. He was sure she was asleep because her left eye was open and completely motionless. A cloudy, white film worked to obscure the eye’s natural brown pigment. Occasionally, a high-pitched snore would escape her open maw, and every so often, she’d make a gurgling sound before resuming her routine.

Over time, Caterwaul learned quite a bit about conjuring from watching the old woman work. A lot of it was what might be put down as simple garden-variety stuff, but there were some spells among his gleanings that could only be called sorcery.

He had filled a pack with whatever he imagined he might need: spells he'd written down, potions and powders, roots and reagents, tokens, and talismans. Once free, he had no plan of ever returning to that cave.

Arriving at the entrance, he noticed that the door had been left slightly ajar. The cat squeezed his frame through the narrow space between the door and its jamb and sprinted up the earthen ramp in the direction of daylight. What luck it was that the rat left it cracked as he had. His heart began to race, and he unconsciously increased his speed as he approached the cave opening.

He caught the eyes of several small cave creatures, but they were too involved with their own business to cause him any trouble. The one potential problem was the rat. The rat was unpredictable.

Caterwaul prayed the filthy bugger was off in a ditch somewhere, intoxicated, sleeping off the effects of some over-fermented hunk of fruit he'd been saving for a special occasion.

Luckily there was no sign of the rodent, or any other resistance, as he emerged into the cool of the early evening's breeze. "So far so good," he whispered.

Now outside, his best course of action was to follow a shallow creek leading away from the cave. As he crept along the stream, a small turtle popped his head from the water and sneezed. This startled the cat, and he slipped, his forepaws ending up in the muddy water.

"Sorry about that, chief," the small turtle said apologetically. "I know your kind doesn't usually care for water." He swam

toward the creek's edge and sat down on a slab of water-polished slate. He had a face that was painted with yellow and black stripes and a lacquered, orange underbelly quite intricate in design.

"So you're headed up along the creek, eh?" he asked Caterwaul. "Not sure if that's such a good idea at the moment." The turtle put a claw to his lips as to signal for silence. "Something, or someone, has those frogs up in arms again."

"Frogs?" Caterwaul asked him. "What frogs?"

"What frogs? . . . You're joking!" The turtle was laughing. "Well then, it's a good thing that I just happened to sneeze when I did. Because, my friend, you'd be skewered like a shish kebab before you walked even another fifty feet in the direction you're going."

The cat cocked his head slightly to show that he clearly did not understand.

"Ol' Fairfax is on maneuvers, mate. Haven't seen 'im this riled up in a long time either. This," he said paddling at the water, "is Bug Stool Creek. Everyone knows that Bug Stool Creek is guarded by that blighter general and his army of poison dart frogs."

Just then a high-pitched whizzing sounded above Caterwaul's head. Looking up, he saw a sharpened quill, as if from a porcupine or hedgehog, sticking out of a tree trunk.

"Well, they know you're here now, mate. Sorry . . . but you're on your own." The turtle dove off his rock and disappeared beneath the water.

Another dart flew by Caterwaul and then another. He ducked down just in time to dodge a fourth dart that actually parted his fur as it sailed over his head.

After that, he took off like a thunderbolt. He could see them, forming ranks all around him. They were everywhere, small frogs with colorful markings, armed with what he thought

looked to be . . . wishbones? Were they actually using bows made out of wishbones?

Whatever they were, they were dangerous. Each of the frogs seemed able to reload and launch a minimum of three or four of the poisoned quills per minute. Caterwaul was in serious trouble. He had to get away . . . now! He pumped his legs faster than he thought possible. There was no way he was going to die here in the mud next to some filthy stream called Bug Stool Creek.

Then he felt one of the barbs pierce his right side. He was terrified. He had no idea what type of poison was on the tip of the arrow. He imagined it was some form of neurotoxin or a muscle inhibitor, like curare or something. He'd often heard that frogs were able to generate toxins within their own skins. A second quarrel hit him in the right hind leg and then a third, in the right shoulder. Still he ran. He was distressed, but he did not dare let up.

Yanking the barbs free of his flesh, he continued to run. Scared as he was, it did not occur to him that the poison appeared ineffective.

Finally, after about half an hour, his legs gave out, not because they were paralyzed, but from sheer exhaustion. Slumped over and gasping for breath, the cat lay trembling, propped up against a dead branch resting on the ground. He was so close to the edge of consciousness that he hardly felt the large reptilian paws lifting him up to carry him away.

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The sun wasn't down an hour when the rat crawled back up the muddy rocks to the cave entrance. It had started to rain, and he was covered in muck. His coarse, wiry fur jutted out from his body in all directions.

"It's done," he said. "I did it . . . just like you told me to." He

was laughing. “I swear I don’t think ol’ Fairfax has had that much fun in years.”

“You made sure to tell the general not to hurt him?”

“Absolutely, ma’am. The frogs were all shooting blanks. If they hit him, all he’d have felt was a little prick. Kind of fitting, if you ask me.”

“You are positive? You know what I will do to you if I find that you are not being truthful.”

The rat swallowed hard. “Don’t worry, ma’am. I swear to you there was no toxin on any of ’em. After all, there’s plenty enough frogs out there in this wood already. But if you don’t mind my askin’ . . . why d’ya let the ungrateful little fur ball go? It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

The old woman lowered her hood back onto her shoulders. Her hair was matted, and her eyes were red. It was obvious she had been crying.

“Of course it doesn’t Edsel,” she answered curtly before turning to go back down to her home. “I never expected you to understand.”