

“Cat’s Pause”

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Kefira woke up feeling warm and satisfied. She stretched, extruding her claws and plucking at the rumpled blanket with alternate paws as she arched her back and flicked her ears and whiskers forward. A deep rumble started in her chest and erupted as a satisfied purr.

Her round yellow eyes snapped wide. Whiskers? Claws? Lord Androff’s bells! She glanced around the room feeling disoriented by the faded colors and distorted depth perception that flooded her brain. An overpowering smell of human sex came from the narrow bed she shared with the young guardsman snoring next to her.

Thinking furiously, she started licking her paw and wiping at her red-gold face. Snout wrinkled in disgust, Kefira realized what she was doing and stopped mid-air. Panic gripped her. What happened? How had she acquired this feline form? Her ears flattened, hackles rose, and she bared her teeth in a frightened hiss. Kefira harshly suppressed an almost overwhelming urge to go racing through the room in a blind panic. After a few tense moments, her natural curiosity wrestled down the fear.

How had she changed overnight from a reasonably successful street acrobat into a cat? Had she crossed a powerful sorcerer? Insulted a rich merchant? Her thoughts fixed on Almon. The kind older man wanted to be her patron but Kefira wouldn’t give up her vagabond life to settle down.

She had tried to explain her need for freedom the last time they coupled, but he still didn’t understand why a female wouldn’t jump at the opportunity for safe and comfortable surroundings. She pictured the hurt in his eyes and the resignation in the slump of his shoulders. No, Almon would never do this to her, he was too honorable.

“Fira?” Cahil mumbled sleepily as he rolled over reaching for her. A sudden fit of sneezing convulsed his body. Cahil’s brown eyes widened as they spied Kefira watching him curiously from her side of the bed. He reached for a neckerchief from the hastily discarded pile of clothes on the floor. His normally bronze skin colored to a bright red as he tried to quell the sneezing.

“Damn cat! How’d you ged in here?”

Kefira dodged a backhand swipe and leaped for the nightstand knocking over a guttered candle. She skidded with a surprised yowl over the edge and onto the polished wood floor. Candle, holder, and assorted bright cheap jewelry cascaded around her as she scrambled to reverse directions and escape under the bed.

Cahil pulled the blanket off the floor and peeked under the bed. The watery eyes and runny nose

spoiled his good looks. “Here, kiddy, kiddy, kiddy. Nice kiddy. Cum oud from dare.” He lunged for her. Kefira avoided his reaching grasp by cowering in the dusty corner.

“Gods’ blasded cat.” His stubbled face disappeared. Kefira listened to the curses called down on cats and changeable women mumbled between sneezes. He quickly pulled on his tights and officer tunic, buckled on his sword and searched the floor for his boots. She poked her bewhiskered nose from under the bed watching for her chance to escape.

Now. He was heading for the door. Kefira dashed between his legs, sending the unfortunate young man crashing to the floor with a surprised yelp. She sprinted down the stairs with a sense of regret mixed with her greater sense of urgency.

Having a cat body offered a different perspective on the world. She was a small, relatively frail animal in a world of giants. But her feline form had some advantages. As an acrobat, she appreciated the quick reflexes and flexibility. That move off the night stand was a pretty good recovery. Kefira took advantage of her naturally low profile by following the shadowed wall behind the bar to the open kitchen door. She slunk into a noisy crowd of cooks and servants getting their breakfast before starting work. Food. Her stomach clenched.

She had come to the tavern with one purpose last night and it wasn’t dinner. Kefira purred contentedly, one paw raised. She had laughed and flirted with several men until Cahil had entered the room. The musky scent of the well-built young guardsman had attracted her immediately. He had responded to her with poorly concealed lust. They barely waited to get to their room before tearing off their clothes for intense, frequent and sometimes violent lovemaking.

The sharp scent of another cat brought Kefira back to the present. She had forgotten about the scarred old tabby that was unofficial mascot of the inn. His scent marked his territory throughout the kitchen. Kefira rubbed her head and tail over the markings masking them with her own scent as she stealthily tread through the room. That would give the old torn fits!

She reached the open alley with no sign of the tabby, then made a dash for a pile of litter strewn against a gap-filled fence. Kefira hid behind several smashed wooden boxes and a tattered pallet leaking straw. She settled on all fours to think about her situation, tail curled forward, the end twitching. She needed help for her strange affliction. Matrika. The witchwoman had helped her when Kefira first arrived in the city, penniless and with a mysterious gap in her memory.

She mused on the cause for her predicament. Maybe Cahil was cursed and every woman he loved turned into a cat to which he was violently allergic. It’s too bad cats can’t chuckle, she thought, as Kefira flicked her whiskers half in amusement and half in frustration. She shrugged. Fruitless speculation wouldn’t help. She needed to get to Matrika.

Kefira stretched herself briefly and checked out the alley. Matrika lived on the other side of the Bazaar. Her large rambling house sheltered an odd and ever-changing assortment of human and animal occupants. At this time of day, she should be at home studying her books on magic or conducting her experiments. Matrika supported herself and the others who occasionally turned to

her for help by doing a brisk business in small white magics such as love potions, fertility charms, and traveler's protection.

A streak of movement tracked across Kefira's vision. Her feline body bunched and leaped. The small rodent gave one squeak before she bit through its spine at the base of its skull. Ugh! Hungry as she was, Kefira pulled her lips back in disgust as she realized what she contemplated for a meal. As a woman, she had a lively appetite and eagerly tried exotic foods. Raw fish, maybe, but fresh mouse pushed the limits of her curiosity.

A low growl caught her attention. The inn tabby emerged from the dark crowded space between two buildings. They stared at each other for several seconds, then the tabby made a brief cautious move towards her, stretching one paw forward.

No! My kill! Kefira started a growl deep in her throat as she arched her back and fluffed her fur to make herself look larger and more imposing. The stranger cat sniffed briefly and lowered himself to the ground, staring unblinkingly.

Kefira watched cautiously as the tabby's muscles bunched and his hindquarters dug in in anticipation. In a flurry of movement the tabby leaped. She dropped her meal and reared to meet him, rolling onto her back. Kefira raked his soft belly with her sharp hind claws and bit at his neck. Pain lanced through her as the tabby snapped at her face and tore an ear.

It was over in a few furious seconds. Kefira wriggled out from under the larger cat and backed down the alley hissing and growling. The tabby picked up her dinner as she turned tail and raced away, her fear and pain replaced by a growing sense of unease. What was that all about? Why had she fought the tabby over a disgusting rodent? She had a more important goal...if only she could remember what it was.

An overwhelming sense of loss boiled up from her empty belly, clutched her wildly beating heart, and constricted her throat. The panicked animal let loose one prolonged scream that sounded like a baby being tortured. She set off at a ground-eating lope, charting a straight course through the thicket of human dwellings. Home. Something awful would happen to her if she didn't get there.

A small tawny cat jumped through her study window from the ash tree, startling Matrika. The graceful animal immediately leaped to her desk. It daintily picked its way through the clutter of jars, books and charms and plopped itself down with a rumbling purr in the middle of the book Matrika was reading. The rumpled woman removed her reading spectacles from faded blue eyes and pushed small curling tendrils of gray-streaked hair behind her ears.

"Well, kitten, you sure know how to get a body's attention." She ran a gentle hand over the animal looking for injuries. Matrika examined the torn ear and sighed. "Got into a scrape, have you?" The cat continued to purr contentedly then rolled over and exposed a lean stomach to be scratched.

“Come, kitten, let’s get you some food.” The witchwoman picked up the trusting animal and carried it down the hall. She stopped at a small room at the top of the stairs, rapped on the door and asked the occupant to join her in the kitchen. Matrika cradled the cat like a baby, petting and talking to it in a soothing murmur.

The kitchen was cool and dark with wooden shutters blocking the intense afternoon light. She put the cat down near the empty hearth and reached into the cold closet for a pitcher of cream. She poured the cream into a chipped saucer while the hungry animal mewed and paced. Matrika placed the saucer on the flagstone floor and turned as a tall, awkward-looking girl entered the room. The teenager had wild red hair corkscrewing in an untamable jumble down her back. Freckles dusted her long nose.

“You wanted me, ‘Trika?”

“Kefira’s home, Gemina.” She gestured toward the cat daintily washing its face in the corner.

“What?” The girl looked startled and raced across the room. Gemina picked up the small feline and scratched under its chin.

“She just came in. I saw her performing a few days ago, so the reversion must be recent. Your spell lasted for nearly three full moons.” The sorceress frowned at her star pupil and her favorite pet for a few moments then turned to put away the pitcher.

“I’m sorry, ‘Trika,” Gemina mumbled. “I didn’t mean to cause trouble. I just wanted to try that new changer spell you taught me. She’s alright, isn’t she?” The girl anxiously inspected the injured ear.

Matrika reached out to tousle the unruly red hair. “I’m sure you meant no harm, Gemina. But next time, try to think about the consequences. All magic has a price, you know. Sometimes you pay, sometimes another. We’re here to protect, not abuse weaker creatures.”

Kefira started to make a bed in the girl’s lap, kneading a bony thigh with both paws. She circled twice and settled in a comfortable heap, tail tip over her nose. This was good. Food. Home. A nest for the kittens to be born in nine weeks. The human voices faded to a low murmur as the contented animal drifted toward sleep, the vague uneasiness plaguing her only a distant echo of regret.

Author’s note: This was the second story I wrote, the first one I sold and still one of my favorites. It came to me almost fully formed while I was playing with my cat and took only a few hours to write the first draft. It tricked me into thinking writing was easy. I’ve learned better

through the years. All writers treasure their first sale, but this one was almost eclipsed by the news that I was pregnant with my daughter. Luckily, I only had to wait nine months for my child – the story didn't appear in print for three years!