

Yellow Eyes

by Marylois Dunn

Cat entered the castle through the cat door built into the wall near the kitchen. The dogs also used the door . as did an assortment of mice, when there were no cats passing through. Scenting the various passers-through as he entered, Cat thought to himself that it would be better for the entire castle had they made the opening too small for the great hounds. A few cats in the house would have kept the varmint population to nothing. With the dogs coming and going, bringing their fleas and their filth and their aging bones with them, there was no way to control the intruders.

He turned into the kitchen and sat under a table waiting for a handout. The cooks were like the dogs. They came and went. He did not know why or where and, frankly, did not care. There were usually one or two who would toss something under the table for him. Occasionally, he found a cook who would take time to discover his preferences, but at the present time, he did well to get a biscuit that was not too tough to chew.

The alternative was to make his way to the top turret of the castle where the white cat ruled. She had cream for dinner every night. She had the best of the meat, liver, kidneys, and sweetbreads, chopped fine or sometimes lightly braised with butter. Other times, raw. Always tasty.

The white cat was fond of him and generous. It rather hurt his pride, though, to make his way up those long stairs too often. He did not like to seem a beggar.

Of course, he could always hunt, but rats and mice were such filthy things. More often than not, those which lived in the castle lived with or near the dogs and smelled like dogs. When he hunted, he went outside the walls of the keep where there were rabbits, and fat, sweet field mice.

Today, however, the weather had turned foul; cold and wet and his rabbit hunting had gone sour. He came into the castle grumbling to himself and stopped off in the kitchen to see what might be offered. While he waited to be noticed, he attended to his toilet. He began at his shoulders and worked his way down, tonguing carefully until he had all four paws clean and was nearing the tip of his tail. He did this by turning himself almost double and putting one forepaw on his tail to hold it in place while he licked.

An armored warrior came clanking into the kitchen, accompanied by four hounds who slavered and shook water all over the floor. They acknowledged Cat's presence but did not attempt to come under the table where he sat. None of them were fools.

One small female lay down beside the table, watching Cat with her yellow eyes. *Have they fed you?* she asked.

Not yet, Cat replied. *How was your hunting?*

The hound picked at the burrs between her toes with her small front teeth. *Not very good,* she said. *When the rain began, it was hard to pick up a scent. Some of those stupid males went off after a wee little bunny. I knew it was useless, and I had a better trail. For which, I caught a lash across my flanks. If he were not the master, I would think him as stupid as those males.*

What were you hunting?

Deer is what he said we were after. We came across some old tracks but nothing fresh. We have hunted too much too close to the castle. The game moves out. We should as well.

I would have settled for a wee rabbit, Cat said.

The yellow eyes looked at him mildly. *Come with me sometime. I will chase one your way.*

Cat did not answer but thought he would have to be starving to hunt with a hound.

The hound opened her mouth and panted with her tongue curled upward. Cat knew she was laughing at him.

A scullery maid trotted past, kicked at the hound and said "Ho, there, Cat. Is that hound pestering you?" She gave the hound another boot and Cat saw it disappear into the great hall after the others. Strange, he thought. The hounds usually do not acknowledge more than my presence. This one seems almost feline. She does not look like the others either. Smaller. Lighter color. Leaner. Yellow eyes. Cat's eyes. Strange.

Then he did not have time to think about the hound. The scullery maid had brought a saucer of fresh milk and some tidbits of meat. They were cutting the roasted haunch for the dinner table and she had sneaked a few scraps for Cat's supper.

After he had eaten and washed his whiskers, Cat made his way into the great hall where a fire burned fiercely on the large hearth. The sun was down and there was no light coming through the windows, but Cat leaped up on his favorite resting place anyway. Enough heat from the fire came across the room to keep him comfortable on the window ledge. He enjoyed curling on his pillow, paws tucked under his chest, watching the proceedings in the room from slitted eyes. No one noticed him there. He was as much a fixture as the window itself.

The warrior, who ruled under the woman, was speaking. "There is something abroad these nights that I do not like. Have you not felt it, Claire?"

"I feel the winter's approach. Nothing more."

"Perhaps you should light your herbal fires and consult your crystals. Something is abroad. I feel it. The hounds feel it. Something unnatural."

The woman laughed. "Unnatural? What seems unnatural to you, Ruger?"

"The game has all left the vicinity. The dogs feel it. They do not turn their noses after the harts because there are none to find. If I do not take a party out to find what is creating this disturbance, we may eat rabbit for the rest of the winter. It is not a prospect I relish."

"Nor I, my dear. I should have known it was your stomach which was disturbed. The weather is terrible right now. Allow me to consult my resources. Rest yourself and your men until the weather clears, and perhaps, by then I will be able to tell you what you are looking for."

He took her hand and kissed it lightly.

There were many people in the room; listening to the conversation between the master and mistress had kept most of them silent. When it was done, the chatter and laughter began again. Knights seeking ladies. Knights entertaining each other with lies of valorous deeds. Cat wondered what one of them would do if he actually saw a live dragon. His whiskers flattened against his cheeks in amusement.

A moist nose came over the window sill and touched his own nose. Cat opened his eyes and sat up quickly. *Oh*, he said, seeing the yellow-eyed hound looking up at him. *What do you want?*

That looks like a good place to watch without being noticed. Is there room enough for me?

Certainly not. The ledge is little wider than I am. In fact, Cat craned his neck and studied the hound's size, I doubt you could fit up here alone.

Too bad, the hound sighed and lay down below the window sill. *The hounds are over there by the fire scratching fleas. Eating bones I would not bother to bury. They stink, you know.*

I know, Cat murmured not quite sure if the hound meant the bones or the other hounds. After a long silence Cat said, *Why are you talking to me? Dogs never talk to me.*

Their loss, I expect. I don't know why. You seem like a sensible fellow. In my village dogs and cats were companions, not enemies. I do miss my home.

I thought you looked different from the others. Where is your home?

The hound sighed again. The village name was Timbaca, but I know that means nothing to you. It was a warm, sunny country and the game differed greatly from game here. I came over much water in more than one boat. It was a long journey. The master bought me at a fair. He called me a leopard dog and said I would be a good breeder. So far, I have not taken one of those idiots to mate. If I have my choice, I won't, either. Ever.

Cat, who had never seen more water than the stream which ran through the keep and who did not know what a boat was, found the hound's story interesting. A leopard hound. He had heard of leopards. They were giant cats with spots. Legends, really, like dragons; but he had heard the legends. No wonder the beast was different. If she were part leopard and part hound, no wonder she seemed brighter than the rest.

Since you are not native to our countryside, I don't suppose you noticed anything strange. The master said it was "unnatural." Have you noticed anything unnatural.

Yellow Eyes panted thoughtfully. *It is hard to say. Perhaps.*

Cat lay back down and tucked his paws.

Yellow Eyes said, *I've been here for several months. I'm familiar with most of the game the master hunts. While the other hounds were rabbit hunting, I cut a trail I recognized but not from around here. It reminded me of my home.*

A creature like yourself? Cat asked.

Yellow Eyes sat up to look into Cat's eyes. *Oh, no. We called it "the leaf-ear." The humans called them "tembo." Did I not know there are none here, I would have thought the track I found belongs to a leaf-ear.*

I do not know leaf-ear or tembo. Cat said. *Can you eat it?*

Not in ten years, Yellow Eyes panted, laughing. *The leaf-ears are huge. Tall as the beams in this room. Taller than the keep's gate. It is so tall and wide it could not pass through the Horse Door in the donjon.*

Cat's eyes widened. It was hard to imagine anything so large it could not pass through those tall, massive double doors. *An animal?* Cat questioned.

There were herds of them in my homeland, like herds of cattle or deer here. It has a distinctive paw print and its scent is unmistakable. At first I thought I was only wishing, but the track was clear, pad after pad. I was beginning to course it when the master called me back and lashed me for not following with the hounds.

He did not see the track?

It was a grassy flat. Humans seem neither to see nor scent as well as we do.

No, Cat agreed. They have many weaknesses. Those are two of the obvious ones.

Both of them were absorbed in conversation and did not notice that the woman, Claire, was coming their way. "Get out. Get away from my cat, you filthy hound." She struck at the dog and Yellow Eyes slunk away and hid herself in the pack near the fireplace.

The woman stroked Cat and murmured nonsense words to him, while he preened and purred under her touch. It was, he thought, a small price to pay for comfort. If only the woman considered his stomach as thoughtfully as she did that of White Cat. Him, she left to hunt for himself. Ah, well. He raised and rubbed his head against her.

"Oh, you are such a love," she said.

"Would you fondled me as warmly as you do that beast," Ruger's voice was brittle and cold. "Come, I have a gift for you."

"This cat is a favorite of mine. Do keep your hounds away from him." She gave Cat a last pat and put her hand on the man's arm, allowing him to lead her from the room.

Cat sank back onto the pillow and began to wash. The woman's hands smelled of stale grease and sour wine. Another failing of humans was that they seldom washed.

When he was clean enough, Cat leaped down, making his way around the edges of the room to the hearth near the pack of hounds. They were gnawing at the bones tossed from the table and gave him little more than a glance and a snarl. Yellow Eyes came close and Cat asked, *Do you know where the tower room is?*

Where the woman makes her spells?

Yes.

I know.

Meet me there when all is quiet. I want you to tell someone else about the beast that is larger than the Horse Doors.

Remember. I did not see it. What if I was mistaken about the track? I have no reason to believe there are any leaf-ears in this part of the world.

This one is wise in all things. She will know if it is wishing only, or a real thing. Cat looked around at the dogs to see that there were none paying attention to them before he stood and slowly strolled away.

He spent some time in the kitchen where it was warm and full of good smells. Cat allowed the house to quiet down before he made his way up to the tower room. The door was open a crack and he slipped in and looked around.

White Cat watched him from her fur covered bed, which she sometimes shared with the mistress. *Ho, Cat. What brings you up to the tower to see me? What scheme are you hatching now?*

He leaped up on the bed and greeted her with a lick. *You know perfectly well it has not been that long since I have been up here to see you. It seems to me that I brought a live field mouse for your entertainment and a snack. Was that a scheme?*

Her whiskers flattened against her cheeks and she gave him a lick. *You are right, of course. You know I have a suspicious nature.*

They talked of inconsequential things until Cat heard Yellow Eyes' toenails on the stone steps outside the room. She stuck her head in the door and White Cat sat up, every hair on end. *How dare you come in here? Be gone!*

Cat said, *Now, now. This is a new friend of mine who has a strange story to tell. The master feels there are unnatural forces working around the castle and this hound may have something to say about them. Will you listen?*

White Cat sat down, but her fur did not entirely smooth down. *Cat, you do make strange friends. Come in then, hound. Tell your tale.*

Yellow Eyes told again about the village to the south and about the great herds of leaf-ears there. She told about finding the track where none should have been. *Cat said you were wise. You would know whether this was a true thing or only a wish of my mind.* She sat down beside the bed and waited for White Cat to speak.

I am flattered by Cat's confidence. I cannot know, from what little you tell, whether or not this is a true thing. How would a leaf-ear come here? What do they do? Are they good for anything? Do men ride them, or plow them or use them for beasts of burden?

On, no. They are too fierce for that. I have never seen a tame one. They are wild and they break down the village walls, sometimes the very houses. Occasionally, one is killed. The meat is good to eat. That is the only use I know.

It seems unlikely then that anyone would bring one here by boat or by magic. What would be the purpose?

Could an enemy have brought one here to break down the castle walls? Cat asked.

There are easier ways to make war than with strange animals. It seems to me that you need more information. Dog, could you find the track again and, perhaps, follow it?

Yellow Eyes licked her front paws thoughtfully. I think so. The track seemed fresh, and the dampness of the night will make the scent stronger. If I go now, will the master be angry?

Cat said, If you go now, who will know? Are you afraid to go alone?

The dog sat up. No. I am faster than anything in these woods. I have nothing to fear except the master, and if I go now and return before dawn, he will not know.

Yellow Eyes trotted quickly to the door, looked back over her shoulder at the two cats, and then without another word, slipped out of their sight.

The White Cat asked, Will she really go?

I think so, Cat said. She seems different from most hounds. Braver.

They heard footsteps on the stairs and Cat jumped quickly from the bed and slipped under it to watch without being seen.

Claire came into the room. She cooed over White Cat for a minute or two and then went to the table where she worked her spells. She pulled a large stone bowl to the edge of the table and filled it with herbs from leather bags and wooden boxes. With a stone and flint, she struck a spark and breathed on it until a small flame set the dried weeds to flame. Aromatic smoke filled the room, turning its air to blue haze.

Cat watched while she pulled a white leather pouch from her sleeve. From it she took a red crystal the size of a hen's egg and held it to the light, turning it slowly to study its facets.

"Power," she said. "I feel your power. Where do you come from? What is your story? Such beauty! Such power! How could anyone trade you for a horse, even a good horse? They must not have known what they had."

The red crystal seemed to glow with inner fire. As she turned it, flashes of red light, bright as fresh blood, stabbed the dark corners of the room.

Cat drew back deeper into the darkness under the bed. He knew it was a spell, and he wished White Cat was under the bed with him so she could explain the process and, perhaps, tell him what has happening.

As the fire burned itself out, the woman put the crystal away and came over to the bed, which creaked as she lay down. Cat could hear her talking to White Cat. "How much of what you see do you understand, my pretty Puss? What could you tell me if you could talk? I wish I knew. There is so much mystery in your eyes. I know there is intelligence there as well. Could you tell me about the giant I see stalking about our castle? Perhaps it is a dragon. I have never seen one and I'm not eager to see one now, but there is something out there. It is from the east. The crystals tell me that much. Come here by magic so strong, I do not know if I can counter it. I wish I could talk to my Sisters to the south. They could tell me what to do. We must think, Puss. We must think."

The room grew silent. After awhile, Cat slipped out and down the stairs to wait by the door for Yellow Eyes' return.

The kitchen came to life early. Fires were lit. The morning meal was being distributed to the people of the castle as they made their way to the great hall. Cat wished someone would put one of those bowls under the table for him.

He was considering his own emptiness when Yellow Eyes dragged through the cat door, saw him and dropped down beside him, panting with weariness.

Well? Cat said, impatient at her silence.

Yellow Eyes said, *When I can make the climb, let's go to the tower. I don't want to tell it twice.*

Cat switched his tail irritably. After all, it was he, not White Cat, who had waited the long night in the cold, drafty hall for Yellow Eyes' return. *Quite all right, Cat said. I don't care to hear it twice. You'd best find yourself a good hiding place to rest. You look terrible. I'll go up now. Follow when you can.*

Cat stalked off, grumbling to himself. He did not even know if she found the track or saw the leaf-ear. She could have told him that much. He avoided the feet of people

coming down the stairs as he made his way up. People tended to become very angry when they clumsily stepped on an innocent cat moving on the stairs.

Outside the tower room, Cat waited until the mistress was no longer there before he nosed open the door.

White Cat was sitting on the work table, lapping at a bowl of mush. As Cat leaped onto the table, she moved over and indicated he was to share with her. She sat back and washed while he finished the bowl. It was better than he usually had, cream had been added and something to sweeten it. White Cat waited patiently until he finished eating and had time to groom himself.

Did the hound return? she asked.

She did, muddy and covered with burrs. She must have gone a long way because she was too tired to climb the stairs.

Did she find the beast?

She did not want to tell it twice, Cat said primly.

White Cat licked her paw and washed her ears. *She could have told you something. Unfeeling. Just like a dog.*

I suppose she can't help that. Did the woman tell you anything about her vision? Cat asked.

Nothing useful. She did seem frightened by the red crystal. White Cat sniffed the white leather bag. I didn't see anything unusual about it other than the color.

Do you ever see the visions?

I don't think so. Not the same thing she sees.

Cat looked at the white leather bag. He wished he could see the red crystal for himself; it had made such frightening flashes of red light in the firelight. Perhaps it was wise to leave it covered.

They heard the slow click of toenails on the stairs and Yellow Eyes slipped into the room. She looked better. The mud had dried and had been shaken off. Some of the burrs had been picked from her coat and there was a slight bulge in her lean belly which told Cat she had found something to eat.

Both cats jumped down from the table and made themselves comfortable on a braided rug facing Yellow Eyes. *Well?* Cat said again.

Did you find the leaf-ear? White Cat asked.

Yellow Eyes stretched out on her belly, paws before her neatly, facing the cats. *It was not easy. I found the track, but the rain had washed away more of the scent than I thought it would. She licked her paws alternately. The leaf-ear makes one step to my ten. I followed up the mountain and down into the next valley. In a small swale with a heavy canopy of trees, I saw a faint light, a fire. When I crept close, I saw a master and the beast. Strange, though. It was a leaf-ear all right. It smelled like a leaf-ear, but it did not quite look like the ones from my home. It is smaller, its horns are shorter, and its ears are smaller. It is friendly with the human and that is unlike the leaf-ears I know.*

White Cat was less interested in descriptions than in facts. *Could you communicate with it? Where did it come from? How did it get here? You did ask, didn't you?*

Better. The human called to me and invited me to share their fire. It is the first human I have known to communicate directly with me. Understand me, that is.

Cat hummed to himself. He remembered one such but did not want to interrupt Yellow Eyes' story so he stayed silent.

He is from a far eastern country sent here to seek a jewel of great price. It was stolen from his homeland and traded and sold many times before he traced it to this land. He has a green stone which is the companion to the red one which was stolen. The green stone glows when it is near its companion and he showed it to me. It is glowing now in its leather sack.

A white leather sack? White Cat asked.

Yellow Eyes looked at her in surprise. *How did you know?*

White Cat looked at Cat and closed her eyes. *I have my ways,* she said.

Cat looked away to hide his smile.

Does he think it is in the castle? White Cat asked.

He asked if I had seen or heard of such a stone. I have not, of course.

Of course, murmured White Cat.

When he learns where it is, how will he get it back? Cat asked.

He did not tell me, but he is weary of searching, and he has strong magic. I think he could take it by magic or, perhaps, he will use the leaf-ear to tear down the gates and come in and get it. It could, you know. Yellow Eyes stretched her eyes to make them rounder and nodded her head wisely. She had seen the leafears in action. She believed it could breach the castle walls easily. Certainly, it could crash the gate.

Suppose he got it back. What would he do to the who have it now? Cat asked. Would he reward them or punish them?

He didn't say. He did tell me that he understood my longing to see my homeland again. He feels the same way and would like to go home. I suspect he would take the stone and go.

How would he go? White Cat asked.

I don't know how he got here. I suspect magic. I suppose he would go home the same way he came.

A sensible answer to a needless question, Cat thought. He said, Friend, be not offended. White Cat and I need to discuss something outside your hearing. Rest yourself here until we return. He stood up and nudged White Cat.

She glared at him, but after an appropriate wait she stood and followed him into a small anteroom where, speaking softly, they could not be heard by the hound.

The mistress' new crystal is the red jewel the Easterner seeks, is it not? Cat asked.

I feel sure it is. What will happen if he does not get it back?

Cat nibbled his back toes and looked thoughtful. There is only one man and one leaf-ear. I tend to think our castle can defend itself. But we have seen powerful magic, you and I. If he works magic against us, there is no way to guess how much harm can befall the castle and all its inhabitants, including us.

You are becoming most wise, Cat. I agree with you. Perhaps we should return the jewel to this man. First, I would want to be sure it was truly his. How can we know?

Cat spat out a burr. Yellow Eyes seems sure there is a red jewel. We only suspect this is the same one. I see no way except to go to the Easterner and talk with him. We could carry the jewel with us but hide it before we reach his camp. If we are convinced it is his and he will leave peacefully if he has it, we could give it to him. I think it a small price to pay for peace.

It isn't your stone, White Cat said. And I am not going outside the castle. The way she emphasized the I, Cat knew she meant it. She had never been outside the castle walls and had no wish to go now.

What will the Mistress say when her new crystal disappears?

Explain that to the Easterner. He may offer a solution.

Good thinking. Let's tell Yellow Eyes and see what she thinks.

She thought the journey was too far to make again so soon, the stone was probably not the right one, the master would beat her severely if he found her gone too long, there was less danger from the Easterner than from the master. In all, Cat got the feeling she did not want to go again.

Would it make a difference if I go with you? Cat said finally, tired of the arguments.

Yellow Eyes thought for a bit. *It would be a good thing to have it settled. I cannot believe there is danger to the castle, but if I am wrong... She left the question open. All right. But not before tonight.*

The two cats agreed that it would be a good idea to go after the evening meal had been served. The master was not as likely to look for his hounds then. They were fortunate he had not left the castle this day.

Cat remained with White Cat most of the day, leaving only after he had shared the evening meal she was served.

Yellow Eyes was waiting at the cat door. *It's about time.*

Cat, who had hauled the white pouch with its crystal contents down the stairs in his mouth, stepped under a wide table and sat down in its shadow. *I got this thing down the stairs, but I cannot carry it through the forest. It's hard enough for me to travel by myself such long distances. Can you carry it?*

The hound moved under the table with Cat and picked the pouch up in his mouth. *It would be awkward. Look. It has long strings on it tied with a knot. Could you pull them up over my head if I can get my nose into the loop?*

Good idea. Here, I can hold the knot up while you get your nose through ones ...

Yellow Eyes worked with Cat until the loop was over her head. *Careful. Don't pull my ears off. There. It's a bit tight, but not uncomfortable. I don't think we can get it off though. Is it noticeable?*

Cat agreed that it was, indeed, noticeable. His whiskers flattened against his cheeks and his eyes sparkled. *Wait here until you hear a commotion in the great hall. Then slip outside and out of the gate. I will meet you there shortly.*

Yellow Eyes watched Cat swagger toward the great hall with his tail held high. In moments, he heard a dog yelp. A great uproar of dogs barking, chasing, fighting each other sent the kitchen help rushing to the hall to see what caused the ruckus. She slipped out the door as Cat had instructed and made her way through the shadows to the gate and out through the narrow slots at its base.

Cat arrived a few moments later, out of breath and all of his fur still on end. *You know the black male who thinks he is king of the pack? I slashed his tail end and hid under a table. He jumped the nearest dog. They fought all around the hall and the humans were running around and trying to quiet things down. Food spilled. Wine went all over the floor. It was a fine brawl.*

It sounded so. I can't stand that arrogant beast. Come. We'd best be off. It's a long way, but I'll go slowly.

Quite all right, Cat said. Go at your own pace. I'll keep up.

After quite a long way at a hard run, Cat had to call out to Yellow Eyes. *Ho. You are right. My legs are not as long as yours. Please slow down.*

The hound stopped and allowed Cat to catch up and rest. *Sorry. It is a long way.*

Yellow Eyes slowed and allowed Cat to set the pace. It was full dark and the moon was high in the sky when she said, *Shush, now. Just beyond this brook is where they were camped last night. Perhaps they have remained there because of the rain. I'll stay back in the shadows with the crystal while you go into the camp. I think he will greet you kindly.*

Does the leaf-ear like cats? Cat asked.

It did not seem to notice me. I doubt it will notice you either.

Good! Cat muttered. *I'm not sure I want to meet a creature as large as a castle gate.*

They saw the fire as they came up from the bed of the brook and made their way quietly into the brush nearby. They could see the man stirring a pot, which hung over the fire.

I wish it was a pot of fat field mice, Cat said.

I EAT NO MEAT. The man had caught Cat's remark, and he looked at the brush where they hid. I WILL SHARE WHAT I HAVE WITH YOU. COME TO ME.

Cat stepped out into the firelight with his tail held upright in a friendly gesture. He walked over to the man and sat down facing him. *How is it you understand me and can speak directly to my mind? Few humans can do that.*

IN MY CULTURE THERE ARE MANY WHO HAVE THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE WITH OUR FELLOW CREATURES. *The man held out a bowl, which he had filled from the pot over the fire. Light curls of steam rose from the stew and its fragrance was inviting.*

Cat smelled it politely and felt his mouth water. *Thank you. Let it cool a bit. Where is this miraculous place where humans have some respect for us?*

DO YOU KNOW THE OCEANS?

What are "oceans?" Are they the great waters my friend the hound crossed to come to this place? Did you come on a "boat?"

IF YOU DO NOT KNOW THE OCEANS, IT IS HARD TO DESCRIBE WHERE MY COUNTRY IS. DOES IT HELP TO SAY IT IS BEYOND WHERE THE SUN ARISES?

Cat curled his tail around his front paws. The fire felt very good on his back. *That tells me that it lies to the East and is very far away. Can the leaf-ear ride on a boat?*

MY COMPANION AND I CAME SOMETIMES BY BOAT AND SOMETIMES BY MORE MIRACULOUS MEANS. THE DOG TELLS ME THAT THERE IS MUCH MAGIC IN THIS LAND. COULD SHE NOT COME BACK?

His eyes fixed on the copse of brush where Yellow Eyes lay as he spoke and Cat suspected that he knew she was there. *Yes. She led me here. She will come in later. A Wise One has told me to ask you about the jewel you seek.*

I TOLD THE HOUND. IT IS A STONE OF POWER. SISTER TO THIS ONE. He took a white pouch from his pocket exactly like the one Yellow Eyes carried, spilling the green stone into his hand. It began at once to glow as if it had fire within. THEY CAME FROM A TEMPLE, A PLACE OF WORSHIP, IN MY HOMELAND. THE PRIESTS USED THEM TO CONTROL THE WEATHER CONDITIONS THERE. WITHOUT BOTH STONES, THEIR MAGIC IS EMPTY. OUR CROPS DIE FROM LACK OF RAIN. THE

PEOPLE GO HUNGRY. I WAS SENT TO SEEK THE LOST STONE AND RETURN IT TO ITS PROPER PLACE. CAN YOU HELP?

At what cost?

COST?

You are not here to punish those who took the stone?

I HAVE ALREADY DONE THAT. BUT THE STONE HAD BEEN PASSED INTO HANDS INNOCENT OF ITS THEFT. I FOLLOW TO TAKE IT BACK AND RESTORE IT.

I sense that you do magic.

YOU ARE PERCEPTIVE.

Cat lifted his right paw and licked the pads. Of course. *Why did you not take the stone by magic?*

IF YOU KNOW MAGIC, YOU KNOW THAT YOU CANNOT USE MAGIC AGAINST A STONE OF POWER WITHOUT DANGER OF LOSING ITS POWER ENTIRELY. I CANNOT RISK THAT. I MUST TAKE THE STONE BY HUMAN MEANS. TRADE, PERHAPS.

You mean no harm to the castle or its inhabitants?

NONE.

I believe you, Cat said. We brought the stone. We have heard that our master traded a horse for it at the fair. Our mistress has much magic. She took the stone out last night and it flashed light like blood around the room. She knows it is a power stone but does not know the use of it yet. She is going to be very angry when she finds it is missing. If we give it to you, we will displease our mistress.

MAY I SUGGEST A SOLUTION?

Please do. We would be glad to hear it. Cat called to Yellow Eyes who came out of the brush, tongue hanging, tail wagging. They sat down side by side. The man made no move to take the stone though the pouch hung in plain sight.

He reached back and pulled a large bag forward, rummaged in its contents and brought out a pouch that looked much like the other two except that it was brocaded in silver.

He poured its contents into his hand, another large red stone. This one lay glistening in the reflected firelight, but no flashes of crimson light lashed the area about them.

THIS STONE HAS POWER OF ITS OWN, BUT IT IS NOT A SISTER STONE TO THE EMERALD. IT IS CUT MUCH LIKE THE OTHER AND WEIGHTS ALMOST AS MUCH. DO YOU THINK SHE WOULD NOTICE THE DIFFERENCE?

The two animals looked at each other. Cat widened his eyes slightly. Looks the same to me. *She has only seen it a couple of times. I think it could pass. How about you? He looked at Yellow Eyes.*

I think so, too. I'm willing to trade. She stood and allowed him to take the pouch from around her neck. He patted her kindly. I AM NOT HERE TO PUNISH, BUT I WILL REWARD MOST GENEROUSLY. He took the stone from its pouch and the green and red fires from both stones made both Cat and Yellow Eyes lie down and cover their eyes. He put the stones back in pouches, but he put his stone into the brocaded pouch and the stone he was going to give them into the pouch the dog had carried. Before he slipped it back over her neck, he lengthened the strings so she could pull back out of them easily when they arrived home. I HOPE THIS WILL BE ALL RIGHT. I WOULD NOT LIKE FOR YOU TO SUFFER ON MY ACCOUNT. HOW MAY I REWARD YOU?

Cat switched his tail. *A cat needs nothing but a good meal every day, a dry place to sleep and a little respect. I have all of these already. You could reward me with a ride back to the castle on your beast. It is a long walk.*

A SIMPLE REQUEST WHICH WILL BE GRANTED. HOUND, WHAT MAY I DO FOR YOU?

Yellow Eyes looked at Cat sadly. *I hate to leave you, Cat. You are a good friend and I think we would have good times together, but I miss my home. I would like to go home more than any other thing.*

The man smiled. I KNOW THE FEELING. CAT, IF I TAKE BOTH OF YOU ON THE BACK OF MY BEAST AND RIDE YOU TO THE CASTLE, CAN YOU CARRY THE STONE BACK TO WHERE IT BELONGS?

Of course, Cat said.

THEN LET US GO. I AM AS ANXIOUS TO BE HOME AS THE HOUND IS. SO IS MY BEAST. REST HERE. EAT. I WILL PACK AND MAKE READY.

Cat would never forget the journey back through the woods to the castle. Small trees crashed down before them and every once in awhile the great beast lifted her long nose

and blew a trumpet call that threatened to shatter his eardrums. They rode in a little house trimmed in fine silks and cushioned in golden brocades. The beast moved in a swaying motion, making Cat dig in his claws to hold his place. The man held Yellow Eyes before him to keep her from falling. Cat was beginning to wish he had not helped the dog finish the bowl of stew the man had given him as they reached the edge of the woods in sight of the castle.

There is something I would like to ask for, but I don't know if it is possible, Cat said as they stopped within the woods.

ASK, the man said.

The master has said the game is gone from our forest. Is there something you could do to bring it back so we do not go hungry?

I DO NOT EAT MEAT, the man repeated, BUT , IF THAT IS WHAT YOU WISH, IT IS DONE. I HAVE TIED THE POUCH AROUND YOUR NECK. CAN YOU MAKE YOUR WAY FROM HERE?

Easily, Cat said. He leaped and landed on all four paws. He looked around to say good-bye and saw only the forest. Cat felt a chill go through him and his hair stood on end. He could see plainly the tracks of the leaf-ear, but there was no trace of the beast anywhere. Rat's Eyes, he said to himself, I have never seen magic like that.

The dawn was beginning to show on the eastern horizon as he slipped through the gate and into the cat door. The kitchen was busy, but on the stairs, few feet stirred. He made his way unseen to the tower room. The door stood partly open as it usually did. The mistress was walking about as she dressed, looking in drawers and under things, muttering to herself.

"I know I left it on the table. Now, where has it gone?"

Cat waited until her back was turned before he raced silently for the safety of the bed. White Cat saw him and, when she could, jumped off the bed and came under. *Did you do it? Was it his stone? Is he going to harm the castle?*

We found him. It was his stone. He is a kind man, who will harm no one. He is gone. Is she looking for the stone?

Yes, since last night. Where did he go?

I don't know. Vanished. He said he had magic so I suppose he took Yellow Eyes to her home and then went on to his homeland in the east.

Yellow Eyes is gone, too?

Poof. Gone. As soon as I jumped down from the leaf-ear, they all vanished.

Cat, you are so clever. You have saved the castle, sent the danger away and come back safely. If only we could find some way to satisfy her. There is no way to tell her what happened.

And no need to. The man thought of that. Here, pull this bag off my neck and push it over to the edge of the bed where it just shows under the coverlet. She will find it sooner or later and be happy. It is a stone much like the other but not the same. He had a green sister stone to the red. Together they make fire that makes you hide your eyes. I was glad to see it go. This is a much calmer jewel.

White Cat moved close to him, purring, and licked his ears. *Cat, you are truly a marvel.*

He had never been so sleepy in his life and this seemed as good a place as any to take a nap. I know, he said and closed his eyes. Tomorrow would take care of itself. He had had his adventure for today.