

My territory has been invaded. There is no other way to put it. Only a few months out of the continual shuffle from house to madhouse to school, and already, my home isn't my own again. Some of the stops weren't bad. The house with the people who looked like the mistress was comfortable, and quiet, with a marvelous wide window sill for sunning in the afternoons. But it was only a few weeks a year, when I wasn't being shoved into that blasted carrier for holiday trips with them. And when we were there, the mistress tended to pay more attention to the pleasant people and not nearly enough time lavishing me with the absolute, undivided affection and devotion I so richly deserve. Now they come here for occasional visits, but that's tolerable. I tend to sleep through them.

The unmitigated madhouse that was usually the next stop wasn't *too* bad, if you could find somewhere to get away from all the noise for an uninterrupted nap. The ghouls in the attic made that difficult. The family with the ginger fur was noisy enough on their own, especially the two who looked alike, as they had a penchant for exploding things, but they also had the annoying habit of fraternizing with people even noisier and more given to histrionics than they were. They seemed to invite more and more of them in every year. In the ramshackle house in the country or the ramshackle one covered in dust that made you sneeze and the curtains filled with doxies. Didn't seem to matter. If it wasn't the mistress and the one who had the temerity to question my dislike of his so-called pet rat fighting, it was the skinny black-haired one with the spectacles pitching a tantrum, or the shrieking thing behind the curtains giving them all what for. Not that I blamed it, whatever it was. Probably telling them all to bloody well pipe down so a feline could get some sleep around here. There wasn't even the fun of Padfoot and myself taking a midnight roam of the grounds to break the monotony. Something about 'cars', the mistress said, and she wouldn't so much as let me out when we were in the dusty house in town.

The castle wasn't so bad. At least there weren't enough cars about, whatever they were, to make the mistress worry. And there were worse places to be a cat than in a dorm full of usually affectionate girls cooing over you. Mrs. Norris managed the occasional visit, or I managed the occasional visit to her, whether Filch liked it or not. There were a million interesting smells, and acres of halls and grounds to roam over, in search of ground squirrels and mice, moles and birds. Pinning the odd fat sparrow or graying old chipmunk kept the ego up and the hunting instinct sharp, even when they ended up scampering off after a few halfhearted bats of the paw. I let them go because I just wasn't hungry. One thing held true wherever we were. I was not underfed.

Sadly there was only the one year of Padfoot as nighttime roaming companion. I missed him, but I could do without the... thing... rather like him, the one that called himself 'Scabbers'. He was here at the same time. If I could have gotten hold of him, I would not have been nearly as magnanimous as I was wont to be with the squirrels. When he was about, the instinct screamed for pinning, clawing, biting and breaking. Ripping to shreds. Just to stop the menace that

radiated off of him, which made my teeth and claws feel on edge, and my whiskers twitch. He made all the hair on the end of my tail bristle. Bad news, that... rat. Not any ordinary rat, mind. Just like Padfoot wasn't any ordinary dog.

Even without him, though, the castle was the best place to be, although a bit crowded. A cat needs a bit of personal space, you see. At least when he's not in a mood to call on a lady friend with an overly protective owner. And if there was anything hard to come by in the castle, it was personal space. Seemed as though you couldn't turn your head without your whiskers hitting a house-elf or look up without spotting a ghost or a portrait. You couldn't hide in a corner of the dormitory without some girl rousting you off her jumper because she needed it for class or wanting to put you in her lap, and you couldn't nap in the common room without a dozen ins and outs an hour, or some boy brushing you off the squashy chairs just after you had gotten your spot made. The halls were often teeming with tramping feet, just like the grounds. And heaven only knew what you were liable to run into in the forest. Late at night, when I managed to sneak out the portrait hole, I sometimes spotted a slender little tabby who always primly and promptly avoided me. I got the feeling there was something "other" about her, too, just like Padfoot. Something about her smell seemed familiar, what little of it carried through the air. She was no ordinary cat, and Mrs. Norris was surprisingly silent on the subject.

Personal space was definitely at a premium. A cat could hardly be a proper loner in the castle. So when we moved to the little flat, just the two of us, for once, and the mistress started calling it home, I was thrilled. Finally, a little territory all of my own. Small it might be, but I was the only cat in it, and more importantly, I had her attention all to myself. Well, not all to myself. She went out during the day, but who cared about the day? It meant uninterrupted naps that left me well rested for an evening of prowling or just surveying my kingdom from the warmed up spot on the sofa, beside her. Or better yet, from her lap, kneading and purring. The people from the other places dropped by occasionally, but they left soon enough, and they usually granted me a rewarding pat on the head, graciously stood still while I twined about their ankles, marking them with my scent as my adoring subjects, and took the rest of the visit, where I studiously ignored them, since they were beneath my notice, all in stride. In other words, they paid tribute to me as master of the house quite well, and as such, I was happy to let them spend an hour or two in my... our home, with their ankles unmolested by tooth and claw. It seemed to make the mistress happy, in any case.

But enough is enough. I was generous enough when the new one showed up at first, smelling a bit like the equipment shed back at the castle. Like broom polish, wood and leather. I tolerated him just like the rest. Until he started showing up every few evenings with such irritating regularity as to cut well into the time reserved for fixing my supper and scratching between my ears. The mistress is often spending time doling out *his* supper, instead, or eating out of mysterious

containers of “takeaway” that one of them drags in, whatever that is. When they aren’t going out, wherever it is they go, and neglecting me completely.

I have nearly had to give up the warmed up spot on the sofa in favor of the arm, instead, he’s in it so often. He even has the temerity to pick me up and put me out of it when I have beaten him to it, fair and square. The mistress always takes his side about it, scolding when I hiss and spit like any self-respecting cat would when someone isn’t playing by the rules. And he doesn’t even have the courtesy to wear something other than high boots so I can get at his ankles. That’s not even genuinely sporting. I don’t know why she even wants him there. Happiness is a contented cat snuggled in beside, isn’t it? What benefit is it, purring and cooing at one another and pressing mouths when the time could be better spent attending to me? Honestly. She’ll be scratching between *his* ears, next.

The hissing and spitting earns scolding. I can’t even begin to make a proper assault on the lower leg, and the few times I tried to draw blood when a hand ever so rudely scooped me up out of a near dead sleep on the sofa, I had to bear the terrible insult of being locked up in the bath for the duration of the evening. Fine. If you can’t bite them, ignore them, I always say. Whenever he comes by from now on, I shall hoist my tail in the air and pointedly walk away. He and the mistress shall be given the cold shoulder, whenever he comes by. I’ll take to sleeping on his cloak, instead. Let them pick the ginger hairs off of it instead of shoving me off the cushion. And if a bit of extra concentrated kneading with the claws happens to take its toll on the fabric and the fur, who are they to complain? Should have left me my spot on the sofa. She will surely come to her senses soon enough. What man could be half decent competition for Crookshanks?

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Blast it, the cold shoulder is *not* working. If anything, he is over here more often than ever, in what should be *my* spot on the sofa, and the mistress hardly seems to notice that I’m ignoring them when he’s here. She could at least have the decency to notice and acknowledge the snub. An apology would be nice. A treat or two or a bit of catnip to make it up to me wouldn’t go amiss, either. The only thing I’ve gained is a comfortable place to sleep and a bit of peace to sleep in. There’s a certain joy in sinking your claws into the fabric and yanking a heavy cloak off the hook in the coatroom, kneading it to your satisfaction, and flopping in it for a well earned rest. It’s thick and soft enough. The fur is comfortable and a shade exotic smelling, with a bit of a tang that seems foreign. The heavy winter one is even better, because it’s all fur.

The only other thing waging this campaign has earned is the guarantee that she comes to fetch his cloak for him when he takes his leave. Hardly deigns to give me a scolding over it. Mostly she fusses over the ginger fur I contribute, taking her wand to it until she’s satisfied it’s as clean as it’s going to get. The shedding

she bloody well notices. She doesn't even notice the spite. Even commented once that she thinks it's sweet, the way I'm always sleeping on his cloak! *Sweet?! It's a wonder a cat can muster any self respect, being called sweet like that, when he's channeling the full power of his cunning and deviousness and sneakiness and... and... Perhaps the fact that he has the good sense to spend the money for a decent cloak that stands up well to tooth and nail, and makes for rather luxurious bedding, I might add, has made this a fruitless exercise. It's certainly getting me nowhere in the attention department. Fair enough. If you can't get them to miss you when you give them the cold shoulder, kill them with kindness. Hard to ignore a cat when he's got his bottlebrush tail practically right up your nostrils...*

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That is completely... bloody well not fair. Not on at all. It is likely the most disgustingly not right thing ever in the history of the not at all right. It started out well enough. Every time he came over, I added on a bit more. For months, just the right addition each week or so. A surefooted little balancing beam act across the back of the sofa right behind them, with an "Oh, are you still here?" sort of air, a careless swipe or two of the tail that meander into personal space. Sorry, is that over your face or right in your ear? I hadn't noticed. Mind of its own, I'm afraid. A side of concentrated rooting around in a shoulder or two, batting some hair. Not too much. I still have my dignity, after all, and a cat my age can't go around acting like a green kitten with too much energy and not enough sense.

Sometimes I topped it off by doing a rather unconcerned, unaffected walk or jump down a shoulder and into a lap, making my nest for a kip and occasionally taking a smidgen of perverse pride in kneading extra hard, the claws going right through fabric and into a thigh, purring loudly and contentedly the whole while, making them jump. Not enough to earn me a scolding or an eviction, mind. Just a bit of affectionate violence, handed out in measure, like all good felines will. A good, solid dose of "Here I am. Right in the middle of things where I should be. Adore me. It's my due. But I don't care whether you do or not." Much.

My routine had been working out quite well. They had not only put up with it, but had even seemed vaguely pleased with each escalation, leaving me put, stroking me while I dozed to the drone of their voices, until he left and the mistress and I bedded down for the night. Until tonight. And I will be choked by a furball as big as my head if it wasn't the *mistress* that chucked me off his lap! Without so much as a by your leave or an apology! I will never understand people. All that fuss over something in a little velvet box with a hinge, and then yakking for hours after he left about how we're all going to be living together soon and something about a house. Grand. Just when I was starting to like him. A speck. I don't know what a wedding is, but I'm not liking the sound of it one bit. Anything that seems to be responsible for having me abruptly thrown off of a perfectly good lap at its mere mention can't be good. It can't be good at all. This house talk sounds intriguing,

but the wedding part makes my fur prickle.

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Weddings, whatever they are, are apparently followed by something else known as a honeymoon. As far as I can tell, the difference is that weddings mean you're in and out over and over again over a few weeks. Honeymoons mean you're out for a solid week and they send someone else to come by and feed you. Only to come back and promptly start boxing up everything in the flat. Including a cat minding his own business among the linens, if he's not careful. They have rooted us out of a perfectly good flat and taken up residence in a house that still smells of new paint and has several empty rooms. It seems somewhere between the wedding and the honeymoon, they've gone and made themselves mates, of sorts.

He's taken to bedding down with the mistress more than I do, these days, at any rate. I only get invited into their den and onto the bed for the night when he's gone, which isn't often, lately. They might both be amenable to my insinuating myself among them on the couch, but the bed seems to be right out. Something about privacy. Humans are so incredibly silly about their privacy. About being "alone". How on earth can you be alone when there are two of you? How can you be alone together? You can be alone or together, not both at once. And why would they want to be? If it weren't for the total lack of yowling, I would swear the two of them were in heat or something.

Fine. We're here, he's here, and he's not going away. Here's not so bad. The food is excellent and plentiful as always. There's a nice window seat. Catches the afternoon and morning sun. There is even a large back garden thoughtfully stocked with a few garden gnomes, plump birds, and fat, graying chipmunks for an afternoon's entertainment. Ringed by flower beds to lounge in. There is a very comfortable cat bed in the corner of the sitting room, near the couch. And at least they're paying proper attention to me, again, when they're not going on about privacy. They *have* thought of just about everything a cat could want.

But I refuse to call him the master. A cat has his pride to think of. And I was here *first*.

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Something isn't right. I can't quite put a paw on it, but something is just off. The mistress is making... noises... in the mornings. I would theorize it's hairballs, if it weren't for the laughably naked state of people. The master often comes in and fetches digestive biscuits and tea in the mornings, disappears back into their den for a while, feeds me, and then eats breakfast by himself. The mistress comes out of their den eventually, looking a bit pale, and we all go about our days as usual from there on out, but something is decidedly odd. I haven't heard any

mention of weddings or honeymoons, thank goodness, but there is most decidedly something hanging in the air. Some sort of anxiousness and expectation. Cats with a bit of Kneazle in them are terribly sensitive to these things, you know.

I've kept my ears perked up for any more mentions of weddings, or honeymoons, or even holidays, but not a syllable uttered about any of those things. Instead, the buzzword of the week seems to be "appointment". There was a great deal of speculative talk about acquiring one, a volley of Floo calls to track one down, and then a great deal of bustle about incorporating it into their schedules, followed by a large amount of nerves and anxiety about possibly forgetting it or missing it. The mistress gabbled on and on about it earlier tonight while doling out a brushing, much the same way she used to prattle nervously about exams back at the castle. Apparently this appointment requires an exam of some type as well. As usual she's on about the results of said exam, biting her lip at the mere mention of them. I still haven't the foggiest notion what about it should cause such a sensation in the house over it, but as long as this so-called appointment doesn't interfere with my status and the lifestyle to which I've become accustomed, let it come.

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I don't know why the mistress carried on about it so. Apparently the results of her test were positive. Like always. She needn't have worried, even if she didn't have her head buried in a book and piles of parchment clear into the wee hours for weeks before she went to take that first exam. Like the ones back at the castle, these exams seem to keep coming in fits and spurts, at irregular intervals. Possibly you have to take these exams in order to get one of these appointments, for they always seem to be mentioned in the same breath. Perhaps having appointments is like Apparating or owning dangerous animals, and there's a license required before they'll let you have one without supervision. They do keep anxiously speaking of keeping appointments, much the same way they talk of keeping owls. I certainly haven't seen any evidence of an appointment being brought into the house.

Not that I'm worried about being replaced. Oh, no. Nothing and no one could replace me, obviously. The mistress even said as much the other evening, while giving me a brushing. Not that it needed to be pointed out. It went without saying. But it's still nice to receive one's just due out loud now and again. The exams don't seem to have changed anything. We haven't abandoned the house for a return to the castle, there's still plenteous breakfast in the morning, mid-morning naps in the sun on the window seat, late afternoon amusement in the garden, just so the gnomes don't get too complacent, early evening supper, followed by quiet paying of tribute, should I allow it, sprawled in laps on squashy armchairs or the sofa. And midnight prowling while the rest of the house sleeps, save the owls, Dragomir and Athena, when they're in. Aside from the fact that the mistress

is feeling a bit lumpier of late when I take up her lap, life goes on much as it always has. The sharp smell of the fresh paint and the addition of new curtains in one of the empty rooms is hardly worth mentioning. Though they *do* make for excellent curtain climbing when no one is watching.

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If it weren't for the fact that this is a two lap household, I might think I were putting on weight. But the fact remains, clear and plain, that when I am on the master's lap, I have just as much room to stretch out as I always did. When curled up properly, I fit neatly and tidily, with a bit of room to spare on all sides. When sprawled in more casual fashion, the amount of feline that drapes over the curve of a thigh or the rise of a knee is exactly the amount of feline that draped when we first came to the house. No more, no less. In my experience back at the castle, laps certainly do not grow bigger without an accompanying change in size elsewhere, such as the hands or feet, or at least height. As I can measure myself against abandoned boots in the back entry, and height against the doors, I think I can safely say that the master is precisely the same size he was when we arrived, as am I.

In my experience, laps should also not shrink, but the mistress's lap appears to be doing just that, slowly but steadily growing smaller. At first, she was merely uncomfortably hilly when I tucked in a mite too close, and I chalked it up to poor posture and perhaps too much good food and not enough chasing of garden gnomes. But what was once a perfect fit started getting more and more tight. A shade more overhang this time. Front paws that wanted to hang a wee inch further off the lap itself later. And longer still after that, staying on started requiring a concerted effort, hunching a little tighter, clinging to knees and making sure the chin didn't droop too far and tip the entire works bottom over teakettle.

A cat dare not let his guard down while perched on a lap that way, for fear of a repeat performance of the calamity a few nights ago. A full day of beating back the dual chipmunk and garden gnome menace can take it out of a cat, and he can hardly be faulted for wanting to rest his eyes while relaxing and receiving his due. The warmth and softness of a lap and torso alone can make a body drowsy, but add in a marvelously executed body massage, a well oiled, thoroughly melodious, lulling purr, and a quiet evening, and it's guaranteed. It's hard enough to cling to an increasingly precarious perch when you're very nearly dreaming of mice. Throw in the treachery of a poorly timed, explosive hiccup that gives you a wholly unexpected and rather rude shove toward the edge of that precarious perch, and even the most graceful cat is sure to come tumbling down in a terribly ungraceful heap.

I realize that people can't be expected to exhibit the same precise, breathtaking bodily self-control and self-discipline we cats maintain at all times. Well, very

nearly all times. But it was still in bad form for the mistress to hiccup at such a critical juncture. It was in poorer form still to laugh. Both of them. As a cat has his image to think of, I stalked off and studiously ignored the two of them for a couple of evenings, to teach them a lesson. One simply does not laugh at a downed feline. One has the good grace to pretend it never happened and overlook the entire affair, to never even acknowledge that such a thing is possible. Particularly if the ever increasing projection of your middle is wholly to blame in the first place. When I returned, I made a decision to return only to the lap that still fit me, and to pointedly snub the shrinking lap in favor of the sofa cushion beside, when it's available.

You would scarcely think they had noticed, anyway. They seem to have taken minor leave of their senses of late. For some reason I have yet to fathom, they have taken up the curious practice of rubbing where her front bulges the worst. Not proper kneading, just rubbing and touching. Particularly when sitting. Sometimes even when I am right there. You would think they didn't have a perfectly good cat for petting. It's practically getting to the point that a cat can't get petted properly around here for competing with the mistress's middle. They sometimes sit for eons, touching and waiting for something to happen, it looks like. I haven't seen it do a single bloody interesting thing, unless you count shoving me rudely aside. Yet they sit about, hands on it for ages, and they sometimes make a fuss over something or other like it's done a perfectly wondrous trick. I don't get the appeal, personally. I have seen more excitement just watching the patterns of the sunlight through the drapes change against the windowsill. And she has always bulged at the front, though it used to be just smaller and higher. Even those bulges have gotten bigger, I notice.

Possibly the mistress has just suddenly decided she likes having her tummy rubbed. Which is such a pathetically and disappointingly canine-type thing to do. Only a drooling dog or a green puppy with no dignity whatsoever would think that's cute, to just offer yourself up in that fashion. Any self-respecting cat would be going at a hand attempting a tummy rubbing tooth and claw. It's a sign of weakness, showing your belly and letting someone at it that way. I would have figured the mistress for having a bit more spunk and fire than that, even when it is the master doing the rubbing. Still, I find people are funny about so many things. They bare their teeth to one another when they're pleased, hide them when they're not. They often insist on removing their own whiskers before they're long enough to be any use. And they are very nearly puppylike in their need to be overtly affectionate, rather than quietly dignified, with all the boisterousness and putting their mouths on each other all the time, and pawing at each other. I just try to stay well clear when they get too out of hand. It's one of the things you just have to put up with when living with people. But if the mistress's leg starts thumping in time while the master rubs, I am staying well clear of both laps for a while.

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Fair enough. A cat can be big enough to compromise even while he's too big for other things. I was content enough to settle for one lap and the occasional couch cushion beside the mistress. Even the wide sofa arm, now and again, when I was feeling generous and there were no other alternatives. It's startling enough to find your mistress's lap completely disappearing, but how was I to take finding that she's gotten in the habit of taking up the entire sofa all by herself in the evenings? She certainly never used to do that before her lap went missing. But every night this week, I come in from finishing my supper and the post-supper washing to find her sprawled out across the sofa cushions, swollen belly thrust toward the ceiling. Nary a speck of cushion left for me to perch on, and not much in the way of sofa arms, if a cat wants to be within easy petting range.

Not such a dilemma with a second lap on call, I grant you. You simply take up the lap on offer and get on with it. But day before yesterday the master went away again, and with no real alternatives, I spent the evening huddled up in my own bed. No great loss, as the mistress was sleeping anyway, and any sleeping other than your own is bound to interfere with petting. She seems to have taken my cue in regards to naps recently. A cat's philosophy is that a good kip is never wasted. Or perhaps hauling that bulge in her front around is harder work than it looks. She certainly does enough grunting when she's getting herself up and down these days. It did rather make up for the evening's petting shortfall that I was allowed into the wide, soft, spacious bed in their den when she finally made her way there. There's certainly nothing to complain about when that happens.

I even discovered in the middle of the night that the hump of her belly now makes for a decent perch in its own right when she's stretched out that way. It's definitely roomy as her lap ever was, if a bit more hilly, it's quite nearly as comfortable, and it's a "you can't possibly ignore me" spot. Just as good as a lap for high visibility, and easy petting access. When she's stretched out on the sofa and not sleeping, she's usually rubbing her middle anyway. I might as well take up the position and get in on the action. Besides, it seemed to have amused her mightily when I did it earlier this evening. And if a cat can't be generous enough to grant his mistress a bit of pleasure and amusement now and again, what's he really worth? Not much. It's the least you can do in return for such faithful service. My only real complaint is that this roost seems to move a great deal more than her lap ever did. Between the rhythmic rise and fall of it with her breath and whatever it may be that causes the little thumps and tremors, it doesn't make for very good sleeping. Far too unstable for a totally undisturbed nap. The excellent petting can't be argued with, however.

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The exercise room, with its wonderfully climbable curtains and the nearly faded tang of new paint, has been the subject of much activity, lately. I gather it may be because they're planning on putting something in there, and they're creating a

new den for it. The totally empty room first became new home to a large wooden box with a hinged lid, which I had never seen before. Not terribly unusual, as the empty rooms about the house were often used for temporary storage, especially for new pieces of furniture. The only slightly curious thing about this particular piece was the white background and the jumble of painted animals prancing about on it, tumbling, playing or sleeping in a heap with one another. And the occasional fairy flying through the scene. I had rather thought that the master and mistress might be keeping it for someone else for a while, since it didn't seem to match anything else in the house. None of the other furniture has a single puppy, kitten, or bunny on it.

In the following weeks, a few little bits of fluff with button eyes, just perfect for cat amusement, showed up, perched upon it. A small stuffed rabbit with what smelled like genuine rabbit fur. A miniscule bear with the same smell. A floppy calico horse. A soft, colorful ball with something that jangled inside. I had rather a good time with them until the mistress stashed them inside the box instead of on top of it. Then more furniture joined it. Those tall, boxy things they call "dressers" and a strangely half-sized thing with a flat top that they called a "changing table". I've yet to see it live up to its name, even in hours of staring at it.

And finally, a few days ago, the final clue that makes me think perhaps all these exams have paid off and they are, in fact, acquiring this appointment for good and bringing it home. They assembled what appears to be a cage in the room, right in front of the window with the very climbable curtains. Apparently appointments, while dangerous enough to merit a cage, are not very adept at climbing or leaping. The cage hasn't got a sign of a top on it. It certainly is more luxurious looking than the ones at the pet shop that I remember from my youth. Has a nice, cushy bottom and the whole side opens up, sliding downward for easy access. As they're currently leaving it open, I catch the occasional kip in there. As a matter of fact, I was doing just that, minding my own business when the madness in the living room spilled over into this one.

A veritable gaggle of women had come in early in the afternoon, bearing boxes and bags of various sizes, with crinkling paper and monstrous bows, making a big to-do over the mistress and gabbling at each other so noisily that it nearly sounded like the Owlery back at the castle, with all the raucous cooing and hooting. As the living room became a dangerous collection of feet and a trampling hazard in addition to an irritation to the eardrums, I took that as my cue to leave. I noticed that the master exercised the good sense to follow my lead at about the same time, disappearing in the direction of the small office of sorts, the only room really in use upstairs.

And a fine kip I was having, too, until the same gaggle came trooping into the room, just as noisy as they had been when entering the house. I opted to take my leave again and seek refuge in the office with the master. He's proven far more reliable and indispensable than I ever would have given him credit for in

the beginning. The value of a second lap in the house cannot be underestimated. And frankly, sometimes he understands far better than the mistress that a load of prattle isn't strictly necessary to get the point across, and that some silent time together can be just as valuable as talking something through a dozen times. He hasn't displayed the same need to bend my ears in private that she often does. When she gets nervy, especially. And she's been nervy a lot lately. Particularly before these exams. Instead, he gets even quieter and withdraws more. And a cat can respect that. The idea of a good silence. The need for some privacy to do your own thinking without someone else's yapping drowning it out.

Besides, he's seemed a bit nervous and on edge lately, far more than I can ever remember. And if there were ever a sure balm for nerves and tension, it's attending to a cat on your lap. Purring does not count as ear bending. Perhaps he's just worried about the ever increasing difficulty the mistress is having when extricating herself from the furniture. Her middle has gotten, though I wouldn't have believed it possible, even bigger and rounder of late. Or maybe he's worried about the pending arrival of this appointment. I think they've been discussing names for it, already. I have caught him out of their den a few of the last several nights, during the times when it's usually just myself and the owls stirring, simply standing in the doorway and looking at the cage in the other room. And all the twining about his ankles and treading on his bare feet that I could muster barely distracted him from it. I got a few half-hearted pats before he headed back to their den and that was it. One has to be thoroughly preoccupied to ignore a determined cat.

In the office, he was a shade more attentive. Seemed glad of the distraction, in fact, he was so eager to put aside the piece of parchment on the desk and the small book he had been skimming through with a fingertip. I gather the book has something to do with the names for the appointment, as whenever the master or the mistress have it out, they're making lists and testing the sounds of things aloud, as though experimenting with them. They did the same when they acquired the last owl, although I don't recall nearly as much list making or research going into the other decision.

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I take it the appointment has been delivered. I've yet to see it, but I have heard it doing a spirited piece of yowling. Strangely, it seems to be coming from their den, rather than the room with the cage, which is still empty. Or it would be more accurate to say the cage is still empty. Perhaps there's not nearly enough space in the room after the addition of all the things the roaming gaggle of women dropped off. For something over which there has been such an uproar, this entire affair seemed rather anticlimactic.

The mistress apparently came over all poorly soon after breakfast, so maybe she

simply wasn't feeling up to a big fuss. She shuffled about the kitchen for a while, pausing every few minutes to brace her back and suck in her breath. Instead of waiting for evening, she went in and stretched out across the sofa cushions. I kept her company, as she looked rather anxious about something. Her stroking was a bit distracted and nervous. Could be she was all worked up about the appointment's arrival. Soon after she took to the sofa, the master was Flooing someone called a midwife to come by for the delivery. I suppose he must have been all worked up about it, too, because he lifted her legs and took the end of the couch, putting her legs back down over his lap after he sat. They didn't move until the midwife came, with a sizeable satchel or case, presumably big enough to fit an appointment in.

After the midwife's arrival, there was some bustle. The master scooped me up off the mistress and hurried me over to the bed in the corner, albeit with something of an apologetic air. All three of them disappeared off down the hall into their den, the mistress making rather slow progress, even with assistance. The door remained firmly closed, and as the saying goes, curiosity may have killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back. However, all the lurking and lingering outside the door yielded little in the way of satisfying my curiosity about what was going on inside. Some muffled, unidentifiable noises, some of which might have been the mistress, and plenty of soothing, quiet talk, that was about all I was able to gather in the morning.

I was, unfortunately, always back in the living room on the few occasions when the door opened and the master stepped out temporarily, for water and ice, apparently. All I got were slightly less muffled, unidentifiable noises, some of which certainly were the mistress, though I have never once heard her make those noises before. Later in the afternoon, the noises got louder and more insistent, and there seemed to be some sense of urgency behind the closed door, a crackle in the air that made my fur stand on end and prickle, and some curious, new scents wafting under the crack beneath the door. Followed by a stock stillness that seemed to go on forever, echoing quiet in contrast to the former bustle. Until the yowling started, anyway.

Well after I had gotten tired of pricking my ears up and putting my nose to use outside the door, the midwife and the master emerged, and the midwife took her leave. I was fed early, and the master seemed awfully well pleased with something. Very nearly giddy. For him, at least. I admit to it being rather contagious and going to my head a bit like catnip. I gave in to a good old race through the kitchen and living room, for no particular reason, then had a bath nearby while the master made some Floo calls. The appointment has evidently been dubbed Aleksandar. I take it the appointment is a "he" as well. This fact, along with statistics such as size and weight were passed along with each call. I haven't much sense of inches and pounds, but judging from the hand gestures, the cage is ridiculously oversized. But perhaps it's just a baby.

The acceptance of the delivery of an appointment must be a tiring prospect, for the mistress didn't make an appearance the rest of the day and hasn't been seen all of today, either. The master retired quite early, too. Last night and tonight. Not that I blame him after the veritable parade of people in and out during the day today. And the appointment yowling a few times during the night. Perhaps they're only keeping it in their den until it's big enough to be left on its own.

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The mistress has had kittens. I marvel that I didn't see it before now. Perhaps I should revise that. The mistress has had herself a kitten. It's a pitifully small litter of one. Judging from the size of her before it came, I would have guessed a much more respectable number if I had known a litter in the offing was the cause of her lap disappearing. The two of them were not expecting the delivery of an appointment, but rather the production of a baby. A cat would very nearly be ashamed of so small a number of offspring in one go, but they seem terribly proud of it, nonetheless, and no one else seems disappointed, so perhaps litters of one aren't unusual in people. This is apparently what they've named Aleksandar, though they refer to it as "the baby" nearly as often. As things which get named have a habit of sticking around, I have no hopes that this will be a short term arrangement. The owls have yet to go anywhere.

Like most kittens... babies, rather... it's a fairly helpless little thing. His eyes are open, but not very often, and he has a strange milky scent. Something about him smells... there's no other way to describe it but "new". That curious, waffy newborn smell that everything newly minted has, that is not quite a smell, but more an impression. Not a sign of fur save a bit of dark down, but, then, people do tend to be laughably naked. I assume their offspring are no different.

Evidently he has weak limbs, for they carry him everywhere, and he doesn't make nearly the range of noises that the master and mistress make at one another. Though I admit he is an exceedingly advanced howler. It's quite keen and the volume can be positively unbelievable, given the size of the thing producing it and the lack of practice. It can be surprisingly ear-splitting in the middle of the night, before the mistress goes in and stays or the master goes and fetches him back to their den for a while. She's nursing him, I suppose. Speaking of noises, the master and mistress have added to the confusion of all the names in the house by insisting on referring to themselves and each other by yet another ridiculous and pointless title. At least I suppose it's a title and not another name. The other people in and out of the house still seem to be referring to them mostly as Viktor and Hermione. But now there's been the rather silly addition of Mama and Tate. Perhaps it was just the general naming frenzy taking hold.

From the few up close looks I've had, the tiny paws are most fascinating.

Shouldn't be much good for petting for a few weeks yet, until he's up and about on his own. At this point, the cage is still looking like complete overkill. Though the mistress's lap is making something of a reappearance, the overall lap situation has not improved a great deal, unless he's been put up for the first part of the night, already, inside the cage. Otherwise, he's almost sure to be in what rightfully ought to be my spot. Or near enough that they're more preoccupied with petting him than petting me. I do get a bit of the overage when I happen to be beside, though, or when I catch the right quiet moment after he's already been put up. So, while it hasn't improved, it hasn't exactly gotten worse, either. Strange that these babies seem to need so much petting, particularly after nursing. They don't even purr in response. Just a strange sort of cooing or squealing, rather like the owls.

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The baby's progress has been disappointingly slow. It's been absolute weeks now, and the master and mistress are still carrying him everywhere. I rather had hopes that as his eyes stayed open longer, he would pull himself together and manage to get about on his own. The most I've seen him do so far is roll over in the cage, raise his head up and peek out through the bars in my direction in a slightly wobbly, doddering sort of fashion. Even a newborn kitten with his eyes still closed would best that. Not that I was watching him, especially. I was simply in there for a change of scenery and the quiet. He seemed awfully proud of himself for having pulled it off for an audience, or thought it amusing, anyway, but I was unimpressed. I had a bath to be getting, instead of acting like a fool over it. Enough people are already fawning over him for doing so much as looking at you that it's quite enough to go to his head without me behaving in the same fashion.

Barely a sign of him getting any more independent or useful. Oh, he can roll over, and the mistress isn't the only one nursing him any more, or feeding him, in any case. Speaking of which, now I've truly seen it all. The master has a contraption rather like the water bottles for the owls that seems to hold milk. And thankfully Aleksandar has at least gotten a slightly more respectable head of hair, rather than the former, thin, fine down. But he's still not much to brag about. Hasn't even got any teeth, yet. No wonder the only things they allow him are the nursing, the bottle, and a completely useless thing they call a pacifier. He usually sucks on that only a very short while before forgetting it completely and letting it fall out. Not that I blame him. It probably tastes of nothing at all. It certainly smelled of nothing at all when it bounced to the floor. He'll be months and months being weaned at this rate. A kitten would be on proper food by now. Perhaps that accounts for the slow progress. A straight diet of milk alone can't be all that sustaining.

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Perhaps a cat should be careful what he wishes for. Otherwise he's sure to get it and probably rue the day he ever thought it in the first place. The baby has begun getting about on his own. Not proper walking, but crawling, at least. Or maybe more of an odd, bodgey scooting. Gets about quite fast at it when he wants to, especially when *you* don't want him to. I've had to step it on the double quick a few times to keep out of range of grabby little paws. He's popping his head up in the cage and squealing or chuckling most of the time when I nip into his den, when he's not napping, at least. Apparently I'm simply uproariously funny without even trying. It's enough to make a cat self-conscious, wondering what's so amusing. I appear to be particularly funny when having a bath and studiously ignoring him.

Well... not *too* studiously. One has to keep an eye on him now and again for safety's sake, especially since he's discovered that the fluffy little tufts of fur with the black button eyes that serve so well at being squeezed, chewed, and cushioning a plump cheek during a kip also fit between the bars. They can be launched at a velocity that has to be seen to be believed, given the rather lax, uncoordinated muscle control the baby has otherwise. And when one isn't expecting to be pummeled by a flying rabbit out of the blue, with truly startling effect.

A cat has to show some good sense, and so far, I've shown the good sense to stay at a safe distance when they let him down on the floor and out of the cage. He's deceptively fast, and I would rather he not confuse any of *my* furry bits with something that could or should be launched as far as possible for the fun of it or given a damp gumming. He seems to have a tendency to get grabby when anything interesting is within reach, and they mostly tolerate it. The mistress even puts up with him playing with and yanking at sodding great hunks of her hair. Perhaps she thinks she's got plenty to spare. Not that it's the only thing he grabs. Anything that isn't nailed down, he's got his chubby little fingers on or in. How the two of them can stand being poked and prodded, yanked and tugged at, and clung to all day, I'll never understand. It must be like owning a pet monkey.

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There was absolutely no call for it. No call for it... what... so... ever. None. A cat goes about, minding his own business, even after the floor is no longer safe as his own, and this is what he gets for his trouble. I've tried playing nice. Not just tried. I have *been* nice. Sickeningly nice. Nice above and beyond the call of duty, in fact. It's certainly not my fault that Aleksandar's balance still leaves nearly everything to be desired, and that the boy has a dreadfully tetchy temperament. I mean, a cat goes and gets curious enough to go poking his whiskers into the boy's chest while he's sitting there, playing, because they've practically let him slather himself in a rather alluring tomato sauce during supper, and accidentally tips him backwards, you would think the world had come to an end. It shouldn't have been reason enough for wailing and caterwauling worthy of a banshee.

Bad enough he has to pucker up like I've wounded him irreparably, but the boy has shown a few fine fits of temper, lately. When frustrated, especially. Perhaps he's as put out by his slow progress as I have been. And obviously being sniffed or tipped over by a cat, or perhaps it just being Thursday, was particularly frustrating, because he threw a right royal fit. Which, of course, brought the master in, like the house might be on fire. And considering what the boy *did*, maybe that's not completely without the realm of possibility when someone's lit his fuse.

Like usual, the master scooped him up and soothed him, never mind the cat and *his* possible trauma after being subjected to this ear-splitting ruckus, of course. Bit of jostling, petting and shushing generally do the trick, unless it's extreme circumstances, such as actual bruising or showing of blood, which might call for actively trying to prompt a giggle or giving up on that and popping a bottle in to stopper the noise until the boy decides to get over it. Therefore, it was completely unexpected when the master's eyes fell on me and he froze completely, squalling baby seemingly forgotten for a moment, mouth agape in silent surprise. Until he started laughing, at least.

Not that hearing the master laugh is totally unheard of, but rarely... scratch that... *never* in the entire time at the house or the apartment can I remember him being made downright helpless by it. Moved to the point of tears and doubling over, actually. So much so that it brought the mistress to see what on earth could be so comic. She then proceeded to fall about laughing herself. I failed to see what could possibly be the cause of that kind of high hilarity, so I decided to do what cats do, when all other options have been exhausted but it's still too noisy to have a kip, and have a wash. At which point I caught wind of what must be so terribly amusing. The fur on my front half, instead of being its usual attractive ginger color, was a startling and rather electric blue.

While trying to decide how one should deal with this kind of shock, I took a seat, wrapped my tail about myself, and was dealt the second astonishing blow of discovering my hindermost bits were an equally shocking bright pink. Lovely. So he's not a Squib. Not that they didn't come and set things to rights eventually, after a couple of hours, but they could have had the good grace not to laugh about it for a solid half hour before even starting to hunt me up. And to look a right smart harder for me after I took off and hid under their bed. Honestly, you would think it would be the first place one would look.

The two of them *did* apologize for it when they finally dragged me out against my will, clawing at the rug the entire way, and they gave me a few sardines as a peace offering, but on the whole, I would find it far more sincere if the two of them hadn't looked as though they were stifling laughs for at least a week every time they looked at me. And very poor stifling, at that. The boy at least has the good grace not to laugh at me behind my back. He does it directly to my face. I



take it the tipping incident is forgotten in his books. He's back to finding me mostly tremendously amusing, even with my usual good looks back intact. All the stern growling in the world doesn't seem to serve as a scolding when he's giggling like that. Still... he did offer to let me have a good chew on the furry bunny the other morning... so we have a truce. For now.

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It's about bloody well time. but the boy is finally up and toddling about, albeit with little more balance than before. It's a health risk to follow along behind too closely, for he has a distinct tendency to go from walking to sitting in abrupt fashion. The bottom might be well padded, but I still don't relish the thought of being sat upon with no warning. Or come to it, *with* a warning. Luckily, he tends to take this in stride, no pun intended, much better than the earlier misadventures with sitting or crawling. Or bumping into the furniture. And other frustrations. Actually, about the only thing that seems to prompt wailing these days is verifiable and truly dire bodily injury, or being tired and not wanting to have a kip. Which, if you ask me, is madness. Who doesn't like a good kip? He should be thanking his lucky stars he sleeps more than they do. It's a wonder they aren't perpetually cranky, with the little bit of sleep they take. You would think he were afraid of missing something.

He is, altogether, a much less weepy child than he used to be, rather more amiable all around. More given to long periods of studying things intently than he used to be, and definitely more independent. Thankfully, he's eating almost as good a variety of foods as the rest of the household, and he's a lot more generous about sharing it than they are. Intentionally and unintentionally. There's always a fairly good chance of finding a few choice morsels beneath his chair at the dining table, and now and again, I'm openly offered a tidbit of cereal or a cracker. Not, mind you, that I'm all that much on cereal or crackers. I eat it so as not to offend.

Aleksandar is also parroting some of the noises they make. Loudly and not too distinctly, but still, he's making an effort. He's still a bloody public nuisance with the throwing things he's supposed to be playing with, but I've learned his range and stay well out of it when he's in the cage. And the living room, as well. Someone really ought to teach that boy that rabbits are meant to be chased down and caught, not lobbed. He appears to have confused the thing for a flying disk, and me with a dog.

Come to think of it, I've tried teaching him the purpose. Well... not so much, but instinct dictates I have to pounce on the furry little thing bouncing across the floor, chase it down, and strangle it until there are no signs of life. Throwing the ball is fair enough play, and at least it jingles a warning first. And batting that with the paws is relatively amusing. It's just... sometimes, he still gets a bit close for comfort. Aside from the general threat to a cat's health, he's not so bad, I suppose. Otherwise, I find him a lot more tolerable than he used to be. And a

damned sight more interesting. He might be trained into a decent member of the household yet.

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Is bragging upon a verifiable point of pride still bragging? Of course not, it's not bragging if it's true, is it? I think I can be forgiven a bit of swagger when the boy says my name before he says theirs. Oh, I'll grant you, he's had their simple titles down for a long while, but as far as I can tell, he's never so much as attempted their proper names. And I'll even spot you that it still comes out vaguely mangled, more like "Coo-shanes" than "Crookshanks", but that's the mistress's fault for picking such an unholy mouthful of a name with a tongue-twisting cacophony of consecutive consonants in the first place.

Perhaps she wanted some company in the "unlikely and altogether too lengthy" names department. Or perhaps the boy just gets that from the master. He still pronounces the mistress's name in an altogether different way than anyone else does to this day. It's the same name, but different, somehow, when he says it. But it's simply the way he says her name. So, for the time being, "Coo-shanes" will simply be the way the boy says my name. It's not *wrong*. Just different.

Given the boy is even more parsimonious with words than the master, I'm glad of any attempt at all. Coaxing a word out of him on purpose is sometimes a five minute exercise. Possibly they should all try doing what I do a little more often. Shutting up and giving the boy a chance to slide a word in edgeways.

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Laps and hands are rather funny things. Every single one of them is different, just like the owners and their personal petting technique. The mistress was always one apt to cuddle, really. Grabbing you up and hugging you to her, and burying her face in your fur. Which is good for a cat's soul, but rather damaging to the ego and the reputation should one be spotted being the object of anything so twee as cuddling. Not nearly as much as she used to, mind, but she still gives in to the temptation now and again. Not that I blame her. How could one be expected to resist? When not cuddling, she's likely to opt for the ever popular light stroking. The master, on the other hand, tends toward the more vigorous massage approach, the type that starts with pinning your ears back and gives you a good jostling on the way down your spine. If there is one point that I have had to concede since the master joined the household, it is that two laps that are nothing like the same size can somehow both be a perfect fit.

The lap situation has reached something of an improvement. Though Aleksandar sometimes has fits of pique and restlessness in which he decides that the more desirable lap will always be the lap he is not currently in, resulting in a lot of being roused about after having gotten your nest made, we've come to a rather

equitable agreement of sorts that each of us can only occupy, at most, one lap at a time, and there are exactly enough laps to go around. All of us piling in the middle of the sofa seems to work best, with all laps in easy reach, and a bit of space left over on the cushions for all the bits and bobs that little people constantly strew about. The master and the mistress look content enough to be doing it. He's even joined in on earning his keep, or at least he thinks he is, following me around the back garden in the pursuit of squirrels or garden gnomes. I suspect if squirrels weren't half silly, they wouldn't start at all when he's about, unless they thought he might confuse them for the well worn piece of fluff that once resembled a bunny a great deal more than it does now. The garden gnomes are a bit smarter on that score. He's been an apt enough trainee that he deserves a bit of lap time in the evenings, though.

He's even developed a recent interest in petting and such. It began with an altogether too enthusiastic application of the mistress's old technique, squeezes about the shoulders and middle that were sometimes a mite too wholehearted to be encouraging to a cat's breathing. These old joints of mine are not quite as young as they used to be, I admit. Luckily, he's still rather too close to the ground to actually haul me up off my paws. Some of these embraces, to tell the truth, very nearly resulted in spontaneous hairball launchings. I usually made myself politely scarce for a while after, just to avoid being, literally, loved to death. But a few weeks of patient suffering, and the master and mistress admonishing that he should be more gentle, along with a slight demonstration of what, exactly, gentle is, resulted in rapid improvement. The boy has finally cottoned on to the idea that cat hugs should be administered with something less than bone crushing fervor.

I give them credit for striking a preemptive blow with the petting, by guiding little hands during some of the evenings on the couch, when I deign to sit still for it. Not that Aleksandar doesn't sometimes forget and get just a shade too percussive with his petting when there are no referees about, but grumbling a warning just at the back of the throat and stalking off for an hour's nap in some completely inaccessible corner when the petting gets too rough puts the message across in fairly short order.

Otherwise, we tend to get along perfectly. Particularly when there's food about, ready to be shared. The boy's charitably generous and sharing nature when it comes to noshes really can't be argued with. And I've discovered a rather curious thing. Though no amount of curling up, draping, hunching, or other clever feline space saving techniques could ever make me fit in Aleksandar's lap without more cat being off than on, somehow, it seems just the right size, too. A nicely padded little leg makes a fair enough chin rest when you're both on the floor, I find. And it has to get bigger, eventually. Besides, someone has to train him up to be a proper member of the household, and if I didn't do it, who would?

