

The Marble Cat



Seth Atwater Jr

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By Seth Atwater Jr

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*To those seeking their way in this world who are yet to find
it.*

And to anyone who loves cats.

Wizards make things. What that means exactly can differ quite a bit from wizard to wizard, but it is a universally defining trait of wizardhood to create. Some make spells or potions, twisting the very laws of nature to their own whims. Others make ripples in time, reading their patterns to predict the future, or even to change it. Some don't settle for such mundane parlor tricks, instead employing their vast power to shape entire worlds.

And still others are content with making a cozy house, an armchair, a cup of coffee, and a marble statuette of a cat.

The cat was small, about 3/4 the size of a real adult cat, if we're being generous. It sat up straight on its front paws as real cats tend to do, its head tilted ever so slightly to the left as if it were curiously examining you, trying to determine if you were friend or foe. It was rather light considering its size and material, but not so light that the wizard couldn't use it as an effective paperweight should

the need arise. Not that it ever did. Wizards who content themselves with a simple life rarely have use for paperwork. More often it just sat peacefully on his coffee table, watching him with its curious expression as he sat in his armchair, drinking his coffee and reading the morning papers.

Every morning at precisely 7:30 the wizard woke up, put on his slippers, and made his way to his familiar place in the living room, where a hot breakfast would already be waiting for him (there are benefits to being magical). He tended to start with the headlines, as he wanted to get the most unsavory part over with first. Next came the sports column. The wizard never watched sports, but he made a point of reading the scores every day. It brought him an indescribable sense of peace to know that such a small set of numbers could so accurately predict his neighbors' temperament. "What need have we for soothsayers?" he could be heard chuckling to himself. He

finished his mornings with the crossword puzzle, which he filled in with his special red pen. It wouldn't take him so long to finish if he used magic to cheat on the tricky words, but the wizard held himself to the very highest standard of honesty, so it wasn't until 12:45 that he was usually able to enjoy an elegant, refined lunch of hamburg steak, placed delicately between two buns.

After reading over the remainder of the papers he typically spent the rest of his afternoon thinking, a process so arduous he found it to be best tackled by sitting in his armchair and closing his eyes. Sometimes he would also emit a low rumbling noise from his nose. At times, such as a particular afternoon in August for example, this rumbling was so powerful that it seemed to shake the whole house, starting from its very foundation. It certainly shook the table, causing the marble cat to rock slightly.

On a particular day that the wizard was "rumbling" rather powerfully the marble cat stretched its back and

paced around the table. It didn't much enjoy being rocked, as the motion woke it from its own slumber and tickled at a fear that is common in all marble statues: the fear of falling over and having one's head broken off. It crawled to the edge of the table and leapt down softly to the floor, where it would be safe from the shaking. It began pacing restlessly. It clearly wasn't going to get any more sleep, not with everything vibrating like that. So it began to look for something to do.

The wizard's house didn't contain many things that are of interest to a cat. It was lightly furnished with exclusively his armchair, the table, and a set of stools that would be all together unsatisfying to sharpen one's claws on. It was completely free of mice or any other kind of pests that a cat might like to hunt, and all the food in the kitchen was inaccessible, trapped in horrid metal containers that were impossible to open for any being lacking a pair of thumbs. This was especially unfortunate on a day like this

day, when the cat was feeling particularly hungry. It sniffed the air, hoping to find something that might satisfy it.

Cats are extraordinary creatures. They can smell things that are much farther away than any human could, and once they detect a scent they have many unique skills that can be applied to tracking it down, no matter where it is coming from. For example, a cat's shoulders aren't attached rigidly to the rest of their bodies; they are connected only by muscle, granting them the ability to wiggle into any space they can fit their heads through. So when the marble cat smelled something coming from a direction the English language can't hope to properly describe it was a simple matter for it to squeeze through the tight space between the worlds and follow it.

The cat emerged onto an open street adjacent to an expanse of old fashioned wooden docks. Its whiskers twitched as it looked around, trying to locate the source of the smell. It wasn't, as one might naturally expect, coming

from the docks, where great towering herring buses blocked the view of the smaller local fishing boats that were attempting to squeeze their way between them and find space to dock in the harbor. Burly men ran about every which way, barking at each other like dogs as they carried large barrels of fish off of the enormous boats. The sailors — the cat assumed that most of them were sailors — went about their work in a manner that was simultaneously methodical and frantic. It was somewhat mesmerizing to watch. Considering all the excitement going on the cat felt it strange that not one of the men seemed to be enjoying his work.

On the opposite side of the road various stands were set up, stretching onward nearly as far as the eye could see. Vendors shouted at passersby, advertising their products. “Fresh fish! Straight from the harbor; caught just this morning! The best prices in the market! Sale on cod for today only! Get them while they’re still here!” The cat

found it all rather bothersome. Besides, the smell didn't seem to be coming from there either.

The street itself was nearly as busy as its surroundings. All sorts of people scurried back and forth at a determined gait that suggested they either were in a hurry to get somewhere, or merely wanted to look like they were. Most of the travelers appeared to either be coming or going from the market. Almost all held baskets of some kind, presumably for the purpose of carrying their purchases. They reminded the cat of mice scampering in and out of their nest. It felt a distinct rumbling in its stomach, not unlike the vibrations of the wizard's snores. It sniffed around for the smell that had attracted it to this world in the first place. It seemed to be coming from...

“Oy, whatcha tryin’ ta pull?” One of the sailors had turned around to face the street and was confronting a tall young man, in his early adulthood by the cat’s best estimation, with dark blonde hair and long ears that tapered

to a point at the ends. An elf then. He was wearing a light cloak that concealed most of his body from the eye, but not from the nose. He was definitely the source of the smell.

The cat crept closer, trying to get a peek into his basket without being detected.

“I-I-I’m so sorry, this is my first time being in, um, a place like this and I s-suppose I got a bit, er, distracted. I certainly had no intention to, um, to bump into you like that. I apologize.”

“Well watch where you’re going next time.” The sailor grunted. He turned again and went back to his work.

The elf sighed, placing a hand on his chest as if checking his heart to make sure it wasn’t racing too fast. He reached into his collar and withdrew a thin cord that was tied around his neck. He looked longingly at the object hanging at the end of it. The cat looked longingly too. It was exactly what it had been searching for: a tiny marble figure of a fish.

The cat's wizard was a kind man. As its creator he had every right and power to command it, to seize control of its every action so he could use it to spy on his enemies, hunt for rare potion ingredients, or the like. But he hadn't. Perhaps it was giving him too much credit to assume it was for any nobler purpose than that he was "perfectly content with his life the way it is, thank you very much," but whatever the reason he had only ever given the cat one command: don't let yourself be seen. Of course being a cat it cared little for anyone's commands, creator or not, and even less for what people thought of it, but at the very least it always tried to follow the spirit of the rule by not letting itself be seen in motion. After all, what trouble would it cause anyone to see a statuette of a cat simply sitting there and looking magnificently attractive? If anything they would likely consider it one of life's small blessings and then move on to the rest of the comparatively dull experiences of their day.

The point of bringing all of this up is, of course, to demonstrate how simple it would be for the cat to follow this young man until the opportunity arose for it to snatch his marble fish away from him. Which is just what it intended to do.

The elf stepped out of the road hurriedly onto the side where the market was, looking around as he did to make sure he didn't run into anyone else. He pulled a handkerchief from his coat and wiped his brow. He looked down at the marble fish around his neck, scrutinizing it as if he were appraising a fine jewel. Behind him a large woman wearing a very dirty apron scowled at him from under the awning of the market stall that he had inadvertently stopped in front of. The cat eyed her wares for a moment, but looking closer at the harsh look on her face it decided that trying to get away with some wouldn't be worth the risk. Besides, it had a more important target in mind.

“Are you planning on standing around all day like that or are you fixing to buy something?”

The elf jumped at the sound of the saleswoman’s voice. Evidently he hadn’t known that she was there, or he wasn’t expecting her to speak to him. He turned around, and as he did the woman’s face made a miraculous change. In less than a second her scowl was completely gone, replaced by a bright and welcoming smile. It wasn’t a perfect facade — the cat could still detect a hint of tired disdain in the corner of her eyes — but it was apparently enough to fool the elf, who lightened up and let some of the tension out of his muscles when he saw her expression. Typical of humanoids to be so undiscerning. If the cat didn’t find them to be so interesting it would most likely have never followed any aspect of the wizard’s rule in the first place. The fact was, it liked observing people. Maybe not so much as it liked tiny marble representations of

delectable sea life, but it was perhaps a close second. It waited to see what the elf would do.

“Um, yes, I would like to buy something.” He said, sounding much more confident than he had when confronting the sailor a moment before. “What varieties of fish do you have for sale?”

“I have only the best quality specimens of everything I carry.” she spoke enthusiastically despite the fact that she hadn’t actually answered the young man’s question. “All caught fresh from the dock this morning. I only buy from local fishing boats so I can ensure I get the freshest and healthiest catches. None of that being holed up in barrels for days on end like all the poor creatures they scoop up on those oversized buses.”

From the smell alone the cat could tell that this was not true. Her fish may have come from the smaller boats but they certainly weren’t as fresh as she claimed, at least

not all of them. But of course an elf couldn't be expected to be as perceptive as a cat, especially when it came to scents.

“That does sound nice.” He mused. “Can... Can I ask a strange question? I’m looking for a fish that matches the kind my necklace here is made after, but I can’t remember the name of it. It’s very important to me that I get the right kind. Would you mind looking at this to see if you have the sort I need?” He lifted the coarse cord from around his neck and handed the marble fish to the woman. The cat would have nabbed it and taken off right then and there, but it was afraid of being grabbed by her thick, calloused hands. Even with its great speed and agility it wasn't sure it could escape her strong grip.

She studied the charm for a moment, then her eyes lit up with that not quite sincere enthusiasm and she handed it back to him.

“Of course I have what you’re looking for!” She stepped toward a barrel and drew out a fish, holding it

proudly by the tail to display its whole length. It was about half the size of the cat, and smelled about two days old. Its scales were still bright and glistening, although that was as much the effect of the liquid it had been stored in as anything else. Regardless, there was no doubt it was one of her best wares.

“This silver herring is exactly what you need. The best taste of any herring you’ll find in the whole of the market it has, and it’s so fresh you could eat it raw. So what do you say? How many will you be needing now?”

The elf looked relieved to find his quarry so quickly. “About half a dozen should suffice.” He said, reaching for his coin purse. “Ah, you didn’t mention the price, did you?”

The woman chuckled heartily. “Don’t worry, you’ll get them for a fair price. Usually I sell catches of this caliber for high, but for a good man such as yourself I’ll lower it to just one guilder a piece.”

“One g—” He choked, his hand dropping from his purse and hanging dejectedly at his side. He looked at the fish with an expression of yearning, glancing between it and his necklace for nearly half a minute. The cat couldn’t claim to understand monetary exchanges, but judging by the young man’s reaction it could surmise that the price was more than he could afford.

Finally the elf sighed and spoke in a stuttering voice, much more akin to his previous encounter with the sailor. “I, uh, g-give me a chance to look at other stalls to com- um, compare prices. I’m so-sorry for the inconvenience.” He bowed quickly and half jogged away, putting the woman behind him before she had a chance to object.

“Surely someone is selling them for less.” he said, his voice sounding much less confident than his words.

The elf turned around, looking for another vendor whose wares looked promising. His flight from the burly

woman had led him deeper into the market, and now he and the cat were surrounded on all sides by the clamor of a great many voices. The cat was beginning to find it difficult to avoid the eyes of the many onlookers while it followed its quarry. Not too difficult, it was still a cat after all, but enough to be a mite irksome.

It was also becoming harder for the cat to hear what was going on around it. Sellers advertised their products while customers of all sorts, as well as fishermen from the docks, compared options and negotiated prices. The elf winced and put his hands over his long, delicate ears. The cat supposed that they must be quite sensitive — though not nearly as sensitive as a cat's of course — and the noise was likely causing him a great amount of discomfort.

The cat was getting tired of waiting around. Smelling the air, it located a promising stall. Moving quietly so as to avoid being spotted it pushed against the elf's leg, sending him stumbling in that direction, then

quickly hid itself in a shadowy corner. The elf glanced over his shoulder, his face filled with surprise, but the cat had already disappeared. The elf turned forward again and noticed the stall. Apparently deeming it as good a potential spot to find what he was looking for as any he took a deep breath and, gathering his courage, he stepped forward. The cat's maneuver was a success, as was expected. Now all it had to do was wait for the elf to get the fish he wanted so he would stop focussing so intently on the figure around his neck. As soon as he stopped worrying over it so much the cat would have an opening to strike.

The cat's subject stepped up to the booth and pulled out his small stone charm. The vendor, a dwarvish man whose nose barely reached over his side of his market stall, looked at it curiously.

“Eh?” the man grunted, peering over his large spectacles, a feat which required him to stand on the tips of

his toes. “I’m not lookin’ to buy anything, kid. And even if I were this trinket ain’t worth much.”

The elf looked startled. “What? Um, no, I meant to— What I was hoping was that you might have the kind of fish that this is. Silver herring I think? I’m afraid I’m not too familiar with ocean varieties. I come from Tyulma forest, so this is the first time I’ve even been near the ocean, actually.”

The cat disliked the gleam that appeared in the seller’s eyes when he heard this.

“Ah, of course! You’ve come to the right place, my friend. What I have here is exactly what you’re looking for.”

He motioned to one of the fish on display. The cat saw the young man’s shoulders sink. He may not have had the intelligence of a feline, but he at least seemed to be able to tell that this fish was not the same as the one the woman had shown him.

“I don’t carry silver herring, but that charm of yours isn’t one either. It looks to me to be one of these: pegasus cod, so called because of the length of their fins. These here are of genuine quality. Fresh caught, too. You won’t get them better anywhere else.”

“Are you sure that’s the one?”

“Sure as winged pigs fly. What reason would I have to deceive you?”

The elf turned around and shuffled away, ignoring the insistent cries of the bespectacled dwarf saying that he’d sell the cod for a large discount. The cat purred impatiently. How much longer would it have to follow this troubled customer? Was it really so hard for all these people to show a little human decency and be upfront about their wares?

An old fisherman hobbled down the other side of the way. At least the cat guessed he was a fisherman. It was hard to tell in this place where *everyone* smelled of fish.

Nevertheless, it was the particular nuances of his salty scent that gave it away. It was fresh, like the spray of the ocean, unlike the sedentary, almost chemical saline smell of the fish in the market and the people who sold them. He saw the elf standing dejectedly and hesitated in his already slow gait. He raised an eyebrow and seemed to consider something for a moment before approaching the despondent young man.

“You doing alright, son? You don’t look well.”

“I— Oh. I’m fine, sailor.” He looked down at the man addressing him. Elves don’t have an exceptional sense of smell so the cat was unsure how he recognized it but he seemed to notice that the speaker was a man of the sea. Perhaps it had something to do with the old net he had slung over his shoulder. Or his ragged navy blue coat. The cat had no idea how humanoids identified each other. Regardless, both the elf and his hidden observer knew this

could be an opportunity to figure out once and for all what kind of fish was represented by the figure on his necklace.

“You, ah, wouldn’t happen to know how to tell the difference between silver herring and pegasus cod, would you?”

“Course I can! Any fisherman worth his mettle can say at least that!”

The elf perked up again, his eyes widened hopefully. “That’s a relief. What does this look like to you?”

He held out the marble fish and the fisherman examined it closely, one eye shut and the other fixed squarely on the tiny figure. After a minute he reeled back and gave a zealous guffaw.

“Ha! See, your problem is that this little knickknack is neither one. It’s clear as day to my old eyes; this is definitely a sharpscaled haddock. In fact, I happen to have some back at my boat if you—”

“Nevermind, I’m not interested.” the elf said, resuming his downcast posture. “...You wouldn’t happen to know a good place to get a drink around here, would you?”

* * *

The Crimson Crown was close enough to the market that the cat could still hear the raucous chatter of shoppers passing by, but fortunately its walls were thick enough to muffle the sound to the point that one could almost ignore it. Almost. Upon entering the establishment the elf went directly to the bar and sat down, taking no time to look around at the weathered interior walls of the building that were decorated with impressive paintings of sailors battling the waves during violent storms and harpooners locked in deadly struggles against whales and sea dragons, or to notice the patrons occupying the Crimson Crown, many of whom were teetering around in various degrees of drunkenness, and almost all of whom seemed to be much more jovial than the beleaguered young forest-

dweller. The cat followed him and sat near the end of the bar, assuming an innocent pose and staying so still an onlooker would think it was merely a statue. Which it was.

Behind the counter a *very* tall man — the cat guessed he may have been a giant — was vigorously mixing drinks for two other customers. They were discussing something about women and... sleeping? The cat found their conversation to be rather dull, but they were laughing near uncontrollably, and at a couple of their louder remarks the bartender roared along with them. Once he had served them the drinks they were waiting for he turned to the elf and quickly looked him over.

"What can I get for you, sir?" The bartender asked. His voice was loud, but retained a level of politeness the cat deemed appropriate for the situation.

The elf rubbed his temples, then glanced up. "Do you have salamander whiskey?"
"Absolutely!"

“Then I’ll have that.”

The bartender started whistling a jaunty, off key sailor’s song while he prepared the drink. A moment later he placed it on the counter in front of the elf. The young man picked up the glass and started shifting it back and forth, absently watching the ice swirl around in a slow circle.

"Going through a hard time, are we?" The bartender asked. "Let me guess, it has something to do with a lady, yes?"

"...Well, yes, but—"

"See, I know my business, and I happen to be in the business of knowing about people. So, what exactly is your trouble?"

The elf looked at the bartender uncertainly. He slowly pulled his necklace out from inside his shirt and showed the large man the charm at end of it.

"I'm looking for whatever kind of fish this is. I got it from—"

"Hold it there, let me get a closer look at that!" The bartender suddenly leaned in close and grabbed the necklace, making the person it was attached to look very uncomfortable. The cat almost hissed. That stone fish was its prey. The giant turned it over in his large hands and examined it with surprising delicacy. "The craftsmanship on this little trinket is incredible! Where'd you get it?"

"Well, like I was saying, it was given to me because—"

"Oi, Henry! Come over here!" The bartender suddenly shouted. The elf covered his ears and gritted his teeth.

"I've got a pal who knows things about pieces like this. I'm gonna have him come take a closer look at it."

"Um, okay, but—"

From a dark corner of the room a short, weaselly man hobbled over to the counter and sat down next to the elf. His face was fixed in a scowl, though it appeared to be more of an unfortunate resting mien than one carrying any form of malice. The bartender handed him the charm — which the elf was still wearing — and he pulled a viewing glass from his pocket and used it to scrutinize every part of the marble fish.

It was a painfully long process.

"Hm..." The man called Henry grunted. "It is impressively detailed, but it's definitely replicable. Is it an original?"

The bartender scratched his head. "I dunno, let me ask the owner over here. Hey, is this little thing an original?"

"Well, yes, yes it is. See—"

"Perfect! You hear that, Henry?"

"Yes, I did. Well, considering its status as an original piece, I'd say it's worth about five guilders."

"You hear that, lad? What'ya say?"

"Huh?" The cat wasn't sure how much five guilders were worth, but based on the elf's shocked and bewildered expression it imagined it wasn't a small sum. Or he simply was too surprised by the bravado of the bartender and his associate to understand what was going on in the first place. Given a moment of contemplation the cat decided that was the more likely option.

"Is the price not enough for ya? I'd be happy to raise it to six."

"Six...! E-er, if I may ask, what exactly do you want it for?"

The bartender smiled widely, and there was that same gleam in his eye as the man from before. The cat was beginning to understand why it disliked that expression so much.

"I want to mass produce it! I'm sure you know how big a deal the market here is, since you are here after all. You must have heard of it from somewhere, just like everyone else out and about there on the streets. People come from far and wide, some of them just to get a look at the place. Surely many of them would like some kind of trinket to remember it by. That's where we come in! We'll make tons of copies of your little fishy friend here and sell them at the bar. It's a genius marketing strategy! Been planning on doing something like it for a while but I never had the inspiration for what we could sell. Until now! So what do you say?"

"You want it to... make money?"

"Course! That's all anyone working around here wants."

The elf stood up, yanking the necklace from the hands of the man called Henry. "I'm beginning to see that. Thank you for the drink. I'll be leaving now."

"But wait, you didn't even drink it! Hold on, pal, surely we can talk about this? What if I paid you twice as much?"

The cat was sure the elf could hear the man's plea, but he reacted as if he didn't, continuing his brisk stride toward the door and back out into the street as if it wasn't worth even as much trouble as brushing a fly away from his face. And for the better. The cat didn't like the feeling it got from the men in that place, and besides that they all smelled of liquor.

Once he had gotten far enough that the Crimson Crown was no longer in sight the elf stopped where he was standing. He stood silently, head raised toward the sun, which was just beginning to set, and hands pressed into his sides. He was trembling, whether from anger or grief the cat couldn't tell. A tear welled up in his eye. The cat felt a desire to rub itself against his leg and comfort him. But revealing oneself was the surest way to lose one's quarry,

and it was still on the hunt. The marble fish wasn't currently visible, but the cat knew it was there, pressed against the young man's chest above his heart. So it waited.

The street they were on was less busy than most in the market area, but there were still a few people milling about. Several of them glanced concernedly at the elf as they passed, but none stopped to inquire what was wrong. No doubt they were all busy trying to get somewhere much louder and more chaotic than this. And more exciting for what it was worth, which wasn't much.

Once standing in one place had apparently grown tiresome, the elf leaned back against a nearby market stall and sighed.

“What seems to be troubling you, my dear?” An elderly woman stepped out from behind the stall and addressed the elf. The way she spoke was kind, and her eyes didn't carry the same disingenuous look the

marketeers they had previously encountered had. Upon hearing her voice he instantly stood up straight.

“Agh! Oh, I, uh, I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there. I thought this stall was closed, and I just—”

“No need to worry. I was just taking down my wares anyway. It’s been a long day, and these old bones can’t take any more standing around.”

The elf looked like he wanted to respond, but he said nothing.

“So then, there’s obviously something on your mind, and I’m a good listener. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

“I-I just...” As the elf started speaking his tears that had been gathering began to fall. “She, my wife, she wants... a fish from the town where she grew up. It’s all she’s been talking about since we found out that she was... and I tried my best to find one near us, but they only come from the ocean. She has a hard time making herself eat

anything else right now, so I thought... but I've never left Tyulma forest once in my whole life, and she doesn't remember the name of it, so all I have to go on is this necklace she carved." At this he withdrew the necklace and showed it to the woman. "I've been all over the market, but I can't figure it out... and I just... she's been really sick, and I know that's normal, but I wanted to... I just wanted to..."

He fell to his knees and wept. The old woman put a hand on his shoulder.

"Dry your eyes young man. I haven't finished storing my wares, it's not too late to see if I have the one you're looking for."

The elf sniffed. "How will I know?"
"You won't if you never try." The woman smiled at him. He hesitated for another brief moment, but then he stood, nodded slowly, and walked around to the front of the stall. His hands moved over each of the varieties as he

examined them individually. He had a hint of hope in his expression, but the more he looked the more that small spark flickered. Finally he sighed and looked back up at the old woman.

“I can’t tell them apart.”

“Here, show me that charm again. I might just be able to help you.” The elf lifted the necklace over his head and handed it to the woman. She looked at it quizzically. She seemed to be in deep thought about something, as if she was somehow considering the deep philosophical implications of a small fish shaped rock. Then it happened.

Her eyes gleamed a familiar gleam.

The cat was furious. How was it that every single person in this godforsaken harbor was so determined to make a profit at someone else’s expense? Did they not realize they were keeping a poor, tired creature from getting the one thing it was here for? It was seeming less and less likely that the cat would ever feel that cold marble

delicacy between its teeth, and that was something it could not tolerate. It hoped the wizard didn't mind too terribly that it was about to break the one rule he had ever given it.

The woman jumped back and screamed as the marble cat jumped up onto her stall and began pacing back and forth, examining each of the fish itself. The elf's mouth hung open and he stood frozen, apparently unable to process the cat's majesty.

“What is this witchcraft? Are you doing that, young man?”

“M-me? No, I've never seen anything like it before. What is it doing?”

The cat was, in fact, trying to identify the fish the young man was looking for, though it was proving to be harder than it had expected, seeing as real fish and marble representations of them don't have quite the same scent. Nevertheless, it was a cat, and if cats know anything — which of course they do — it's what prey looks like.

Within a minute it had identified the correct specimen and pushed it emphatically toward the elf with its nose. It looked up at him, hoping he would understand.

“Are you trying to give that to me? It belongs to this kind woman here, I can’t just— wait, is that...?” He turned quickly to the old woman. “Could I please have my necklace back?”

She fidgeted in an agitated manner, but she relinquished the necklace. The elf held it near the fish, looking back and forth between the two rapidly. His eyes lit up with excitement and he grinned. It almost seemed as if he was about to start crying again.

“This is it! This is the one! All this time searching and all I needed was a— ah, whatever this creature is to find it for me! How much for six of these?”

The woman sighed, but then she smiled a slightly bitter, but still genuine, smile. “That’ll be twelve stuivers.”

“That’s half of what I would have paid for one fish at the first stall I went to!” The elf said, sounding astonished.

“Believe me, I know.” The elderly fish-seller responded curtly.

The elf looked bewildered. “What do you mean?”

“So are you going to pay for them or not?”

“Oh yes! I’m so sorry!”

After making his purchase the elf helped the saleswoman load up her remaining goods on her cart and she went on her way. The sun had dipped part way past the horizon, bathing the market in warm, golden light. By this time the other vendors were all on their way home, if they were not already there, and as a result their customers had all left as well. The only living creatures anywhere in sight were the young elf, who was now whistling a cheerful tune, and the marble cat.

“Thank you so much for your help.” The elf said, leaning down to pet the cat on the head. “Is there anything I can do for you in return?”

The cat stared at the charm that was hanging around the elf’s neck, now in full view rather than tucked into his shirt. He followed its eyes, and his widened in realization when they reached the target of the cat’s gaze.

“Oh, I see! That makes sense, you are a marble cat after all.” He chuckled as if he had just told a great joke. “Now that I have what I was looking for I don’t need this anymore, so you may as well have it. Take good care of it for me, alright?” The elf removed the necklace from himself and placed it gently around the cat’s neck. The moment he did the cat grabbed the charm with its mouth and bolted around the corner. It sought for an adequate place in its surroundings to squeeze back into its own world. Once it found one it stepped through, leaving the fish market behind, perhaps forever.

The wizard's house was quiet. The cat walked back into the sitting room to find its creator still sitting in his chair, eyes closed tightly. He was no longer snoring though, so the cat decided it would be fine for it to take its place on the coffee table. It climbed up the leg of the table and sat down, back legs lax and front legs straight in the same position it always assumed when it was sitting still. It cocked its head very slightly to the side, fish still grasped between its teeth. Then it froze, drifting peacefully into a sleep of its own.

The wizard opened his eyes and sat up. He reached out to the cat and took the fish from its mouth, turning it over and examining the beautiful craftsmanship. He could tell its making had been a labor of love. He set it down and looked at the cat. Then he smiled.

“Did you have fun today?”

Author's Note

I'm more of a dog person than a cat person. I recognize that starting my author's note for a story like this with that line could be viewed in poor taste, so rest assured, I like cats too. Cats and dogs have very different qualities, and I don't personally find them very comparable. They are also useful for different purposes. On a day when I want to be tackled by a loving companion as soon as I enter the door, I would probably prefer a dog (a very energetic wife might do in a pinch). But after a long day of work, when I just want to relax and read a book, I would much rather find myself in the company of a cat.

There is a long tradition of clever cat protagonists in fiction, so it is difficult to trace the idea back to any kind of origin. My story gets its most direct roots from works such as the Japanese classic *I Am a Cat* by Natsume Souseki and *The Cat Who Wished to Be a Man* by my favorite fantasy

author, Lloyd Alexander. There is a notable difference between those cats and mine though. The marble cat does not think. That is the rule I have set for myself, and I try to be as consistent with as possible. My cat observes, acts, and feels, but never will it be described thinking. If the idea of a cat not having thoughts in the same way a human does offends you, think of it as a quirk of the marble cat's enchanted origin.

The one other inspiration for my cat came from a desire to have a character who cameos in all of my full-length novels. I enjoy the idea of my fans undergoing a scavenger hunt to find all the hidden (or not so hidden) mentions of the marble cat in each of the books I publish. The idea to make it a cat specifically was the result of my learning about cat physiology from my feline-loving sister. When I found out that a cat's unique shoulder construction allows them to fit into any space they can get their head into, it brought to mind a short story retelling of the fairy

tale Rumpelstiltskin by Vivian Vande Velde, in which the titular character is an extradimensional being who travels between worlds by essentially slipping through the cracks in-between. Why couldn't a clever cat do the same thing?

And so, my enchanted cat was born.

I'd like to thank my sister for her knowledge of cats, and all my family for reading and enjoying my stories. Just recently I was reading aloud a novel I am currently working on to my youngest brother and we reached the point in the story where the marble cat made its surprise appearance. He was so excited I had to stop reading for a minute to allow him to let it out. It's reactions like his that make me feel like all the time and effort that I've dedicated to my writing is worth it.

I'd also like to thank any future fans who read this story and begin to look forward to seeing the marble cat appear in my other works. I may be more of a dog person, but I hope my cat makes you happy.