

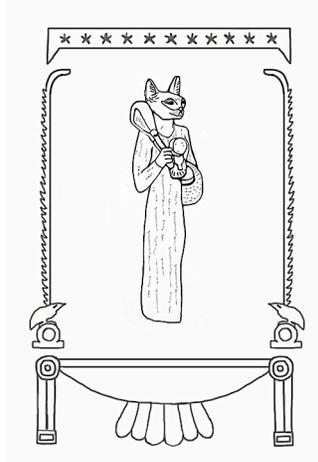
*A Cat Out of Egypt*

*The Prequel to Yeshua's Cat*

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## *Prologue*



*I* am Miw: “Cat,” if you are a human who speaks the language of Egypt. For others it is just a name, or perhaps the meaningless cry of one of the smaller cousins of the great lion. Among my own people I am called Daughter of Fire.

Into every generation of humans a few are born who can understand the speech of animals. This gift is stronger in some than in others. Similarly, among animal kind some are born with an extraordinary ability to communicate with these rare humans. Were it not so, those who run upon four feet and soar in the sky on wings might already have vanished from the earth. Humans understand little of the Great Balance.

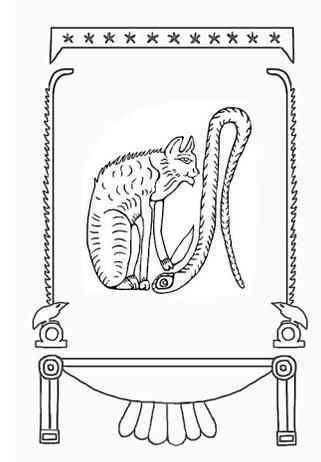
I am such a cat. Perhaps my understanding was deepened by my contact with the child Yeshua ben Yosef, but it is hard for me to judge. Cats don’t spend their lives in self-reflection as humans often do.

I was born within the precincts of the Great Temple of Bubastis, built by humans to honor their goddess Bast, she of human body and cat’s head. My mother was the one humans call the Cat Who Is Bast, a cat honored in the temple as one in whom the goddess dwells, although to the temple cats she was merely Mother and Grandmother.

Being a cat, I never bothered with the ways of humans more than necessary—that is, until they were forced upon me. Now I know little else, for I have come to a place where few cats dwell. Many seasons have turned since my

early days in the temple. I grow old. So I speak these words to a human friend before I sink into the Silence and wake to the light no more. Everything I once loved has disappeared, and worlds I never dreamed of have swept over me like the great Nile in flood.

I tell this story through my own eyes, as well as through the eyes of those I have loved, human and cat alike. Sometimes what I describe I saw in dreams, some of it was described to me by others. The story's ending is hidden from me, since the life of a cat is little more than the brief iridescence of a hovering dragonfly compared to a human lifespan. But even though the story may be incomplete, the Mother of Cats—or the One, as Yeshua calls her—has pressed upon my heart the need to tell it.

*The Great Cat Who Is Bast*

On a cold winter's night when the heavens almost seemed to reach down and touch the earth, a child was born in a stable lit by the guttering flame of a dim lamp. The stable was warm and close with the shaggy bodies of beasts, and no one turned away from the wonder of the birth to notice the star that bloomed in the sky as the child drew his first breath. But magi from the stony wastes of the eastern deserts saw and followed it, bringing gifts of gold and spice. And many miles away, as her last kitten struggled into the world, the Great Cat Who Is Bast saw the star and wondered.



I stirred in my sleep and curved my body more closely around my kittens. A predawn chill lay on the temple island, even inside the clay walls of the House of Birth. After a moment I opened my eyes, puzzled that I should have awakened at this hour. Raising my head slowly, I touched each kitten with my nose, satisfying myself that all was well. Their sweet milky breath reassured me. They were growing fast now. Soon they would be weaned and ready to join the others in the kitten compound. Perhaps this time the priests would allow me to keep one

with me when I returned to the temple. I didn't understand how they decided such things, but yes, perhaps this time.

Ears swiveling, I listened for any alien sound, but I heard only the soft snores of the other mothers and kittens sleeping in their own chambers around the sides of the birthing house—and of course the rustling of mice in the woven reeds of the roof. I was fully awake now. Unease flowed on the heels of my waking, and I strained to listen, but still I heard nothing, not even a breath of wind in the tall sycamores shading the House of Birth. Neither did I scent the presence of an intruder. I opened my mouth and drew the moist air through my nose. Only the fetid odor of the receding marshes penetrated the building.

Starlight filtered through chinks in the reed roof, reminding me of the wide world outside the walls of the birthing house. But I was content. No happiness could be greater than the warmth I shared with my kittens in this peculiar prison the priests had forced upon all the temple's breeding cats.

I laid my head down on the soft hay strewn for our bed and closed my eyes. I was being foolish. All was quiet. Not even the priests had risen yet to prepare for the coming of the light. Yet I couldn't escape the dread that filled my heart, creeping over me as relentlessly as the rising waters of the Nile. I lay quiet, resisting the urge to run, to flee the House of Birth. Flight was impossible. My kittens were too young to run with me. The first stooping owl would catch them up in his claws. The crowned serpent would swallow them. The great lizard would lunge up out of the mud and snap them in his jaws. I quivered with misery. The need to escape became an itch in my body as well as my mind, like a thousand biting flies under my skin.

“O Mother of Cats, protect them,” I breathed.

Then I opened my eyes and stared fixedly at the tiny window facing my chamber. “Mother who formed my claws to rend, my teeth to bite, and my milk to flow, hear me now. The breath of Silence is cold on your daughter's heart. Lend me your wisdom. I am afraid.”

But my mother was across the island in the temple, as much a prisoner of her sacred status as I was of my kits.

I closed my eyes again and curled around my family, releasing my growing terror into the keeping of the Mother of Cats. Then I sank into an uneasy doze. I could do no more.



Inside the chamber of the Great Cat Who Is Bast, Tikos, wet nurse to the Cat, also lay awake. The split palm branches of her bedframe creaked under her weight as she tossed, almost like the voices of the tiny frogs that sang among the lotus. At last she threw off the covers, slipped through the mosquito netting and rose to her feet, reaching for her linen shift. The tiniest hint of stubble on her head caught the fabric as it slipped down over her body: tomorrow she must shave. No servant of the Strong Mother profaned her presence with hair.

Tikos wondered if her restlessness had disturbed the lady Cat, because she found the Cat sitting in the window of appearance, silhouetted against the false dawn like one of her golden statues. But of course the Cat wasn't gold, she was huge and black like a leopard from beyond the cataracts, her spots and stripes barely visible, like tiny schools of fish caught in a dark wave. Not like me, her daughter—a small cat with thick fur that spoke of yellow sun and spotted shade.

Tikos wondered why She Who Is Bast would be watching the sky with such intensity. This was the moment when the great goddess would be battling the demon Apophis for Ra's safe passage into the dawn sky.

"Pray the goddess that her battle for the light is won!" Tikos breathed. Then she added a few of her own words to her prayer and turned uneasily to the Great Cat.

"Great One, is all well?" Tikos sent the thought wordlessly across the room.

"I am uneasy about Daughter of Fire," came the answer, in neither words nor images, but somehow compounded of both. "She is afraid, and I share her uneasiness. Something is out of balance."

Daughter of Fire, Tikos smiled. Surely she was still safe in the House of Birth, with her kittens at her breast. Of all the sacred cats sprung from the Great Cats over time, Daughter of Fire was her favorite.



I had been only half-grown when Tikos and I crossed the temple gardens together, sent by the Great Cat my mother in search of a missing kitten. The evening glowed with the brilliant light of the setting sun. I followed Tikos, leaping at her ankles and chasing butterflies as she searched. Since I was young, I had not yet been named; Tikos called me Miw (cat)—and for that matter, she still does.

She had just parted the tall flowers growing against the lake wall when the noise began, a dreaded sound like water sizzling on a hot kettle, followed almost immediately by sudden movement and shadow. She fell backward in terror, certain that death had found her in the very moment of Ra's sinking beneath the horizon to begin his journey into the underworld. But I leapt between her and the darkness, beating the snake's head aside with the force of my spring. Tikos scrambled away. I slipped silently into the shadows, becoming one with the ancient rhythms of the lethal dance between cat and snake.

Tikos told me later that it was a black viper, deadliest and most feared of snakes, snake of Apophis, servant of chaos. It was unthinkable to her that she should be there, on the temple island of the Queen of the Gods, she who slew the serpent of darkness nightly.

Her cry brought others running, and soon many stood with her, witnesses to this battle of light and dark. But I paid them no heed. I pummeled and scratched the snake, leaping aside before he could strike. Again and again I battered his head to the ground, always trying to get a grip on the back of his neck, but always his dark body thrashed away, pale mouth and fangs gaping wide, seeking my flesh. He struck, I leapt aside, I beat him down, and he coiled away, the dark bars flickering along his white belly.

The timelessness of the sacred dance caught the watchers up into a moment where only heart and breath measured the flow of life. Then at last, the viper struck with blinding speed. I heard the watchers gasp, fearing that I had delayed a second too long. Yet when the snake emerged again I was clamped to his neck, grinding my teeth into his spine, my claws piercing deep through the

loose skin into the flesh of his thrashing coils, my body battered against the earth with his death throes.

When I finally staggered away from the viper's twitching body, Tikos plucked me up, her careful fingers searching for any sign of a bite. But I squirmed free and jumped back to the ground. All I wanted was a chance to clean the bitter snake-scent from my claws and fur. I applied myself to my bath with intense concentration. The gaping humans standing all around I ignored completely.

I had suffered only one small wound: the snake had torn my ear with his fang in that last lunge. But if venom had flowed, it was no more than poisonous seed cast on dry ground. I washed the ear carefully, rubbing a damp paw over it again and again until I was satisfied that all lingering contamination was gone. The wound's only consequence would be my exclusion from the role of Great Cat in my turn: I was no longer whole and unmarked, as the Great Cat my mother had told me the Cat must be.

I knew that Tikos treasured the memory of that evening. She still spoke of the debt she owed me for saving her life. It was so: she did owe me the life gift, but it meant little to me. My action had been no more than a sudden necessity, accepted and accomplished. Mostly I remembered it because the Great Cat my mother had given me my name that very night. "Daughter of Fire," she named me, in honor of my triumph over what the humans believed was a demon of darkness. My mother told me later that my name was also drawn from her memory of the star that had blazed in the sky at my birth.

I suppose I became a favorite with the temple humans, priests and common people alike, after my battle with the snake. I was a good omen, a daily reminder of the goddess' power in a time when the might of foreign armies was grinding Egypt's people into the mud of the Nile.

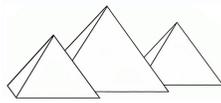


Tikos brought her attention back to the Cat, who was regarding her in the greyness that was not yet light.

"There is a rottenness in this temple, maidservant of Bast," she spoke into Tikos' mind. "The priests have lost their vision. Stripped of their great lands, their

hearts turn toward gold, forgetting the glory of the Mother. My children are no longer honored. Their blood stains the earth, even on this holy island. I fear that the darkness my daughter senses is that of the black viper overshadowing us all.”

Then She Who Is Bast was silent. It had been a long speech for the Cat. Tikos knelt in response to her speaking, but the Great Cat’s words drew the warmth from her blood, leaving her trembling in the center of the many-colored carpet that covered the stone floor. This, then, was the shadow that had disturbed her sleep.



*reflections of a temple cat*

*I* don’t know how long the ancient temple at Bubastis has stood on its island. Length of time is not a thing cats care about. For me, as for every cat, each day is simply Day, and each night, Night. But humans seem to place value on great cycles of passing seasons, as if two or three days together possess more meaning than one day alone.

Peace and calm filled my days in the temple of Bast. I ate poached fish from a glass bowl, and at special seasons I wore a collar of precious stones. The humans who served in the temple treated me with careful respect. If misery existed in the world, it was no more to me than a sour breath rattling in the reeds beyond the walls.