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opening extract from

Cosmo and the Magic Sneeze

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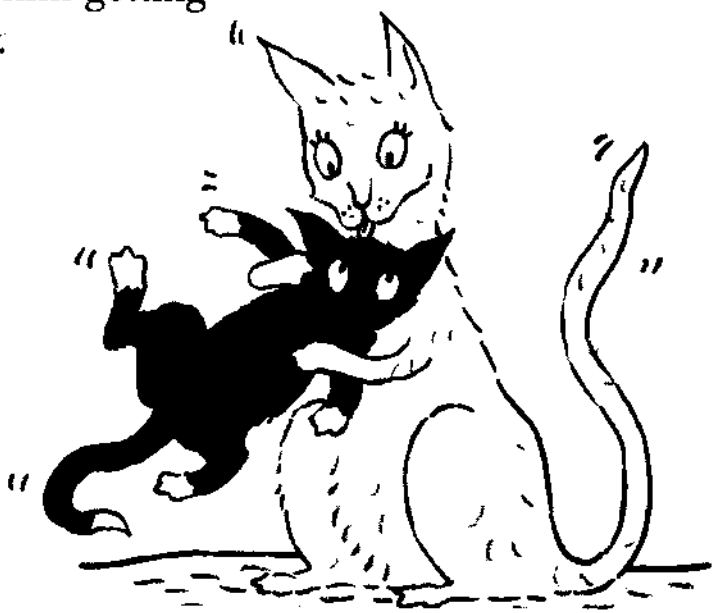
Cosmo hated it when his mother gave him one of her really thorough washes. Her tongue was relentless as it cleaned his face, under his chin, the top of his head and even inside his ears. That bit was ticklish and Cosmo always wriggled, but his mother just placed her big white paw on top of him to stop him getting away.



Cosmo's mother was called India and she was a beautiful, pure white, short-haired cat with emerald-green eyes. Her great-great-great-grandmother had been a cat of a high pedigree flown to this country from India when her human family had moved here.

'Are there witch-cats in India too?' Cosmo asked her now, as India finished licking and moved back to inspect her work.

'Of course,' his mother answered. 'And in China and Africa and Australia and every other country in the world. Now sit there and keep clean until your father arrives. If I see you move from that spot, there'll be trouble.'

'I'm glad your ancestors came from India,' Cosmo chattered. 'Because it's such a beautiful name. It would have been awful if your ancestors came from a country with a *horrible* name, wouldn't it?'

His mother just smiled and said that if



they had then she wouldn't have been named after it.

'You'd have been named Snowie or something, wouldn't you, Mother?' Cosmo said. 'Like that white cat down the road.'

'I don't think I would *ever* have been named anything as common as that,' India replied. Sometimes she found herself sounding a little bit snobbish although she tried not to be. She was always having to remind herself that, just because she had pedigreed ancestors, it didn't make her any better than other cats, especially in this family, when all that mattered was whether you were a witch-cat or not. And she wasn't.

She looked at her six-month-old kitten with pride. Cosmo was nearly all black like his father, but had white paws and a white tip to his tail. Cosmo was her first kitten – an only one – and India thought him so



beautiful that it constantly surprised her that other cats in the street didn't stop to admire him more than they did.

Today was the day India had been dreading ever since Cosmo had been born. If only Cosmo's father, Mephisto, was an ordinary cat like her instead of belonging to a long line of witch-cats.

'Mother, tell me again what's going to happen today,' Cosmo said.

His mother tried to sound calm as she replied, 'You are to be tested to see if you are a witch-cat like your father or just an ordinary cat like me.' The witch-cat test involved mixing a drop of a special clear magic potion with a drop of kitten blood and seeing if the blood changed colour from red to green.

'I hope I'm a witch-cat!' Cosmo said enthusiastically. Witch-cats were different to



ordinary cats. Only witch-cats could assist witches with their spells and get to ride on a broomstick and do all the other exciting things Cosmo's father had told him about.

India hoped he was too, even though she had never liked the witch Mephisto worked with who was called Sybil.

It was a good thing to be a witch-cat though and, if Cosmo passed the test, India knew that Mephisto would be very proud and pleased. Witch-cats were becoming quite rare and difficult to get hold of and witches paid a lot of money to buy new ones. As well as helping generally in all witching activities, witch-cats were especially valued for their powerful sneezes. India hadn't noticed anything special about Cosmo's sneezes so far, but Mephisto had told her that didn't mean anything. A witch-cat sneeze was only magical if it was mixed with the



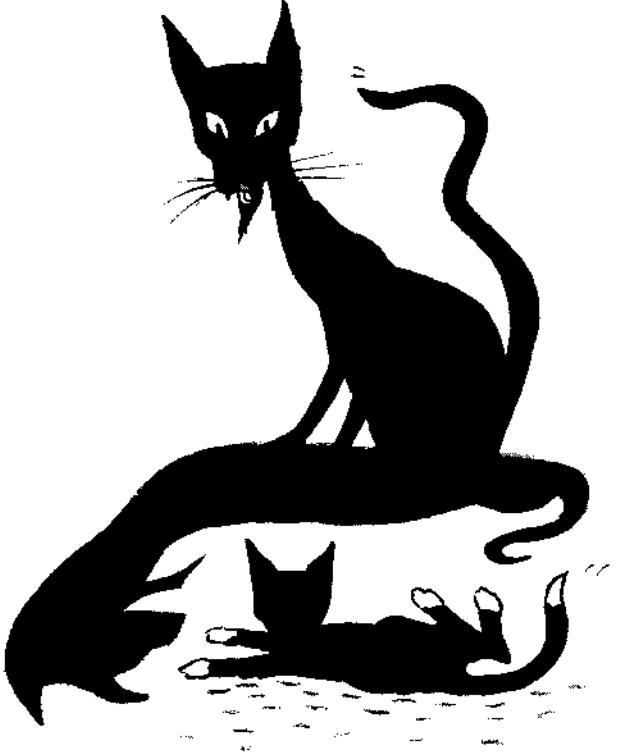
other ingredients of a spell, and even then the sneeze of a kitten like Cosmo might not contain that much magic power. That was why the only true way to determine whether a kitten was going to turn into a witch-cat was to perform the special blood test.

India turned to look at the huge black cat entering their home through the gap in the garage door. Mephisto had the shiniest jet-black coat of any cat India had ever seen, and the darkest-green eyes. His big paws were twice the size of her delicate white ones. No wonder she had fallen in love with him when they'd met by the goldfish pond last year.

'So?' Mephisto asked Cosmo. 'Are you ready?'

Cosmo twitched his whiskers nervously. He greatly admired his father, but he was also very much in awe of him. Cosmo knew





how important it was that his father had a kitten who could follow in his footsteps, and he also knew he could only do that if he was a witch-cat.

Cosmo asked, 'Isn't Mother coming?'

India walked up to her son and gave him a last affectionate lick on top of his

head. 'I'll see you later. I am not welcome in the witch's house. You know that.' India shivered at the thought of getting that close to Sybil. It was silly – and something that had caused a lot of arguments between herself and Mephisto – but there was just something about Sybil that made India's fur stand on end.

'Will *I* be welcome?' Cosmo asked, anxiously glancing across at his father. 'I've never been allowed inside before.'

'Today is different,' Mephisto said. 'Today is a special day. Come on. My mistress is waiting for us.'

Sybil was getting her witch-cat potion ready. That morning she had been to the special witches' section of the local supermarket to get some last-minute ingredients, and she was still wearing her human clothes. She



decided it was time she got changed.

She went upstairs to her bedroom and took off the clothes she had stolen from various washing lines – she didn't see why she should have to *pay* for this disgusting human clothing – and stood looking at herself in the long mirror, admiring her green belly button and bright-green toenails and fingernails. She went to her wardrobe and flung open the door. She had already decided to wear a red outfit today. That way, if the kitten spilt any of its blood on her then it wouldn't show.

Sybil smiled when she heard a familiar *miaow* from downstairs. Mephisto was here. She knew she mustn't get her hopes up, because Mephisto's kitten had an ordinary cat for a mother, but she was hopeful that it would still pass the witch-cat test. She could do with another witch-cat to help her with her spells.

