

Witchward Bound

♦ A Butter and Owl Adventure ♦

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♦ *Where Is the Witch?* ♦



Once upon a time, there was a witch who went away.

The witch left home carefully. (Witches do most things carefully.) She took her little herd of milk goats down the forest footpath to stay with Neighbour Goodbody. She lowered a bundle of fern and rosemary down the well so the small water ghost there would rest easy. She even put out her hearth fire, which had not been out in three years.

One thing she carefully didn't do was tell her familiars where she was going.

Familiars are the talking creatures who help a witch.

This particular witch had two: a cat and a raven. There should have been three, of course. Three is the right number for witchy things. But as it happened, the third familiar—a fire spirit named Karis—had grown too big for the witch’s hearth and gone off to have an adventure with the Northern Lights.

So that left just two.

Meet the cat first. He would want it that way.

Close your eyes, and picture a witch’s cat: a sleek, black, bony fellow, all slink and shadow. Now open your eyes, and meet Butter, who looks nothing like that.

Butter was a calico: He had white bits, and orange bits, and tabby-striped bits, all hodgepodged together. He wasn’t bony—he was big. And he didn’t slink—he strode. When he sat, he plopped. When he purred, he wheezed. And when he slept, he snored.

Butter’s original name had been Miss Butterball. He had come by it as a kitten, one of a litter born in

Neighbour Goodbody's goat barn. The big, round cat had once been a big, round kitten, so the "Butterball" is easy enough to explain. The "Miss" was because Neighbour Goodbody had thought all calico kittens were girl kittens. This is a mistake many people make. In fact, only *most* calico kittens are girl kittens—and Miss Butterball was not most kittens. He was a kitten who was destined for Great Things. He felt the call of this great destiny almost as soon as he opened his eyes. So he shortened his name to Butter—great heroes have short names—and went off down the lane to find the witch.

Now, a witch's three familiars are equals, like three points of a triangle or three legs on a stool: each different, each necessary. But now that there were just two familiars left, Butter considered himself the senior equal. Just a little bit more equal than the other one.

The other one was a raven named Owl.

There is no story about Owl being named Owl. She

wasn't owl-coloured or owl-sighted or particularly wise. It was just her name, and she had picked it herself because she liked the sound of it.

Like most ravens, Owl could imitate other voices—even human voices. She loved voices, including her own. As Butter would put it, Owl was always chattering or hopping from place to place in an unserious way. She would poop anywhere. She would eat anything that caught her eye. She would bring home shiny things and stack them on the witch's windowsills, without even thinking about whether the shiny things were serious and special enough for an important person like the witch.

There was a reason, Butter would tell you, that Owl was the slightly junior equal.

So when the catastrophe came, and Owl showed up to tell Butter about it, the cat was annoyed but not too worried—at first.

“The witch, the witch, the witch!” Owl quorked. (“Quork” is the proper word for the noise that ravens make. Cats meow and dogs bark and ravens quork. Butter liked words, so he knew that—but he also thought that the word “quork” sounded too dignified and exotic to suit Owl.)

“THE WITCH!” Owl cried (or quorked), loud enough to worry the ghost who lived in the well.

Butter had been doing some important midmorning napping. He cracked an eye open and rolled onto his side, letting the warm dust powder his fur. He looked up at the orange poppies that nodded over him. He looked up at the blue sky. He looked up at the carved and painted poles the witch had added to the cottage garden to remind her of home. He did not see the problem. “Which witch?” he asked Owl.

“THE witch!” Owl stomped up and down. “OUR witch!”

The witch's actual human name was Penelope, but Butter and Owl called her "the witch" because she was their witch, the best and first witch in their entire world.

"She's GONE, Butter!" cried Owl. "Our witch is gone!"

"So?" Butter arched his long back and stretched the pink webbing between his cat toes. The witch was an important person. Important people, in Butter's view, were BUSY. They went places. When they rested, as he was resting now, it was strategic. It was fuel for the next important thing.

Butter popped out his claws. They still looked perfect. You had to check these things, though. A cat had to take care of their claws.

Owl quorked wordlessly and hop-flapped closer. She landed on a poppy, but the poppy stem was too thin to hold her. The flower swung downward and dumped



Owl on the dusty stone. The raven somersaulted and ended up on her back with her head between Butter's perfect paws. "She's GONE-GONE, Butter!" the raven told the cat. "She put out the fire and she soothed the well ghost and took the goats away!"

"But the milk . . ." Butter sat up. Supervising the morning milking of the goats and sampling a bit of the milk for quality were key parts of his cat duties. "Where will the milk come from?"

"From wherever she took them! She took them AWAY!" The raven twisted out from between Butter's claws and flapped herself to her feet. "Gone, gone, GONE, Butter! The witch has gone away without us!"

Butter sat up very straight and tucked his tail over his front toes—striking the pose generally known as Noble Cat Thinks Carefully. Owl could be foolish, he thought (carefully). But on reflecting (carefully), he had to admit that her evidence seemed to lead to an

important conclusion. “Owl, the witch has gone away without us.”

“Butter!” the raven cried. “What should we DO?”

Butter knew that the witch needed him.

He could still remember the first day he had walked into the little grey cottage and found the witch knitting. Her feet, in fuzzy mismatched socks, were up on a cushion in front of the fire. Her needles were flashing in the firelight. She was humming a little.

She was also floating half a foot above her rocking chair.

Karis the fire spirit swirled out of the fireplace like a dancer wearing many skirts. “Oh good,” he said to Butter. “You’re here. Just hop up on her lap there, if you’re willing.”

Butter had been not much more than a kitten, round as a lump of bread dough and almost that new. He’d never heard a fire talk before. But he had come to the

witch's cottage to do Great Things, and so (he told himself) he was not afraid. He climbed into the witch's lap, beside the ball of yarn, and waited for his destiny to kick in.

The fire was warm. The witch was warm. The yarn was nice to gnaw and claw in a warm and lazy way. He settled. After a bit, the witch settled too, and sank slowly until she was touching the chair.

"Yes," Karis crackled. "Perfect. A cat to keep you grounded. The third familiar should be a bird, I think. A bird to take you far."

"And a hearth fire to bring me home," said Penelope.

She fastened off the last stitch of her knitting—she was making a blessing bonnet for Fisher Quicksail's new son—and set it down. She rested her hand on Butter's curled back. She found the exact right spot behind his ear where he liked to be rubbed. Then, because she was magical, she called him by name. "Will you stay with me, Butter?"

The carvings on the rafter beams danced in the flickering firelight. The spiders in the corner seemed to sing.

Butter had never spoken before, but it felt very right to yawn and purr and speak his answer aloud.

“Yes,” he said.



In the witch’s cottage, now, the fire was out.

Butter had never seen it like that. It had been a quieter fire after Karis left them, but it had always been warm and cheerful. Now it was cold, the ashes wet and black. The tumble-jumble old carvings of the cottage didn’t look magical anymore. They looked shabby. The singing spiders were silent. The wind creaked without making words.

It felt, Butter thought, *lost*.

He was definitely not afraid, though.

“We need to look for *clues*,” he told Owl.

Butter pronounced the word “clues” as if it had gravitas. (Butter didn’t know what the word “gravitas” meant exactly, but he’d heard it once and liked the sound of it: It sounded fat and important—which is pretty much what it means. Butter had a whole collection of fat and important words.)

“What if, what if, what if—” said Owl, plonking across the kitchen floor with little flaps. “What if she’s gone south?”

“She’s not a robin, Owl,” said Butter. He had head-butted the pantry door open and was nosing every jar and barrel and bag. As part of his duties as a familiar, he kept a helpful eye on the witch’s food stores. In his professional view, a bowl that wasn’t completely full was dangerously close to empty, and it was best to let your human know.

Butter knew what food should be there. He could see how much the witch had packed. She’d packed quite a bit.

“Lots of things go south,” said Owl. “Geese and cranes and swans and best-laid plans—”

“The witch is not a bird at all, is my point.” There was a barrel of salt meat near the door. Butter reared up and pushed on the lid with his nose. The wood slid across the iron rim of the barrel, inch by scraping inch.

“Also whales go south,” said Owl. But she had to admit that probably the witch had not swum south for the winter, and anyway it was June.

“Salmon,” Owl said. “Salmon go upstream.”

“The witch,” said Butter, “is also not a fish.”

“Lots of things go . . .” But, really, not so many things went upstream like salmon, and that wasn’t quite what Owl meant. She quorked to herself a few times. Then she took a strip of the dried meat to help her think. “Lots of things go home.”

“Hmmm,” said Butter. “Hmmm.”

Owl gave Butter half the meat strip to help him think too.

Butter ate it. He thought.

Owl pooped on the floor. She thought.

They knew Penelope was a young witch. They knew that she had come from far away.

She'd told them, sometimes, about the Island of the Witches, where she had been born. It was so far away, she said, that the people ate a different kind of bread. It was so far away, she said, that they made a different kind of art. It was so far away that you could see the line where the river of the sea met the river of the sky, and the whole world ended.

Owl had been hatched in a tree in the side garden. Butter had spent his kittenhood in the goat barn of the nearest neighbour. Smallest Island was their home, and they didn't know what it was like to carry another kind of home inside their hearts. That was a human thing.

But Butter and Owl were also familiars, which meant that they could understand human speech and see

human colours, including the faint blue you see when you look into the far distance. That colour is named “homesickness.”

They both thought, at the same time, that the witch had gone home.

“A witch should not walk the world without her familiars,” the cat said. “We will go and find her.”

