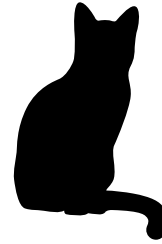


Did you see me in Alia Terra?
This is my story.



The Kitten, the Dragons, and Storytelling by the Sea

Meet my dragon friends in:

ALIA TERRA

Stories from the Dragon Realm

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illustrated by Matthew Spencer

Once upon a time there lived a kitten with a passion for stories. He grew up reading everything he could get his paws onto. Short or long, sad or happy, the kitten would read all. And as dawn neared, finding him asleep with the whiskers tickled by the pages of an open book, he dreamed of . . . more stories. New ones, with fantastic adventures and daring magic.

The kitten's head grew so full with these imagined tales that one day he picked up a quill and started scribbling. A sentence today, a few words tomorrow, and soon the kitten had an entire story to call his own.

Leaping with joy, he rushed to where the town storytellers were gathered in the square.

"Look," he said, fluttering the sheet of paper. "I wrote!"

But in return came only flaws. "Too soft," the others said, "not enough action," and "it won't draw the crowds." They gave advice, of *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts* until the story they described no longer resembled the kitten's own.

Disheartened, he left the storytellers to their debate. So lost in thought was he, traveling down the street, that to avoid colliding with a human leg, the kitten dropped the story in his dash to safety.

Peeking back from around the corner, the kitten saw a girl pick up the sheet. She read and read and—

"Oh," the girl said, wobbling and sniffly. "I can't

believe it! I've never found myself in a story before." She looked around, then back to the paper. "Whoever wrote this, thank you."

She sat against the wall the kitten was hiding behind and pulled out a notebook with a pen. Under the kitten's wide eyes, the girl copied every word.

"So I'll remember it forever," she whispered when she finished.

The kitten wiped his cheeks with a paw, realizing that perhaps stories like his were needed in the world, after all.



After that, he wrote and wrote. His tales were ones of friendships and kindness and happy endings. But the kitten wasn't brave enough to show them himself. Instead, he left them wherever he went. A scroll at the tavern, a folio in a fairy's garden, a page hidden among the maps of a merchant.

The stories soon became known across the land. Whenever a paw-tale was found, copies were made and distributed, while their author watched from the shadows, unknown.



The kitten weaved worlds with words, spun lives into existence, dripped ink into the veins of his characters, but he felt like his own story slipped through his claws. He wandered the roads, but never stopped to know anyone. Never found the courage to let himself be seen.

The kitten was lonely.



One afternoon, as the kitten made his way to his nighttime spot, he found the tiny stretch of beach taken over by three dragons. The purple of the bunch sipped tea from a steaming cup, the golden lounged in the grass, while the third kept to the water, only the head bobbing up above the waves.

They were telling stories, the kitten realized, hidden behind the thicket of bushes that kept the place safe from prying eyes.

Behind them, the sea stretched in pinks and blues of the sunset, a jewel under the dimming light, and the kitten settled in to listen about a tower, and seafriends, and a magic sword.

When the kitten woke in the morning, the dragons were gone and so were their tales. The kitten wondered, then, what if he would have stepped forward? Shared his own? But,

he shook his head, no. It would only lead to disappointment.



“Guess what I found in the merchant’s cart the other day,” Purple said, whipping out a book. “A volume of paw-tales.”

The other two hummed appreciatively and the kitten let himself grin a little, whiskers brushing the leaves shielding him.

“Imagine my surprise,” Purple continued, “when one of the stories was about three dragons meeting weekly by the sea.”

“A story about us?” Fishdragon rose from the water to lean against a boulder.

“Our secrets?” Goldie asked, sword hilt clutched in zir claw.

“Oh, no,” the kitten whispered and three heads swiveled toward him.

“Nothing of the sort,” Purple answered, squinting at the bushes. “Imagined adventures.”

“Ah.”

The kitten didn’t dare move, lest he gave himself away further. Silence settled around them for a while, but finally Purple pulled a cake box out of their backpack. They dished it out, one slice for Goldie, one for Fishdragon, one for themselves, and another . . .

“We know you’re out there,” they said. “And we won’t force you to come out, but if you wish to join us, we’d be happy to meet you.”

The three dragons turned their attention away, and the kitten breathed a sigh of relief. Now was his chance to flee. Yet, the kitten’s eyes were drawn by the fourth slice, sitting there in open invitation. The dragons began their conversation as they usually did, with accounts of their weeks, new stories they’d heard. Except this time, once in a while, one of them would throw a comment or a question toward the kitten’s hiding spot.

Perhaps . . . perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to say hello, so the kitten stepped forward.



“So the paw signature is an actual paw impression,” said Fishdragon. “Clever!”

The kitten ducked his head with a snicker. Bellies satisfied by the cake, their chat drew long into the night, until with stretches and popping joints, the dragons prepared to leave.

“Where’s your lair?” Purple asked the kitten. “I can drop you off, if you wish.”

“Thank you, but I stay here.”

Goldie turned around. “We’ve been invading your *home*?”

“No, no.” The kitten waved a paw. “I only sleep here. I don’t—” *Don’t what*, he thought. It was time to stop talking, especially given the looks he was receiving.

“Kitten,” Fishdragon said. “Would you like to come with me? Meet my seafriends? We have tasty algae down at the bottom of the sea.”

“Or join us,” Goldie piped up, the sword in their clutch vibrating in agreement. “Our princess makes the best of breads and our knight the warmest of fires.”

“Or come to the tower,” Purple added. “The blankets and pillows are so very comfortable for naps.”

The kitten wrapped his tail around himself where he sat. “I—”

“Mm?” The dragons leaned closer.

Answering was impossible. How could the kitten even make that choice? How could he pick one and disappoint the other two?

He ran, instead. As fast as his paws carried him, the kitten dashed over the sand and around the bend of the shore, to disappear from sight.



Chest heaving, the kitten slowed down. Up high, the moon bathed everything in silvery light. He hadn’t made it all that far, but he had almost

wandered into the forest patch nobody should. As if hearing his thoughts, the local zmeu sauntered out from between the trees.

“My, my, what a hurried little creature you are. Who upset you?”

Without thinking, the kitten blurted, “They didn’t mean to! I just can’t be in three places at once . . . no matter how much I want to.”

The last part was added softly, for his own, but the zmeu heard it, because, as the kitten was trudging away, he asked, “What if you could?”

“What do you mean?”

The zmeu snapped his scaly fingers. “I have magic. I could split you in three, but there’s a price.”

“Which is?”

“You have to give up that which brings you the most joy.”

Never write stories again? The kitten’s eyes filled. What a cruel offer.

Before he could answer, a clawed palm smacked the zmeu upside the head.

“We won’t be taking any of your deals,” Fishdragon said from the waves while Purple stood menacingly, looming over them.

The zmeu batted back at Purple’s claw, scoffing. “You know where to find me when you change your mind,” he said, then walked back into the forest.

The dragons turned to the kitten.

“You know you don’t have to choose—”

“You don’t even have to come—”

“Not if you don’t want to—”

“But we can always take turns—”

“If you want to—”

“We’re sorry—”

“Stop,” the kitten whispered and three jaws snapped shut. “I would like it very much, if I can visit you all.” He sniffled and tried to stealthily wipe at his eyes, but thankfully the others didn’t say anything.

“Come on,” Goldie said. “Let’s go back while you think about who’s first.”

Purple rubbed their forehead. “That’s the opposite of what he needs!”

“What,” Goldie defended.

As they bickered, Fishdragon swam closer to the kitten. “I’m claiming you first, it’s decided. And don’t worry, I’ll tell them.”

“Got room for one more?” Purple asked and Fishdragon smirked.

“I’ll swim down, too, after I let everyone know where I am,” Goldie added. The sword wiggled and ze stared at it for a moment. “Right, I happen to know a mage that can make us magic scrolls to write to each other while away. Would you like that?”

The other two dragons agreed readily, and the kitten grinned wide enough to show fangs.

“Have you heard,” he said as they made their

way back to their tiny beach corner, “about the tale of the enchanted scrolls? It begins with a kitten, of course, and ends with friends.”

