

# Puss

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THE BOOTS WERE ONLY THE BEGINNING. I STILL FEEL his hands on me, hard fingers driving deep into my ribs, jamming the heavy, clumsy sheaths of scarlet leather onto my hind legs while I squalled and spat until he cuffed me silent.

"Now walk!" he bawled, drunk with the bit of wine his own coin had bought. "Stand tall, you worthless animal! I'll make my fortune with you yet. There's fools enough in this wretched world who'll pay good money to see a trained cat."

Where had he ever gotten them, the boots? I never doubted that the world was as he painted it: cruel, cold as a dry tit, full of soulless shells like him who'd do anything to hear two coins chink-chink together in their fat, hairless palms. Surely that was how he had found the man to make them.

Oh, how they hurt me! No cat was ever born who'd willingly ask for such a crippling. He had me under the forelegs and swung my body forward—first one side, then the other—in imitation of human strides.

"Walk, damn you! The old fool said as you were special—pox take him. Must be something more to it than a gaffer's babblings, or it's all up for me. *Walk!*" His sour breath was full of curses for me and his father; his brothers, too, snug in their more comfortable patrimonies of mill and farm. They knew nothing and cared less that the youngest of the three now spent his night in a stable, kneeling in piles of horse-fouled straw, torturing a cat.

I could not walk—not like that—and he was too great a fool to bide and seek my true talents. So it seemed I should be free, soon or late. All it wanted was the taste of blood.

I let myself hang limp in his hands, deadweight. He groaned. I could see the self-pity bubbling up in his eyes behind the fat, ready tears of a drunkard. "Worthless." He held me off the floor so the boots with their heavy soles and heels pulled my hind legs down. The pain raced clear up my spine, a white fire in my brain.

"Worthless!" This time it was a shout, and a shaking to go with it. My eyes clouded with the red haze. Rage filled my mouth, called up the ghosts of my true teeth—not these paltry stubbins good for reaping only mice and rats. Oh, the hunger!

"Damn the old man." Now he was sniveling. I got another shake for his father's imagined sin. "All those years a-dying, and Bill and Tom crowding 'round the bed, simpering like daub-brained girls." And another shake yet for my poor, spinning head. "Cunning bastards. One to keep deathwatch, one to stiff-arm me off, keep me far from the old turtle so's it'd look as if I didn't care was no one there to shut his eyes for him after. Well, it worked, blast them all to hell for it! Mill and farm gone,

and nothing for me but *this!*"

And he swung me back and flung me hard against the stable wall.

The boots were my death. I could not twist in midair and take the fall as I should, not with them weighing me down. I felt my ribs shatter as I hit the rough-hewn boards, my spine come unstrung with a single snap against a jutting beam. My limbs crumpled under me when I slipped down into the straw, all skewed. Warm, salty blood welled over my tongue. I let my mouth hang open and the thin, red flow trickled out, dampening the golden dust that overlay the straw. Soon, through the death of this small, much-punished husk, the Change would come and work its power. Soon I would be free.

But the pain was too fierce. The fury in my veins wailed impatiently for my lost wings, for the clean, knife-bright freedom of the air. Peace alone commands the Change, and I was too much dominated by wrath, trapped in a skin once glossy and sleek under a loving hand's care. Now drab and dirty, matted with filth, it would be a relief to shed it once the compact was fulfilled.

It was very hard, the dying, and long. He did his part to hurry it on, standing over me, driving a sprung-toed shoe into my belly. Air tore out of my lungs, scraped my throat with agony as a shallower breath forced its way back in. These mortal bodies cling to life too strongly.

"Stupid cat. Hell have you." I heard him stagger out of the stable, still cursing. Clouds fell across my eyes. Alone, finally left in peace, I sought the hidden power of the blood. Now the Change must come, in solitude, with the old sea's taste fresh and metal-tangy on my tongue.

*Change.* The clouds darkened; only the savor of blood remained, the copper bloom at the heart and core of being.

*Change.* Scent and touch followed sight and sound into oblivion. I felt my self tearing free from the blood-woven web of the world. As my soul struggled, I sensed without seeing that the filthy stable had faded away around me. Laved by the shapetide, my dying shell lay upon the strand that lies between time and time.

*Child?* She came as I knew she must come, as she comes for all of us when the Change is imminent. Some of my folk say she was the first to find the way to the shore where the shapetide runs. Some call her goddess, all name her Mother. Her voice was a tender hand upon me, dulling my failing body's pain. I felt the layers of fur and flesh peeling away like the falling petals of a rose.

*I am here,* I answered in the only true speech. With more than eyes I saw her. She loomed above me, her great yellow eyes warming me. Their fire seared all else away, even the bones of evil memories. My spirit sprang from my broken chest, taking wing against the wind.

*Child, you must return.* Keen as a hatchet blow, cold as a plummet into an ice-crusting river, that sharp saying. My battered soul snapped back into its aching vessel and my sightless eyes stared wide. *What? But the compact—*

*Is unfulfilled.* I heard the sorrow in her words. *The debt is unpaid. You owe—*

*I owe nothing!* My spirit-self leaped up anew, still molded by my latest shape, and hissed and spat defiance against her who may never be defied. *What debt have I ever owed that wasn't paid in full through my own blood?* I gestured with a phantom paw at my fallen form, at the blackening trail now sluggishly oozing from a gaping, ashen mouth. *You see his handiwork, O Mother. Can you call all accounts anything but paid? I owe him nothing but death.*

And that, I swear, was the first I ever thought about that sweet possibility.

Her sigh was summer's own breath. *The debt was never owed to the son, but to the father. It lies over you yet, as heavy as the earth now lying over him.*

And I knew what she said was true, for there are no lies in the true speech.

*I will heal you,* she said, *and you will remember your debt.*

*No! No!* I did not seek memories, did not want them, would break my heart over them if she forced them on me. But her hand was upon me, her wings over me, and the great, scaly shelter of her body coiled around me. We are nothing in her shadow. I felt bone grind in healing dance against bone, and as her breath penetrated fur and flesh I was compelled to see.

Remembered firelight flickered amid the shadows in my eyes. A young man knelt among old pillars. Few from his village knew that such a ruin stood so near the plowland, fewer still would speak of it at all. But to come there—! And by night. And knowing enough half-truths of us to come bringing blood.

He knelt before the great altar in the wild place and made his plea in the tongue so few recalled. We hid among the toothed and jagged pillars, harkening, curious, intrigued to hear our own words stumble out into the midnight air from the lips of a mortal man. Eyes aglow we watched and listened, hungering to drink deep if only he would make the smallest misstep, the flimsiest missaying to give himself into our power.

Not until then, though. We are a well-ruled people.

*Wizard?* my sister asked, nose wrinkling with greed.

*I do not think so,* I replied.

*He must be,* she maintained, mantling her wings against the autumn chill. Blue stars danced in her eyes. *None other would have the skill or courage to find us.*

*Oh, I think he has courage enough.* I licked a finger, still red from the sweet blood of his offering. It was too long dead to be more than a stomach-stay. He had not seen us dip hand and paw and wingtip into the pooled crimson in the brown earthenware bowl before him. We choose who may see us, and how, as reward or punishment. It was only goat's blood, but it was good enough. *See? He trembles.*

*And you call that courage? A hero does not tremble,* my sister said with scorn.

*A hero does not have brains enough to know when to be afraid. The truly brave man knows, but goes on despite his fear.* My ears twitched. He spoke our language

well. Wisdom as well as courage, then. *I think that this time, I will be the one*, I said, and I did not stand on further saying, but chose my shape and stepped out of the shadows to make him mine.

I let the wings linger only long enough for him to see them and know that it was no common cat who had walked into his firelight's weak circle to save him. He gave a hoarse, glad cry, as one who has gambled away his soul but reaped a prize worth the loss, and fell full-length upon the tiles.

The compact was made. It was made in the old way, the true way, with a taste of better blood than a slaughtered goat's. Not Change blood, though; not blood spiced by death's proximity. The blood I took bubbled up from veins still taut with life, good for binding my life to his will, nothing more.

From that time forward, we knew each other, and what each might ask of each. So long as he lived, his thoughts were naked to me. So long as he laid one charge upon me that remained unfulfilled, I was in his thrall. His wants were desperate, but modest: a little land, a mill, the means to aid his parents in their old age. The homely shape I chose would never betray my nature or our pact.

By wisdom and by art I gained his humble prizes, and for my pay had love and gratitude and, better than blood, the rich feast of his mind. For my folk, immortal so long as our bodies are not entirely destroyed, the death-seasoned thoughts and feelings of humankind are dainty fare. He gave me no blows, seldom a harsh word from his lips all the days of our bonded life, and only a look of bewilderment and pain when my skills could not call his young wife's breath and blood back into her body after that third birth.

*He is all I have left of her*, I heard him say to the midwife as he gazed down upon the infant in its cradle. It tore at me to see him so desolate. I vowed then to make this last child of his a gift past common value, for the father's sweet sake. That night, when the older boys had been taken to his sister's house and his wife lay shrouded on the hearthside floor and the babe wailed in its cradle, for love of him I broke the laws that bound me...

*Who are you?* He startled me, making me spring back from the cradle before I could take up the child. He stood in the doorway between common room and bedchamber, eyes red from too little sleep and too much weeping. The only weapon in the house was an old, rusty dagger of his father's, but he had found it.

*Don't you know me?* I was a fool to ask. In my new shape, lawless, a Change made boldly by a blood-drop softly stolen from her corpse—Oh, bitter!—how could he hope to know me?

He held a rushlight high in the hand that did not clasp the dagger. *Who are you, girl?* he repeated. The blade lowered slowly. *What are you doing here, at this hour, with neither cloak nor dress to clothe your nakedness? And why do you hover near my child?*

*I have come for his welfare*, I said, creeping subtly nearer to the sleeping babe once more. I laid my hand on the cradle's lovingly carved wooden canopy. *I have*

*come to bring him blessing.*

He did not cross himself. Not once since that night when he sought us in the wild place did I ever see him make the pale god's sign. *I know you, then.* His voice shook like a candleflame. *You are one of the Old Folk, spirit. Say, by whatever honors your word, if your blessing be blessing true.* For he had heard the old tales, and knew how the Old Folk delight in a double-deal, and for the precious sake of his son's life he was afraid.

*Dread not, I told him. I am not one of the Folk you fear. They were infant shades when my people held this earth. We we the first begotten children of the old sea whose salt still seasons every living creature's blood, the children of Change, shapeshifters, the shapetide's masters. And O, my master, you do know me.*

He stared. Well he might stare! For I was dark and sleek and beautiful and I wore the shadows with more gallant grace than a princess in all her satins. Because the blood I had stolen was cold, so cold, the Change was incomplete—a dusky down clung like velvet to my body, and as I crouched by the cradle I could hear the whisper of my tail flicking back and forth across the floorboards.

I could hear too how his tongue scraped over dry lips as he looked at me. He threw the rushlight in among the banked embers and they flared. The dagger fell to the floor at his feet and he folded to his knees beside me as if he would pray.

Wild prayer, sweet prayer, prayer to serve a power older and darker than the pale god's teachings! Hands knotted in my hair, lips ardent at my throat, at the glowing mounds of my breasts, a ferocious, half-starved suckling made me shudder to the roots of my wombs. The flagstone floor pressed hard against my back until I could bear the chill of it no more and threw him down in my place so that I might spring on top of him as if he were my meat—a mock hunt, a feigned kill, a true feasting. White claws still curved from my fingertips, and I used them to slash away his flimsy muslin shirt. My mouth burned against his chest, the small and dainty bud of a nipple teasing thrills of anticipated joy from my rough tongue. I let one fang graze over it slowly, drawing out the moment, the full exaltation of our senses. He moaned in pain that was no pain when my small, sharp, cunning teeth nipped his flesh the instant before the fangs sank deep and the bright blood spilled into my mouth.

Coupled so, I needed no other coupling, but he did, and his need was my master. He wrestled me to the floor again and burned his way inside me while the last shimmering red drops fell in a sweet rain over my cheeks, my eyes. My whole body shook with the force of his thrusts, my tail curled up to lace his legs, and my claws raked him without breaking the skin, my little jest. Then he shuddered, gasped his name for me, and fell away.

A bad fall that! An evil fall! For as he rolled from me, blind chance let his arm loll back to drop across the still, shrouded, cold clay that shared our hard bed on the farmhouse floor. He turned his head and saw that in our tumblings we had pulled aside a span of shroud, leaving her face unveiled. Oh, cold! Winter's own miserly heart laid bare and bony over lips he had once devoured as madly as mine. I felt revulsion clutch talons around his heart, with shame to make it burn.

White as ash, her face, but ashes hold the phantoms of fires. The ghostly eternal flames that are the pale god's dogs rose up from the corpse. My master thought he had already pawned his soul, but what is pawned may some day be redeemed. This crime said he had sealed it irrevocably for the burning.

In guilt, he sought to deny all blame; in fear, he sought to weld blame to another.

*Monster!* he cried, scrambling from me. *What have you made me do?* His eyes darted from the white face of his dead wife to the red of his living babe, and he stretched out his arms to either one as if they were pinioning nails to be driven through his helpless hands. *Go! Get out of my sight! Mercy of heaven, what have you done to me?*

Then he saw the dagger. It leaped to his hand—not to kill me, no, not even then—and darted for his throat; he would drown the hellflames in blood. My shriek and spring were faster, my own hand quick to strike the blade away. It spun from his fingers, and dropped into the cradle.

Yowl, little one! So newly born, so newly blooded. I snatched the babe from the cradle in fear, then saw our luck: only a scratched cheek. I touched the wound, blood dewing my fingertips.

He grabbed the baby from me. *Dark beast, you will not have him, too!*

I pressed my fingers to my lips with the pain his hard words gave me, my fingers still moist with the infant's blood. How could I resist and still be what I am? My tongue darted out to taste...

And he saw whose blood it was I'd sampled. Under the weight of ignorance all his world crashed around him. He sank down, hugging the infant tight against his chest until I thought him like to smother it. *Lost! The gift of blood makes you their creature! Oh, my son, my son!* His moan was wild enough to tear open the burning paps of the stars.

I crept near. He was tiptoe on the edge of madness, my poor master. A whisper of wrong saying and he would topple in, taking the babe with him. *Hush, you grieve too deeply.* I gave him comfort. *To bind, the blood must be a willing gift. He is as free as any newborn child, I swear.*

He dared to lift his eyes from the babe, his face haggard. *By what can you swear?* His voice was the rattle of dry bones in armor.

*By the gift I meant to give him,* I replied, taking breath. *I will suckle him. He will be my son, too, and from me gain the blood-blessed power of unending life. For the love I bear you, Master—*

*For love, you would turn my son into...* He did not finish. The frenzy was draining from him, reason returning. All that he said was, No.

I bowed my head. What bound us now went beyond the laws of blood. He turned from me, to tuck his son back into the cradle. Every flicker of the firelight that fell upon his bared and bloodied chest sent an ache of longing through me. *You will not—you will not banish me for this?* I begged.

*What a thought!* Still turned from me, he rocked the child. *After all you have done for me, for my parents...* He sighed. *But I do wish you would return to the shape you had before. It is less... disturbing for me.*

Because it was his will and not mine, I could slip back into cat-form without a second blood-theft from the corpse: a Change command is not a Change desired. Later, by the fireside, he took me into his lap and said, *You are my finest treasure, Puss; my dearest love shall have you. From this day forward, you are his. Guard him, make his fortune, set him high.*

It could not be. By all our laws, I had but one master. He would not see that. Love blinded one eye, Death the other. *One wish, and I will ask no more.* He scratched behind my ears and tickled the fur under my chin. *For love of me, breed him to princes.* He made no further request of me until the day he died.

*Breed him to princes.*

*You see, Child?* Her voice tugged me gently back into the present. *When you stole that poor dead woman's blood for your master's sake, you bound yourself to him beyond the grave. Though he is dead, his wish survives and fetters you. You chose it so. Satisfy it and be free.*

My broken prison still entrapped me, but I managed to open and shut my eyes once, slowly, so that she might understand my submission. Fingers of sweet healing stroked my fur. Bone knit to bone, raveled skeins of bloodthreads mended. I licked my whiskers, wildly seeking the precious taste of blood, and rasped my tongue over nothing. The strand where the shapetide ran melted away beneath me. The stable walls shook with the anguish of my howls.

*Hush,* she counseled. *Bear this, fulfill the final compact, and your freedom will follow.* Her wings were moonbright, soothing my waking eyes. The stable walls could not hope to hold them. Timbers splintered and collapsed outward into the frosty night. She stopped to sweep me up against her breast and carried me off into the woodland.

She left me standing by a stream, black water dappled with the silver of shattered stars. The boots still clamped my feet tightly, but her parting gift was the Change that let me walk upright in them, in the teeth of the pain.

My nose sifted the air for scent. Rime hung on every indrawn breath; I breathed diamonds. And then *his* smell—a stink to rake me raw. He was near, he must be. She never would have brought me this far else.

Can you name the look to put on his wide, coarse face when he saw me coming toward him by moonlight, the little heels of my scarlet boots crunching deep and surefooted into the snow? Astonishment is a milky name to put to such an expression, and it turned wholly to vapor in the blast of hot shock when I opened my mouth and greeted him in human speech.

The satin sash, the velvet cape, the little felt cocked hat with its fluttery plume, he fetched them all at my bidding. I never asked how he got them. Thievery had a hand in it, I am sure, and bullying where thievery was too blunt a measure. He obeyed me

utterly, in awe, and his reward was my promise: *I will breed you to princes.*

So my task began.

There is always a king fool enough to dismiss wisdom in the name of novelty; he was not too hard to find. To see a cat walk in boots, and talk, and then to hear that it comes bringing you gifts of game—well! There's a hard lure to resist. He was fat faced and ruddy, that old king, his jowls marbled like fine beef. The white wig on his head was tipsy from the hasty hand he'd used to put it on, showing the mottled patches of bulge-veined scalp beneath the hairdresser's masterpiece. At that first interview he wore no crown.

The second time I came calling, he corrected the oversight. I was a wonder, but after the initial thrill of seeing a creature so unique, he must have noticed that his court was paying just as much attention to me, and not enough to him. Therefore, pomp. I and my sack of grouse and pheasant must wait outside the grand throne room while trumpets sounded and pigeon-chested heralds bawled, "The emissary of the Marquis of Carrabas!"

The first time, he greeted me in a mere antechamber, but this was the crystal-hung jewel of all the rooms in his palace. Everywhere I looked, my eyes met spotless white, or gleaming gilt, or the brilliant, blind sheen of mirrors. The courtiers stood in stiff rows of starched lace and embossed brocade, lips quivering like pinned butterflies behind the fluttering shields of fan and handkerchief and glove. Splendid as a winter's dawn, the king upon his massive, golden throne. Lost, or deliberately put aside, the childlike expression of avid wonder he'd worn when first he laid eyes on me. His wig was on straight, too.

"You may approach us," he intoned, stretching forth his scepter. It was so knobbed and crusted with gems that it looked like a tree-branch warted over with strange, sparkling fungi. Tiny red-heeled shoes with golden buckles squeezed his feet. I could have smiled. *Hail, fellow sufferer! Greeting, my brother in torment! Let us put aside sham, Your Majesty, and find a place apart where we can kick off these painful bindings and be what we truly are.*

I knew better than that, though, and the obeisance I made before the throne was every aspiring courtier's model of perfection. Loosening the hempen ties of the gunnysack, I brought forth each succulent bird one by one, praising it on points and plumage, noting well the plumpness of breast and thigh until I'd robbed the old man of all his plastered-over dignity and had him slaving, eyes aglow with nurtured gluttony.

He recovered himself enough to thank me and my master, the Marquis, for our kind attentions. The more rhapsodic his praise, the surer I knew that words were all we'd have from him in recompense. That was all right: what he would not give freely, I had means to take, in time. Besides, my plans had cause to thank his words, for had he not spent so much time enamored of his own tongue, I might never have beheld the princess.

She came late to the high-ceiled audience chamber, entering without excuse or



ceremony. Tall and proud, she was a creature lacking shame or fear. The courtiers parted before her, wheat stalks bending away from the reaper's hook. Planked in panels of heavily embroidered white satin, sleeves dripping gold lace, diamonds frosting her dark hair, she cut through the room like the hungry black fang of the plow.

*Breed him to princes.*

Yes, and such a one as this. I met her eyes and liked what I saw. We were kin. She was born to be a devourer of men. It would serve him right.

Courts are great places for gossip. I made it my business to glean some before I left. The king commanded his cooks to offer me refreshment, which all of us took in a salon where the walls were hung with rose taffetta, and serving maids goggled to watch a cat drink wine. I lingered as long as I might, lapping glass after glass and cocking a pointed ear to catch any crumb of knowledge the courtiers might let fall. I departed the castle with an empty gunnysack and a brain crammed full of information.

It would please king and daughter to go out driving next day, by the river road. It was cold the morning I brought my old master's son to the riverbank, the ice and snow gone, but their specters still lying over land and water. I do not think any human mind could fathom the wicked glee of my heart when I told him to strip naked and jump in.

Mistake nothing: I would not have him die. His death would never bring my freedom. Oh, but it was a rare pleasure to see him stare at me, disbelieving, and be brought up short by recollection of my fine promises, and obey. I destroyed the rustic smock and hose while he floundered in the chill water, cursing. I had hardly done it when the rattle of coaches from the road summoned me to the next part of my plan.

"Help! Help, ho!" My paws flailed the air; I brandished my plumed hat to make the coachmen see so small a creature as a cat before the horses trampled me. "Robbers, thieves, rascals and hounds! They have despoiled my good master, the Marquis of Carrabas!"

The coaches reined up sharply, the beef-faced king shouting orders that were obeyed instants before they fully left his lips. Lackeys scuttled down the frozen bank to haul my old master's son from the water. Horseblankets wrapped him in their stable smell, stinging my eyes with remembrance of all I owed him. He was bundled into the king's own coach, and I scrambled after.

He was not so stupid as I feared. He kept his mouth shut, scenting fortune. The king marked him for a modest man, but I felt a tug at my spirit and read contempt in the princess' green eyes. Together we were whirled back to the castle, and while the king decked out my old master's son in cloth-of-gold and satin, I paced before the fire.

"Puss." My name, a hiss. Green eyes behind the heavy draperies, and a white hand beckoning me into the shadows. My whiskers twitched. Her scent was all

jasmine and gillyflower. There was a small door, a passage suitable to servant's use, or assassin's. This lavishly appointed chamber granted to my lord, the Marquis of Carrabas, was one reserved for those of whom the king still cherished doubts.

I followed her, vanishing as cats are wont to vanish. There were no lights in the narrow passageway, a lack which troubled neither her nor me. Fresh air stirred the small fur of my face and we were in a deserted hall. From there three twists and a roughcut flight of stairs brought us into the princess' own chamber.

No white here, nor frail yellow gold, nor any of the pallid waterwashed colors most prescribed for princesses. Bed and floor and walls were draped and spread and hung with rich stuffs colored like a dragon's hoard, like the spoils of a long-dead city. My scarlet boots clicked over little, winking tiles like those I had known of old, among the tumbled pillars of my home. A fireplace of black marble grinned, glibly hideous with gargoyles. On the abandoned needlework frame I saw the icy, critical stare of the pale god's mother.

"Come to the window, Puss," the princess said. There was but one. It was narrow and dingy-paned, a poor view for a royal lady. Her eyebrows, feathery as a moth's arched high with bitter amusement. I leaned against the slanty sill and gazed across the green lands to a vast forest fencing the horizon.

"There, to the east," she directed. "One turret is all you can make out from here, beyond the trees; a turret like a thorn. A thorn in my father's side greater than the one my mother lodged in his heart when I was all the heir her body could bear him."

I saw it then, a tower sere and brown. The setting sun's last light was swallowed up at a gulp by the hungry stones. I dropped from the window, landing on my booted feet. "Whose castle is it, Highness?"

"Who knows?" Her laughter fell around my ears like chips of stone. "It lies over one of the finest trade routes in these lands, that much I know, and guards the freest, shortest passage to the sea. Much good that does our people. It has been decades since any man of our kingdom was fool enough to try herding his goods over that road."

"None come back?" I did not need to question when I saw the answer in her face.

"None whole," she replied, her little pink mouth a hard line. "Once, when I was out riding the meadows as a child, I saw another horse come galloping toward me. He was very beautiful, a roan, and riderless. But from the silver saddle on his back there hung a heavy sack, and when I leaned forward to grab his bridle, it fell into the grass. He bucked and plunged away from me, heels kicking out to shatter my poor pony's hind leg. As we fell, he raced away. My pony limped and screamed, bobbing and lurching back to the stables where one of my father's men cut her throat for mercy. I was left behind."

"And the sack," I said.

"Oh, yes. The sack." A pin whose tip is black with poisoned gum can leave a scratch behind much like her smile. "Would you like to know what was in the sack, Puss?"

I did not need that knowledge. "Their heads?" My black-slit eyes held hers. "Or if they were men who died, then—"

She shrieked with what was almost mirth. "Really, Puss! I expected more discretion of such a fine courtier. To speak of such things before a virgin." She pressed her hands against the granite sill until the knuckles bulged and whitened. "All the messengers my father ever sent there vanished. Even knowing what my father knew, all of them carried pretty vellum scrolls offering the castle's unknown lord my hand and body in exchange for free trade and safe conduct. When you arrived, I hoped you had come to tell us that it is the lair of your dear master, the Marquis of Carrabas."

I cocked my head. "Why?"

"Because if my life is a mere trader's token, to be sold to that castle's lord, I would like to purchase it back myself. I have the price." She left the window to kneel before a small painted chest at the foot of her bed. The olivewood casket she lifted from it might have housed the grisly relics of a saint. The black-blade dagger it did contain was exquisite, a tangle of inlaid silver lying like cobwebs over the amber handle. Having dazzled my eyes with its spare loveliness, she replaced it in its casket, dropping a single fold of plain linen over the blade like a shroud.

"I see my wedding gift must wait," she said.

That night, while my old master's son ate and drank at the king's own table, I found occasion to draw aside His Majesty's prime minister and issue formal invitation to the castle of my lord the Marquis of Carrabas on the morrow. His look went from perplexity to cold cowardice when he heard exactly where I would have him bring his sovereign.

I raised a paw to staunch his babblings. "My lord the Marquis of Carrabas is well aware of all atrocities committed against your people. I tell you, Lord, they are a gall on his heart, not the work of his hands at all. What can a younger brother do, when title and power are held by a madman? I do not like to recall how many times he and I were dragged to the brink of death at his elder brother's insane fancy. My kind can only offer so much protection to our charges, you know."

"Yes, yes, to be sure," the prime minister huffed and fumbled. "That is, I have heard the stories—Three wishes, isn't it? Or is it the baptismal gift I am thinking of? Oh dear, so many tales... Do you fairies all subscribe to the same protocols?"

A cat's eyes hide humor wonderfully well. "Your pardon, but I am not at liberty to say."

"Doubtless, of course." He coughed into his fist. "Then I may assume the former lord is... dead?"

"He will not trouble us more. Only bring His Majesty and his honest daughter to my lord's castle tomorrow noon, and you shall see for yourself how truly things have changed within the realm of my lord the Marquis of Carrabas."

That night, I crept up by arrow slit and ivy and unplastered crack between stone

and stone into the princess' chamber and stole the dagger from its olivewood coffin. I had no sword, you see, and my old master's son would never let awe of me make that great a fool of him. He still remembered all he'd done to me. Put a blade in my paw, he? Oh, certainly! But I must have a sword.

The stableboy drowsed, and the horse was wild enough to recognize my lordship and come silently. I leaped onto his bare rump, straddled his neck, hooked claws through his mane, and turned him down the right road.

All that night we galloped through plowland and woodland until in the hours before dawn we came into plowland again. How simple, to terrorize the peasants as they went stoop-shouldered to their chores! They had never seen my like, and a gambol of my dagger before their faces was enough to convince them that worse than their current master's wrath awaited them if they disobeyed me.

"Carr-Carrabas?" The old man stumbled over the alien name. "We are to say that these lands belong to the Marquis of Carr—Cabra—?" He rubbed his gnarled hands up and down the handle of his mattock as he forced the words into memory.

His wife screwed her leathery, toothless face into a grimace that could have been anger or fear or even— miracle!—defiance. "Creature, if our true lord hears of this, he will kill us."

"*If*, old woman," I said. "But the dead hear nothing."

Her muddy eyes, the whites yellowed as old parchment, slid sideways toward the turret. She never looked in that direction willingly. "He is not dead."

"Much changes, Mother." I flipped the dagger from paw to paw. What I lacked in the dexterity of human fingers, I made up for in adaptive skills gathered through many centuries and many skins. Thumbs or no thumbs, my grip was sure. "You never thought to see his death, did you? Well, neither did you think to see a being like myself, yet here I am! Get used to wonders."

She shook her head. "I will not believe in anything unless I see it with these eyes. Until I see him dead, my lord lives, and while he lives, I know the power of his rage. I know nothing about you, Cat. For all I know, you are my lord himself, come in one of his many shapes to test our loyalty."

"What? Could it be—?" Her words struck ice into the old man's heart. He dropped his mattock and clutched his throat with both hands as he fell to his knees beside my steed. "Mercy, my lord!" he shrilled, hunched into a rocking ball of terror nearly under my horse's hooves. "I knew it was you—in truth, I did! And if you would have your slave tell these strangers that these lands belong to the Marquis of Carrabas, shall I disobey your command? Oh, have mercy!" He grabbed for my boots, making the horse shy.

"Enough!" I spat. "I bring you a new master, know it! The old, bad days are done. A lighter hand will lie over your lives if you are loyal to him. Easier tribute, more left behind to fill your own bellies, an end to fear, all these for the ones wise enough to stand for my lord the Marquis of Carrabas. But as for those too foolish to see the good of this exchange of masters, the exile's road, the landless man's death."

The old man was past confusion now. I could almost hear the flapping of a thousand wings inside his hollow skull. The old woman, though, had hard-soled feet planted deep and certain in the earth. She would not yield.

"Trickster!" she screeched. "Get gone and leave us to our work! We will have no new masters!" She banged my mount a hard blow on the rump with the handle of her hoe. The horse belled and reared. I clung madly to the mane, but kept my seat and never lost the hold on my dagger.

"I say you will!" My mouth stretched wide in a hiss of fury. A jab of my claws turned the stallion and sent him barreling down upon her. She shrieked as the hooves struck her to the dirt. I wrenched the beast's mane, making him wheel and trample her again and again, until her blood ran brown as the muck where her old man still groveled.

At last she was dead enough to satisfy even her own doubts. I urged my mount on, leaving her mate to crawl timorously toward her body, as if afraid he lacked the right to claim even that. From the next hilltop's rise I called back to him, "Remember! These are the lands of—"

And between sob and sob over the mangled corpse I heard him choke out the name, "—the Marquis of Carrabas!"

The other peasants I encountered were more tractable. Shepherdesses and cowherds and goose girls will say anything without wasting too much thought over it. That was good. It freed my mind to think over something the old woman had said before:

*For all I know, you are my lord himself, come in one of his many shapes to test our loyalty.*

How many shapes? The shape of a roan stallion, to bring a young princess a ghoulish gift? The shape of a cat in boots and courtly finery, to trick his peasant bondsmen? The shape of something fit to kill such a cat, too? It was not a thought to bring me comfort. The castle lay open, drawbridge down over a moat clotted almost solid with silt and tousled weeds. The keep itself was full of the cold, sour-salty smell of rancid blood. My boots sounded echoes from the great hall's floor of lapis lazuli and snowy marble slabs, the echoes flying up to roost among the nests of golden owls who perched on the painted rafters. Torches burned red on the walls, and there was an underthread of bitter incense burning, too feeble to erase the ingrained reek of death. I licked my lips with hunger and went on.

He lolled upon the throne in ogre's guise, so warted and tusked and walleyed that his hideousness reduced itself to caricature. A yearling calf bawled and struggled in his hairy fist, liquid brown eyes brimming with mortal terror. I dreamed. I scented its mother's milk still wetting the mottled pink-and-black muzzle. A wrench of the ogre's free hand tore head from neck. He let the gouting blood gush over his purple gums as if he were a harvest hand draining a noonday wineskin.

Then he was a man, Change effected in an eyeblink. "Greetings, Cousin." He jumped from the sword-scarred throne and sauntered toward me, trim and elegant in

blue satin and steel. His narrow waist, his ample chest, his long and supple legs and arms were all crisscrossed with glimmering chain. He carried its weight light as spring, and the galley slave's collar and manacles were jeweled to show he wore them only in submission to himself.

He bowed, black boots pointing elegantly. I doffed my hat and made a poor imitation of his polished gesture. He laughed. "Why do we stand on ceremony, Cousin? It has been too long since one of my own kindred came calling. Will you take some refreshment?" He waved at the drained body of the calf. "There is plenty more where that came from, and enough for all."

Outlaw. Renegade. Lost. We have them among our number, as do mortals. They break the laws of blood and binding, pilfer Change and cheapen it past redemption by boldly taking what must be willingly offered. For this, in time, they forfeit the rebirth that is our right. Masters of many skins, slaves of a single life that even a clever mortal may someday steal away, they can be truly killed. Therefore they live with fear. Therefore they slay as many mortals as they can. They are the ones who have earned us all the name of monster. We are brought up to condemn them out of hand. We know how close we ourselves tread to the paths of darkness they have chosen.

And yet this mortal mask of his with its evil, exciting beauty made me burn.

I drank the blood he offered because it was offered. Hat and sash and silly boots lay cast aside, the dagger clattered to the floor. I watched his eyes grow wide and warm as I bloomed unclothed into the princess' guise. "You are an artist, little Cousin," he said, the sharp planes of his face crinkling with a badly mimed boy's mischief.

"This?" My hands cupped the weight of the princess' brown-tipped breasts. "No artistry here; it is not original."

"No?" He sounded disappointed. "I had hoped—"

"So few of us create. Surely you know that much, even shut away here?" I went on. "We are all apes and magpies."

A shadow of storm fell across his face. "That is not so." The question my eyes sent him gained the further answer, "I own shapes that never were made in this papery-dull world."

It seemed to matter to him. I knew I could not take him in open combat—not with Change his good, obedient hound and me locked in this body. Still, the sword aside, there are venoms. You have only to know into which cup you must drop the fatal dose.

"I should like to see that," I said.

In a room small and dark, lit by a single brazier's light, he showed me. I sat cross-legged on a silk rug that tickled my thighs and I had a low table with a glass bubble of wine at my elbow. He stood across the cupped coals from me, playing the showman.

"Scales," he said, and raised a gold goblet to his lips. At once his lower limbs fused, blue satin ending in a muscular coil of serpent's body which itself ended oddly in a peacock's full-fanned tail.

I nodded, impressed, but careful not to let it show. He saw only polite acknowledgment in my eyes and lost his smile. There was another small table, twin to mine, on his side of the fire. It held besides the empty goblet two rock crystal bowls awash in red. "Claws," he muttered, and drank one of them dry.

The beast he became had a human face, a lion's forequarters, and the hindparts of a dragon. Emerald horns curled from its head, and its talons were all keen obsidian. "Oh," I said. "How charming."

An enraged roar burst from the monster's throat, then broke into unintelligible rumblings. He lapped the second crystal bowl empty and was his man-shape again. "You do not find these forms original enough for your taste, Cousin?"

I let my laughter walk the wire between indifference and scorn. "You have lived too long alone," I replied. "The mortals have crammed their scribblings and daubings with a host of patchwork creatures like these."

"I suppose you could do better."

I shrugged. "We may never know." I indicated the empty vessels.

"Is that all?" Hands on hips, he grinned. "Then a bargain, Cousin. One more attempt for me to impress you out of hand, and if that fails then I shall take you to my storeroom and give you the means to match or master me at Change. Will you?"

I pretended detachment. "Try."

"Wings," he announced, and ducked behind an ill-hung tapestry. He emerged still man-form, but with the broad, black wings of a bat springing from between the chains lashing his back. A smile showed the sweet, sharp teeth he'd borrowed to complete the shape, white fangs between which a snake's tongue darted wickedly.

But oh, the greater magic of his eyes.

His eyes were blood afire, the lure of Change's ancient, eternal promise. I could not see that and be still and still be what I am. I stood and came toward him, as a bird must stumble near and nearer to the viper's yellow eye. His wings oared the air, folded themselves around me. I felt their leathery skin embrace my nakedness, wrapping me in lightless, inescapable captivity. And I did not desire the light; I desired only the dark, and the blood, and him.

His forked tongue licked a painful line of yearning along the taut line of my jaw, then traced a cool, teasing arabesque over my throat. The heat of his breath seared away the dew his pretty tongue left behind, and the power of its hard, dry flame offered up every part of me for the burning.

"Do you give it willingly?" he whispered. "Do you give it willingly, the blood?"

I could not speak. I could only nod my head and let it droop to one side like a dying flower. I heard him chuckle, and felt the stab of fangs in my own flesh, the

short, strong suction, and the ecstasy that lifted me past any I had ever known; then the release as he let me go. I heard my voice cry out, begging him not to leave me yet, to come back, to take more, more, all that I had in fee for that unholy consummation. My fingers clawed his wings, only to feel them melt away into smoke and laughter.

"You see?" Through blurred eyes I looked up to see him back to his unaltered man-form, mocking me. I lay crumpled at his feet, hands clinging to his boots, face pressed against his thigh so hard that the chains branded my cheek.

I gathered my wits and let go my hold. Some quality of my former shape remained to let me regain my feet with a feline grace and sureness I did not really feel. I made an effort to brush the dust from my skin the way a cat uses washing to ignore the world. "I admit I am impressed," I said, subduing my voice so it should not quaver. "Only—" I forced a yawn "—only it is such a shame that..."

"That what?" Suddenly he lost mastery of the joke.

"Oh, nothing. Silly. It was flawless, your last shape, I think; a sophisticated exercise. I found it pleasant, playing your mortal victim's part. Did I do it well? You can be proud enough of it without—"

"*What* is a shame?" He roared well even out of lion's form.

"That so small a Change takes so much blood to manage," I answered. "There, that's all."

He grabbed my wrist and dragged me under the tapestry. The stair concealed there led, as I suspected, to the storeroom he had mentioned. The chamber had eight sides and was windowless. I thought we must be in the turret that the princess could see from her quarters, and wondered whether she was gazing this way even now, before the royal coaches departed to bring my lord the Marquis of Carrabas home.

Beeswax candles tried to sweeten the air. A thick oak board set on trestles was the only piece of furniture. The woman on the table was whiter than the shell of my old master's wife. A serviceable kitchen knife with a blade curved like the dying moon lay on her breast, below the slit in her throat. Whimperings and hoarse prayers in many voices came from the curtained alcoves all around us. Behind one dusty velvet hanging I heard a child wailing for its dam.

Not for long. He snatched up the knife and darted behind the drape. The wailing rose to a scream, died to a gurgle. Two full cups were in his hands when he came back.

"Would you call this measure much blood, Cousin?" he asked, his eyes grim. View halloo, the artist challenged!

I took the cup he gave me and considered it long enough to irritate him more. "It is scant enough."

"Now let it be you who names the Change we must effect on so little substance, and the prize shall go to the one who best meets it," he said.



"Prize?" I blinked. "We did not speak of prizes. What can I give you, who are already lord of this grand estate?"

He pinched my chin so hard I gasped. The savor of my own blood was a disturbing ghost on his breath. "If you win, Cousin, you may name your own prize; and if I win, I know enough to take what I want."

He let me go, and I stepped back, trying not to let him see me shake. "You shall have it," I promised, raising the cup to him in pledge. "Now, let me see the full range of your art. Great monsters, great beasts, fiends too immense for these human cattle to comprehend, those are all very well and good. You are a peerless architect for monuments. But do you have also the jeweler's subtle touch? Can you work your creations in the perfection of miniature?" Here I lowered my eyes modestly. "My sisters claim that when I slip skins and Change myself into a small, smoke-gray fieldmouse, no one can approach the refinement I bring to that form."

His brow furrowed. "That is all your challenge? A mouse?"

"I know it does not sound like much of a Change to someone like yourself, but it is harder than it sounds. With monsters, fear distracts your audience; they overlook details, miss flaws. And it is my specialty. I warn you, I will be a very exacting critic; see that you are the same! But if you feel uncomfortable trying something new—"

"Drink!" he shouted, and clinked his cup so hard against mine I feared he'd spill them both. Fortune had it otherwise. We drank; he Changed first, as I knew he must. That was all I needed. I pounced.

He was delicious.

The storeroom captives I freed knew right away it was a miracle when a cat in boots and sash and cape and high-plumed hat came to their rescue. They were more than happy to throw all their strength into clearing away the worst of the "ogre's" souvenirs and scrubbing down much of the castle. Liveries were found, shaken out, the best ones darned here and there and put on. Instead of being turned into supper, they rejoiced to be transformed into the loyal servitors of the Marquis of Carrabas, ready to receive their lord and his regal guests. And if His Majesty the king found their manners to be a little rough and their garb a little shabby, he ascribed it to the lax standards of the previous reign.

They were wed next week, my old master's son and the stone-eyed princess. Her father never asked her opinion of the match, but neither did he question why his son-in-law turned over all the treaty papers and marriage documents to me for reading and written imprimatur.

The boots would not let me curl up to sleep outside the marriage-chamber door. I stood instead, ears pricked, and heard it all. She would not have him, he would have her. The bonds were sealed, he said, making her his by right. Away from king and court, he did not hesitate to use the harshest language of his simple upbringing. She answered in kind, but her haughty words were slapped from her mouth at once, and then again, and a third time for the joy of it. She used a name to him then that changed open slaps to knuckled pummeling. She was choking on sobs when he had

her. The pain he gave her crashed over me with such intensity that I scarcely felt it when my last bond to my old master broke and I was free.

*Breed him to princes.* Well, I had done that. I could go. But I waited by the door instead until his grunts and her groans alike ended. I waited in the silence that came. I waited until the door itself inched back on its hinges and she crept into the hall.

"A fine bargain you made me, Puss," she said when she saw me, making me taste her bile. There were red blotches under her eyes that would blacken, and a spill of red from the middle of her lower lip. Her lace-edged lawn gown too was patched with blood, the coin of my bought liberty. Seeing what he had made of her, I knew I had gained a freedom I would never enjoy, until... unless...

In speechless apology I offered up the dagger I had stolen. She shook her head, refusing it. "A raw girl's fancies. I was a fool. That sliver can't kill him. The blade's too short for any mortal wound."

"You might slit his throat," I suggested.

"His neck is like a bull's. I haven't the power of a butcher's arm, and if I cannot end it with the first blow, he will wake, take the blade from me, and then— then—" Her legs folded beneath her. She knelt on the stones, wringing her hands. "My father has his trade agreement, my husband has his castle and my dowry. I am no use to either, any more. Do you know what he said to me? *Except for the money you bring me, princesses and peasant girls fuck the same!* If I attempt his life, the law is with him if he kills me. Even if it means I must live with him, I do not want to die. I hate myself for being such a coward, but—Puss, oh Puss, what shall I do?"

I knew what I must do. While one is captive, none are free, and freedom's price has always been the same. My grip was firm on the silver-webbed amber handle. The pain was not so much. I showed her a brave face, and to her spirit's credit she did not shrink away in loathing or dismay when she saw me stand before her with the dagger driven deep into my breast. With the last of my blood-choked breath I told her to pull out the blade, and also how she might repay the gift I freely offered her now. As she raised my draining body to her lips, she also pressed my mouth against the pulsing vessel she had opened for me just beneath her ear.

So now we lie here, she and I, feeling the gentle warmth of Change steal over us. (Our Mother has approved and welcomed her; all is well.) She will cling to her original shape, I think, until confidence in her new life grows. So did we all, at first. She will still look like the princess she was born, though with those few small, elegant refinements I have suggested to her. As for me, my choice is made. Call it his memorial. If I could have let him live and still obtained my freedom, he might have me wrapped in those fiery black wings yet.

My own wings form, unfurl, stretch across the moonstreaked floor. Hers extend in turn to brush the dagged edge of mine in greeting. We smile at one another.

*I never knew you were male, Puss.*

*You will learn, love, that such nice distinctions as ever male or female are for mortals. Ah, but what small fangs you have! Next time, perhaps you will be*

*bolder.*

*You will see, Puss, that they are good enough for what I have in mind.* She guides me back through the closed bedroom door and shows me she is bold enough after all.

And when the servants find him in the morning, will they first gasp at the bloodless body of their one-week's master, or question what has become of his wife?

Or will they only stare at what we tore from him in trophy and in trade for one tiny, wrinkled, scarlet boot?