

Rat-Catcher

Seanan McGuire

Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

London, England, 1666

September

London is burning.

London is burning, and she is dead, and yet I must consider myself victorious, for others yet live. It is a cold comfort. It will have to do. How small a stretch of time stands between here, where all is ashes, and the days when I was innocent and thought myself yet young, and all the world was meant to be my stage...

July, 1666

I knew she was there.

Jill believed herself stealthy. Perhaps she would have been correct, had I not been the cat of the Duke's Theatre for four long years. I knew all the sounds that grand old building was capable of making, including the sound of a barefoot Cait Sidhe girl stalking the rafters.

"Rand!" Jill's voice came from above my head, pitched low to keep it from carrying to the audience below. She scarcely needed to bother. The evening's performance of *Romeo and*

Juliet was in full swing, and no one in the theatre was looking at anything but the stage.

“*Rand!*” She sounded more insistent now, and decidedly more annoyed. I considered my responses, and decided that ignoring her would have the most amusing result. Besides, I have always loved the fight scenes.

My youngest sister dropped from the rafters to the catwalk. It was easily a nine foot drop, but she did it seemingly without effort—something she couldn’t have managed even two years prior. My little Jill was growing up.

That was a sobering thought, and made it all the easier to ignore her as she stalked the length of the catwalk to the place where I sat, legs dangling. She was hissing under her breath, a habit she’d been trying, and failing, to break since kittenhood. Even so, I had little warning before she raised her hand and slapped me across the cheek. Hard. The sound had barely had time to fade before she pulled her hand back for another blow.

I raised a finger. She stopped. “You *could* do that, beloved sister of mine, and as you’re faster than I am, you would likely strike me at least twice more before I dropped you on the nice mortals gathered below us. Do you think you could abandon your current shape before you hit the stage, or would your appearance be the news of all the finest taverns for the next month or so?” I turned to face her, smiling. “Either way, you’d likely be in more trouble than I would.”

She hissed again, openly this time, before snapping, “You’d be the one who pushed me.”

“Yes, but you would be the one who fell.”

Eyes narrowed, she scowled at me. The light from the theatre below us made her look truly lovely, with her milk-pale skin and her fog-colored hair, banded down its length with darker stripes of gray. I have always thought tabby girls were the prettiest kind.

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

She sat with a huff, not bothering to look down; she simply trusted that the catwalk would be where she wanted it to be. “I truly, truly *hate* you,” she said, adopting a cross-legged pose that hiked her layered skirts up past her knees in a way the mortals would call indecent.

“So you do, my darling Jill, so you do, but you love me none the less for it.” I leaned forward to get a better view of the action below, keeping my hands braced on the catwalk for balance. “I do love the way they stage the duels here.”

“You’ve seen this show a dozen times!”

“Closer to a dozen dozens, more likely, and yet I never tire of it.” I glanced away from the actors long enough to grin at her. “Can’t you relax for one evening, and enjoy a little entertainment?”

“No, I can’t, and neither should you.” Jill folded her arms. Her pupils were open to their fullest, reducing her brilliant orange irises to rings. She looked utterly, unrepentantly fae. This high above the mortal crowd, there was no point to masquerading as one of their number. “Father wants you.”

“So he sent you to retrieve me? Did he consider, for a moment, that I might refuse to come?”

“He did, yes.”

“And?”

“And if I fail to retrieve you, I’m to be put to work minding the kittens for a week’s time, to teach me obedience.” Her scowl could have frightened Oberon himself. “I won’t mind kittens for *you*, Rand. You’re coming with me, whether you like it or not.”

“Am I, then?” I raised an eyebrow, looking at her. “Will you fight me in order to bring me home? Much as I love you, darling Jill, I doubt you’d come out the winner in that particular contest.”

“I won’t fight you.”

“Then what?”

“I’ll sit here and cry through your precious performance if you refuse to come. And tomorrow night, when my time in the nursery ends, I’ll do the same. And the night after that, and the night after that, until such time as you apologize to me.” Jill smiled sweetly. “You can save us both a great deal of time and suffering if you simply come with me now.”

I cast a longing look toward the actors. Mercutio was preparing to die, and in the process was layering curses down on both the warring houses. “Are you quite sure Father can’t wait?” “Come *on*.” Jill flowed to her feet with the sort of boneless grace that only Cait Sidhe girls possess, grabbing my arm and tugging as she tried to make me follow. “You know how it ends, Rand. The girl dies. The boy dies. Everyone dies. They’re mortals, that’s what they *do*.”

“I suppose that’s true enough.” I climbed to my feet, more slowly than she had, and followed her along the catwalk toward the wall. I only glanced back twice; a personal best for leaving while the stage was in use. “Everyone dies.”

If anyone in the audience looked up, they would have seen only two tabby cats, one black and brown, one white and gray, climbing up the curtains that hung around the highest of the theatre windows and vanishing out into the night. So far as I know, no one looked.

Jill remained in her four-legged form until we were three full rooftops away from the Duke’s Theatre. Then, with a graceful twist and the smell of silver birch and crushed chalk, she was two-legged again. “You *must* stop running off like this, Rand!” she scolded, planting her hands on her hips for emphasis. It was intended to make her look stern. In actuality, it made me want to ruffle her ears and tell her she was endearing when angry. “Father is furious, and when he’s furious, it’s us that suffer, not you. It’s unfair, is what it is.”

My own magic rose around me, scenting the air with pennyroyal and musk. I stood and looked at her mildly, stretching as I rolled my shoulders into place. She scowled. With Jill, it was

best to be mild as milk and sweet as honey—she couldn't stand it, and anything which drove her to distraction couldn't help delighting me.

"I don't see why you should suffer for my misbehaviors, sweet Jill," I said, widening my eyes in a parody of sincerity. I saw enough of it in my actors; why shouldn't I take a lesson or two from them? "I shall tell Father straightaway."

"And he will put you through a wall just as quickly, leaving us to tend your wounds." Jill glared before turning to stalk away across the roof, her skirts swishing around her ankles.

I followed at an easy pace. There were two chimneys, one hot from the fire it hosted, and one long cooled. Jill stopped at the second chimney, shooting a final glare in my direction before grabbing the edge and hoisting herself up.

"You're coming this time?" she asked.

"I am right behind you; you have my word."

"Worth the paper it's not printed on," she grumbled, shifting to her feline form before leaping into the flue and disappearing.

Laughing, I took two steps back, and then ran at the chimney, shifting forms at the last possible moment. As a cat, I fell through the darkness and out of the realm of mortal London, descending into the Court of Cats.

The Court of Cats exists in the tenuous membrane between the Summerlands and every other realm of mortal or Faerie. As such, it belongs to none of them and all of them, all at the same time. Passage is through the shadows which are the burden and birthright of the Cait Sidhe. In London, those shadows were kept open by the will of the King, Airmire, who had held dominion over our Court for nigh two centuries.

The shadows were cold. I breathed shallowly as I fell, trying to feel the edges of our route. My efforts were to no avail; the shadows remained as thick and secretive as they always did. I still had much to learn about the Shadow Roads. Jill was more adept at their manipulation, despite having only sixteen years to my twenty. By the time I fell back into the light and shifted to a more human form, she was nowhere to be seen.

The hall which connected to the chimney we had used for passage was broad, apparently hewn from solid oak. I sniffed one of the walls, curiously. It smelled of wood smoke and pitch. "Viking construction," I said. "Really, Jill. Too simple."

"You still had to check," she said, stepping out of a shadow to my left. I turned toward the sound of her voice, and thus my back was entirely unprotected when Colleen slammed into me, her hands going straight for my throat. Jill yawned. "Too simple."

I would have answered her, but was preoccupied with the effort of keeping my older sister

from throttling the life out of my body. I managed to twist around and catch her by the back of the neck, grabbing tightly. She struggled to be free, and I obliged her, releasing her neck and giving her a shove for good measure. She snarled as she stumbled backward, recovering her balance before shifting her weight onto her toes and leaping once more. I was more prepared this time, and stepped to the side, allowing her to slam into the wall. The impact mashed her lips back against her teeth, bloodying them.

Colleen raised a hand to her mouth, pulling it away and looking narrow-eyed at the blood on her fingers. Then she turned to smile at me, revealing bloody teeth and oversized incisors. "Very good, little brother," she said. "Maybe we won't be spending another week by your bedside after all."

I sighed. "Hello, Colleen, you look lovely this evening, it's always such a pleasure to share the loving bosom of my family with such a glorious sister. To what do I owe the honor of your attack?"

"Father is angry," she replied, lowering her hand. "I grow tired of covering for you."

"Yet you do it all the same." I smiled at her. Colleen scowled in response. I had long suspected that she and I came from the same mother, although Father would, of course, never confirm something so common as lineage. She was calico-patterned, with blocks of black and orange skin carrying over even into her human form, and her eyes were a sweet, clear shade of green. There was a certain similarity to our features, once the differences of gender and coloration were accounted for.

"You'll be the death of us," she snapped. Stepping forward, she looped her arm through mine. Jill did the same on my opposite side. "No more running."

"Not tonight," I agreed, affably enough.

Still scowling, my sisters pulled me down the hall, and toward the inevitable.

In my twenty years, I had never seen a Court of Cats outside of mortal London, or the fae Kingdom of Londinium. As such, I did not know whether they were all controlled by fear and rage. What little I'd heard from the cats who passed through with traveling humans caused me to believe that some Courts might, in fact, be kinder places for a kit who dreamt of things more fanciful than simple power. Not that it would have mattered if every other Court of Cats was a paradise second only to Tirn Ailil itself. The Court of Fogbound Cats was my home, and it was that Court's King who I and my sisters called Father.

Jill and Colleen released my arms as the three of us shifted to our four-legged forms, the better to navigate the narrow rigging connecting the throne room to the rest of the Court. Father's assemblies were conducted in what was once the hold of a Spanish sailing galleon,

before it was sunk in the mortal world and drifted into the Court of Cats, where all lost things go. How it came into Father's possession was a mystery to me, and likely to remain so. There was much he did not choose to tell me, nor ever would.

Jars filled with captive witch-light were studded around the room seemingly at random, providing illumination for our changeling cousins while also leaving shadows for the rest of us to come and go as we pleased. Father was seated in his throne at the head of the room, as he so often was, with two of his current doxies competing for possession of his lap. One was a pretty calico who looked too much like Colleen for comfort; the other had the dark hands and pale complexion of the Siamese, with the bright blue eyes to match.

Those blue eyes cast a measuring glance in our direction as my sisters and I stood, stretching feline limbs into human lankiness. Her nose wrinkled, and she turned her head to murmur in my father's ear, the cant of her chin telegraphing her displeasure as plainly as a twitching tail.

Whatever result she'd been hoping for, I doubt it was the one she got. Father raised his head, eyes narrowing to baleful slits. Then he stood, sending the women sprawling as he stalked toward us. I smiled, stepping forward to meet him.

"Hello, Father. My dear sister was kind enough to inform me that you—"

His hand closed around my throat, cutting off most of my air supply. I forced myself to keep smiling as he jerked me toward him, snarling into my face, "You were bid to be present when the sun went down. The sun has been down for some time. How do you answer this?"

I coughed, endeavoring to look piteous. It wasn't as difficult as it might have been; the lack of oxygen was beginning to make my lungs ache. He dropped me, hissing in disgust.

"I was otherwise engaged," I said, rubbing my throat and making no effort to rise. To do so too quickly would just result in his slapping me down again. "I apologize for my delinquency. To what do I owe the honor of this summons?"

Father glared. I looked innocently back, the very picture of the faithful Prince awaiting the word of his King. It's a look I have had great occasion to cultivate, since I desired neither challenge nor exile.

I had two brothers, once. They were not so good as I at playing the foolish son—and until such time as Father found a younger brother to bear home to my sisters and I, he would no more press me to challenge him than I would rush the moment.

"You are to go to the Divided Courts," spat Father, finally. "An envoy has been requested for the latest of their assemblies. To show respect, I must send a member of the family. To show scorn, I am sending them *you*."

"Your faith in me will not go unrewarded, Father!" I caroled, bounding to my feet with as much vigor as I could muster. My throat ached, but I would not show weakness; not here, not with him watching my every move. "When shall I depart?"

His smile was terrible to behold. "That is why I summoned you at sunset, my dear boy. They

expect you at any moment. You will have to travel the shadows—and you will have to do so on your own.”

He turned away, walking back to his throne and the waiting arms of his doxies. When I turned, my sisters would not meet my eyes. All too aware of what awaited me, I raised my chin and walked out of the throne room.

My first passage through the shadows occurred when I was eight years of age, still a kitten finding my feet. My father, in his infinite wisdom, opened the door to the Shadow Roads, threw me through the opening, and closed the door again. It was the last of the trials intended to prove that I was, indeed, a Prince of Cats, and not merely another mouth for him to trouble himself feeding.

Colleen found me in a London alleyway three hours later, unconscious, half-frozen, and naked. It was a blessing that I'd not been found by the city's mortal populace as I lay there, clearly inhuman, and just as clearly defenseless. But I had survived; that was what mattered. I was named a potential heir to Father's Court the very next day, and the torment commenced in earnest. Ah, well; it was better than the alternatives.

The shadows in the hall slid open under my hand, and I stepped into the biting cold, trying desperately to command the path to open ahead of me. This was nothing so simple as navigating the comparatively comfortable and well-traveled path between the rooftops of London and the Court of Cats; this was a branch of the Shadow Roads that was little enough walked to be balky, and to make me yearn for Jill's advanced skill as I held my breath and plunged through the dark.

After what seemed an interminable amount of time, the shadows parted in front of me, and I stepped out, shivering, onto the polished marble floor of the royal knowe. The air smelled of sweet posies, and windows on every wall afforded a clear view of the starlit Summerlands sky. I walked with as much grace as I could muster to the nearest of those windows, sitting down upon the sill while I waited for the ache in my lungs to abate.

“I am here, and not eternally lost in frozen darkness,” I said, philosophically. “Things can always be worse.”

“True, but can they be more amusing?”

The voice was female and familiar. I smiled despite the ache in my chest as I turned. “My lady. I would bow, but at the moment, I fear it would land me on either my head or my tail, with no way to predict which would suffer greater damage.”

“As your lack of brain will necessitate your trading upon your looks for most of your life, I suggest your tail.” The owner of the voice was a tall, slender Daoine Sidhe with shockingly red

hair and eyes yellow enough to have caused me to tease her, on several occasions, about her clear Cait Sidhe ancestry. She had none, more's the pity; she would have made a fabulous cat.

We met when circumstance caused me to pursue a mouse into her bedchambers. It's rare that a woman makes her first impression upon me with a broom handle to my skull, but that was September. Rare, indeed, especially for a lady of the Daoine Sidhe. She was the best of them.

"My lady's will be done." I stood, offering her my hands. "My sweet September. I have counted the seconds we were apart."

"Please don't let my husband hear you say that," she said, taking my hands in hers and squeezing them lightly. "Come along, Rand. The court has already been called to order, and your tardiness reflects poorly on your father."

"What a shame," I said blandly, and allowed her to lead me down the hall to the royal receiving room.

The Court of Cats is made up of the world's lost things, rooms and halls and narrow spaces stitched together with enchantments too ancient to see. The knowe of the King and Queen of Londinium was something altogether different, a vast palace beyond the wildest dreams of any mortal regent. It was one of the oldest knowes in all of Britain, and it carried a weight of history that was impressive even by the standards of the fae. Being a cat, I strolled along as if I was not impressed in the least.

"What is this about, this summons?" I asked. "Have your brothers been naughty again? I would be pleased to stand witness to their banishment."

"Nothing so pleasant for you, I'm afraid." September looked at me, the levity gone from her eyes. "The Undersea has sent an ambassador, but he has refused to present his message to the court until a representative of every fief and household in the city proper was present—including the Court of Cats."

I frowned. "That's troublesome, and quite strange, but I do not see the gravity."

"The ambassador is Merrow. The message is Roane."

"Ah." I swallowed, wishing my human form had a tail that I could lash in my dismay. "I suppose we had best hurry, then."

"Yes," September agreed. "We had best."

Of the Roane, only three things need be known: that they see the future, but never clearly; that few of them remain among the living; and that the one disaster they did not foretell was the one which killed the greater part of their number. Some believe they saw even that coming, and decided to allow it, believing that the loss of their lives would balance out some greater tragedy ahead. Perhaps I am a selfish man, but I cannot believe they knew what was coming and chose

to simply let it happen.

What few Roane remained after the slaughter were taken in by the courts of the Undersea, where they have been cosseted and protected as prophets ever since. For a Roane to be sent to the land was near unprecedented...and while I may be young, I have yet to encounter anything that was both unprecedented and pleasant.

September raised a finger to her lips, signaling for quiet as we reached the throne room doors. Two pages in royal livery waited there, both Tylwyth Teg. They bowed and opened the doors, allowing us to slip inside and join the crowd already assembled. September had spoken the truth. There were over twenty independent fiefdoms within the city of London alone, and at least twice that many people occupied the room, looking as anxious and unsettled as actors gathered for a first rehearsal. The King and Queen would be the theatre's patrons, then, sitting on their thrones with the bulk of the assembly before them. That left the director's role for the shark-eyed Merrow standing in front of the thrones. A slip of a girl with hair the color of a seal's pelt hung from his hand like a rag, barely supporting her own weight.

The King raised his head when the door swung closed. His lips pressed together in a hard line as he saw me. "The Court of Cats has finally seen fit to grace us with a guest," he said, and looked to the Merrow. "Might you tell us now why you have come? We are consumed with curiosity."

From the murmuring of the assembled, it was plain the King did not employ the royal "we" in this instance. Everyone here wanted to know, myself included. I slipped away from September, working my way through the crowd with a cat's skill. In only a few moments, I was near the front, where I could better see the Merrow and his silver-haired companion.

"We have come at the bidding of King Murtagh, who has long appreciated the relationship between Londinium and his own lands, and who wished to send a warning to you while warnings might still do some good." The Merrow addressed his words, not to the King and Queen, but to the crowd. Interesting, that.

"And what is this 'warning'?" asked the King, barely keeping the annoyance from his tone.

"A moment, sire." The Merrow turned to the waif who dangled from his hand, crouching to look through the curtain of her hair. "Naia? It's time to speak now, dear heart, and then we can go home. You'd like that, wouldn't you? To go home?"

The Roane girl nodded, so slightly that it might have been only a tremble. Then she raised her head, turning startlingly green eyes on the room. She looked as if she only half-saw us. The rest of her gaze was far away, looking at something I was grateful not to see.

"The waves will keep us safe," she said, in a faltering voice. "The land has no such merciful protection."

"That's true, my dear," he said. "Can you tell the land what they need protection from?"

"Ah." She stood up a little straighter, brushing the hair from her face with her free hand. Gaze suddenly focusing on the present, she said, "The fires will come, and though many will

run, few will survive the burning. In their wake will come sickness such as has never been seen before nor will be seen again, and it will be a second burning, one that kills without concern for fae or mortal bloodlines. Few who call Londinium home will survive those fires, and royal lines will be henceforth shattered into history and dust.”

The room went completely silent as she spoke, all but holding its collective breath. Naia looked from face to face, expression thoughtful.

“I have seen many of you before, in the motion of the water,” she said finally. “Too many have I seen on night-haunt wings. Flee this land while the future can yet be changed. Stay, and may the mercy of the waters be upon you.” The clarity fled her eyes, and she turned back to her companion, whimpering, “Can we go home now? Please? This place is too dry, and too vast, and set too soon by far to burn.”

“Yes, dear one, we can go. You have done well.” The Merrow twisted to look at the King and Queen. “Three seers have brought the same vision to our King. Fires, and sickness, such as will kill whomever remains here. If you would save your people, evacuate and leave your lands. If you will not do so...then may Oberon have mercy, for the flames, I fear, will not.”

The crowd parted to let the Merrow and his companion walk from the room, Naia leaning on him like he was the only thing keeping her upright. The silence lasted only until the pair had left the room. Then the gathering erupted, everyone demanding answers, information, reassurance—all things the King and Queen, being as stunned as the rest of us, were hard-pressed to give.

I made my way through the crowd back to September, who was standing frozen beside the doors. “I should carry this news home, and quickly,” I said. “Will you be well?”

September laughed uncomfortably. “I will tell Malcolm it’s time to visit his family in Wales. He’ll be delighted, I’m sure. Don’t worry for me, Sir Cat.” She reached out, grabbing one of my hands in both of hers, and smiled. “I’m a Torquill. No matter what, we survive. We’re frankly annoying in that regard.”

“See to it that you do,” I commanded, and pulled my hand from hers. The room behind me still alive with outraged voices, I slipped out into the hall and began to make my way toward home.

Fear is a great motivator, and urgency a great enhancer of skill. My journey back to the Court of Cats was only half so difficult as the journey outward had been, and I felt barely chilled when I stepped out of the shadows. I was in another of our endlessly interchangeable halls, this one stone-walled, with tattered tapestries adding little warmth. I stopped before I’d taken three full steps, raising my head and sniffing the air. Then I sighed.

“Please come out,” I said. “This is not the time, and my nerves are too frayed by far to be a

pleasant opponent in a game of catch-the-mouse.”

“You’re no fun when you’re serious,” declared Colleen, stepping from behind one of the tapestries. Then she frowned, pupils narrowing. “You’re pale. Rand, are you well? What ails you?”

“Is Jill here?” I looked around the hall again, consumed with the sudden need to see the both of my sisters alive and well. “Jill, come out. I have no patience for games.”

A tabby cat slunk out of the shadows at the base of one wall, and stood, resolving itself into my sister. Her frown melted into a look of concern that mirrored Colleen’s. “Brother?”

I stepped forward, grabbing each of them with one arm and sweeping them into a crushing three-part embrace. Jill squeaked, sounding almost like a kitten herself. Then they both embraced me back, purring soothingly. I buried my face in their shoulders, breathing in the reassuring scent of them, Jill’s crushed chalk and silver birch, Colleen’s thistles and juniper. Dimly, I realized that my shoulders were slumped, the sheer terror of the Roane’s prediction pressing down on them like leaden weights.

London, and Londinium, were to burn. Whatever disaster was ahead of the city, the normal delineation between worlds would not protect those of us who lived there.

“Rand, what’s *wrong*?” asked Colleen.

I pulled away from their embrace, keeping hold of their arms as I studied their faces. They looked back at me, wide-eyed and bewildered.

“If I told you that we had to run, leave this Court and flee as far as legs would carry us, would you go?” I asked, urgently. “Would you trust me, and follow me, and not ask why?”

Colleen raised her hand, rubbing its edge along my cheek. “You know we couldn’t. Father would find us, and the punishment would be worse than whatever fate you had us flee.”

I sighed. “Would that I were half so sure as you.” I stepped back, letting the pair of them go. “I must go meet with Father. Will you attend?”

“Gladly,” said Jill, offering her hand. Colleen did the same, and hand in hand, the three of us walked down the hall, toward the room where the King our father was waiting.

Luck, of a kind, was with us; after all the importance Father had placed on my going to the Court of Londinium without delay, he had chosen to show his own disdain for their message by disappearing on some errand of his own. The throne room was deserted. I walked to his throne, placing a hand upon the cushion softening it. The fabric was cool. He had been gone for some time; possibly even as long as I had. I bit back a curse, stepping back and turning to face Jill and Colleen. They hung back some feet away, watching me with wary eyes.

“Where is he?”

“Father no more reports his movements to us than you to him,” said Jill. “What is this? Why do you fret and not speak of the reasons?”

“Be kind, Jill. His message may be for his King’s ears only.”

Jill hissed, cuffing Colleen hard across the face. Colleen hissed back, but didn’t hit her. Jill raised her hand again, bobbing it in the air like she might strike.

I sighed. “Amusing as this is, this is not the time.”

Now the looks they turned toward me were baffled, like I had suddenly declared my intent to sever all ties with the Court of Cats and join the Cu Sidhe in their baying at the moon. “Brother, are you well?” asked Colleen.

“No.” I shook my head. “I am not well at all. Father bound you to fetch me to him once before; I beg you, do the same again. When he returns, come for me. I must speak to him, and I must do my speaking soon.”

“Where will you be?” asked Colleen.

“Where I always am, when there are things I should rather avoid.” A faint smile tugged at my lips. “I’m going to the theatre.”

The night’s performance was long over, the crowd dispersed back into the London streets. The sound of voices drifted from the rear of the stage, where some of the cast and crew had doubtless gathered for a laugh before returning to the hovels they called home. Ah, the glamorous life of the theatre. I walked in that direction with my tail held high and my ears pricked forward, confident that my compatriots would sense nothing of my distress in my demeanor. They were only human, after all.

The Cait Sidhe, more than almost any other breed of fae, have always co-existed with humanity. There’s some question as to whether man domesticated the cat, or whether the Cait Sidhe domesticated man and decided to share the spoils with our little mortal cousins. Whatever the reality, the truth of the matter is that where there are men, there have always been cats, and cream, and Cait Sidhe hiding their true nature behind a purr.

The first to spot me was Dick Allington, the company’s erstwhile director. “Look! Tom’s come to cast approval on our performance!” he roared, saluting my entrance with his flask. “Were we successful, old boy? Did we pack the stalls with feet enough to kick loose some tasty rats for your supper?”

I walked over to him, stopping some three feet distant. There I sat, wrapping my tail about my legs, and miaowed as piteously as I could. The men laughed.

“No rats for Old Tom tonight, Dicky! I told you the second act needed work!” Peter Skelling was a man of all roles and a master of none. He’d played near every part the theatre held title

to, and done them all diffidently well, with nothing to either shame or recommend him. There was something to be said for a man who devoted so much time and energy to being unrelentingly average.

“Then it will have to be cream and cold chicken again, eh, Tom?” Dick leaned forward to scratch beneath my chin. I closed my eyes, submitting to the familiarity. After so many years in this theatre, these men were owed at least that much from me.

The thought was almost laughable in its absurdity. A Cait Sidhe, owing anything to a human? It was unthinkable. And yet it was so, and I would have done anything to spare them from what was yet to come.

Anything but break the veil of silence that stood between Faerie and the mortal world. There are things too precious to be broken for the sake of a room full of mortal men.

“Here, sir,” said a voice—young, barely broken, the human equivalent of a half-grown kitten. I turned, opening my eyes. Young Tom, the boy who played the company’s female roles and children, knelt beside me, setting two dishes on the floor. One held the promised chicken; the other, milk, instead of cream. Close enough, considering I had come to say farewell. I moved toward the dishes, bending my head toward the chicken.

Tom dared a scratch behind my ears as I ate. I did not protest, but hunkered down to eat, tail-tip twitching. The men roared laughter once again.

“He’s finally learning to love you as we do, Tommy,” said Peter. “Why, that’s the first time I’ve seen you touch Old Tom without paying blood for the privilege.”

I flattened one ear, making it plain that I was listening. The men continued talking, blissfully unaware that I could understand them.

The chicken was plain but pleasant; the milk, slightly sour, but drinkable all the same. I ate perhaps half of each before rising, stretching my back into an eloquent crescent, and beginning to make my rounds of the room. Half the company was here, at best, but it would have to do, for I could not risk this again.

At each man, I stopped, butted my head against knees or shins, and then miaowed loudly. They laughed and commented on how affectionate I was, none of them knowing that what I said, over and over, was “You must leave London at once. Please, friends, while there is still time.”

When my circuit brought me back to Dick, I leapt lightly into his lap and stood, my rear paws on his knee and my forepaws on his chest. He laughed. I patted his cheek with one paw, claws carefully velvety, and miaowed again.

“Oh, you’re a good lad, Tom. A theatre is only as good as its cat, I say.” Dick’s hand caressed my ears with the ease of long practice. I set up a rumbling purr, dropping back to his lap and folding myself into a loaf. These men, who had never exchanged a word with me and knew nothing of my place or station...these men were some of the truest friends I had ever known.

I remained where I was until a burst of laughter from Peter caused me to open my eyes and turn to look at him. "Tom, you old rascal, you didn't tell us you had such pretty girlfriends waiting for you!" He was pointing to the door, where two cats—one a delicate tabby, the other a larger, but still lovely, calico—sat, tails wrapped around their legs, looking at us.

Colleen miaowed. Only once, but that was all that I required. I stood, stretching languidly, and butted my head one last time against Dick's chest before jumping down and walking to my sisters. The men laughed, Dick calling, "Off home to the wives, eh, Tom? Hope you've been well-behaved, for I'd hate to see a cat put into the dog's house!"

The sound of their laughter followed us out of the theatre. They had been my friends; they had been the best of humanity. I had killed a hundred rats to please them; I had viewed near as many performances on that lonely stage. And I would never see any of them again.

We made our way back to the rooftops before resuming our human forms, the mingled scents of our magic mixing with the sweet decay of the London summer night. Colleen turned to face me, walking backward along the edge of the roof.

"Father returned in a temper," she said. "He did not expressly send us to retrieve you and may well be angry over our absence by now. I hope you have reason for what you do tonight, Rand, and are not merely trying to be troublesome."

"I always have reasons for my actions, dear sister," I said.

"Then why to the theatre? Why back to your human pets?"

"I had to say goodbye to them."

Jill cast me a startled, wide-eyed glance. Colleen looked at me appraisingly before she turned to face our destination, walking normally once more. Neither of them said anything as we walked, and I allowed the silence to hold. There was nothing here for any of us to say.

The shadows seemed to part a trifle easier this time, perhaps because I was too tired to fight against them. We emerged just outside the throne room door, Colleen a few steps before me, Jill the same distance behind. Neither of them attacked as I straightened, caught my breath, and walked toward the door. They knew as well as I did that this was not the time, even if they were not so clear as to the reasons why.

I hesitated at the doorway, wondering if there was any other way than this. Could I take my sisters and follow September and her husband to his homeland, far from Londinium? I'd played at theatre's cat, and to play at housecat would not be so great a stretch. We would be safe. We would be in the company of friends.

We would be traitors, and while we might yet be cats, we would no longer be Cait Sidhe. I breathed slowly out, and opened the door.

Father's doxies were not in evidence; nor were the other members of his Court. The silence was almost palpable as I walked in, my sisters behind me. Our feet made no sound. My oldest brother used to stomp when he walked, more human than feline, no matter how often Father tried to beat it out of him. I had barely thought of Carr in years—not since the day he challenged for the Kingship, and lost. The room had been just this quiet on that day, when it was his turn to walk toward the throne, and five of us stood arrayed behind him.

Cailin paid the price of his transgression, pretty little Cailin, with her black and white fur and her smile like the morning. Would it be Jill or Colleen who paid the price of mine?

"Hello, Father." My words fell into the silence like stones. "I must speak with you. It is a matter of some grave importance."

He raised his head, expression calculating. "You overreach yourself, kit. I choose what holds importance in this Court."

"You sent me to hear a message."

"Is that what I sent you to do? I thought I sent you to silence the whining of the Divided Courts and buy me peace. Peace which you are now disrupting."

I took a slow breath, silently begging Oberon for strength. Then, carefully, I said, "The Undersea sent an ambassador who tended to their message—tended, not tendered, for she was a Roane girl, and not some simple proclamation." The first spark of interest came into his eyes. I continued: "She said the city was to burn, and all of Londinium with it. The division of the worlds will not protect us. We must flee, Father. That is what the Roane's vision told her, and what she carried here, to us. We must flee, or surely we will burn." And those who did not burn would face a death even less forgiving. He had to see the sense of flight. He had to understand

—

There was no warning before he struck. Ainmire had been King too long for that. One moment, he was in his throne and the next, he was slamming me to the ground. I had barely seen him move. He placed a foot against my chest, pinning me down, and roared, more lion than housecat. I struggled to free myself, scrabbling uselessly at his ankle.

"*You do not dictate here!*" he snarled, and bent, taking his foot away before he grabbed me by my shoulders, claws piercing skin and flesh through the fabric of my shirt and waistcoat. "*I am King! I say whether we stand or run! I protect us, and no fire will drive me from my Kingdom!*" He shook me, claws digging deeper. "*Do you understand?*"

I looked into the yellow-ringed darkness of his eyes, and saw that there was no reasoning with him. Still, I had to try. Struggling to keep my voice level despite the pain, I said, "You are King, Father, but the fire will not care. The Roane are never wrong. If we stay, we *will* burn."

"As long as I am King, we stay." He dropped me, hard, like he would discard a piece of garbage. "What do you say to that, kitten?"

I closed my eyes.

Kings and Queens of Cats are made, yes, but Princes and Princesses are born. Only some

Cait Sidhe have the power required to take the throne, and much to the annoyance of our rulers, very few of us breed true. So far as I knew, all of the kittens Ainmire had been able to sire had been Cait Sidhe, pure and simple—rare things, to be sure, but not nobility in waiting.

Without challengers to come from within, he left himself open to challenge from without. No roving King would challenge a Court with a Prince who might yet take it. So our father, in his wisdom, spent years purchasing potential heirs. Three boys to challenge for his throne, none trained to win it. Three girls, to hold those boys in check, and remind them of the consequences of their actions.

Cailin died when Carr failed his challenge for the throne. Arles chose exile over battle, leaving me with two hostages to my name: Jill, and Colleen. For their sake, I had never dared come this close to challenge.

For their sake, I had no other choice.

“I say, Father, that I am no longer a kitten.” I opened my eyes, smiling as blithely as I could while my stomach shriveled to a solid knot of fear. “Nor, I am afraid, are you a King.”

I launched myself at him almost before I finished speaking. He roared, swatting me aside. It was reflex as much as anything, and reflex which acted in my favor; rather than getting scratched more badly than I already was, I simply went sprawling, scrambled to my feet, and leapt again.

The rules of chivalry and gentle conduct belong to the Divided Courts, and not to the Court of Cats. We respect only blood.

This time, Father let me hit him, digging my claws deep into the muscle of his chest. His hand closed around the back of my neck, yanking me loose and shaking me hard until my teeth rattled. I kicked at his belly, rear claws extending as I sliced and tore. The smell of his blood filled the air, hot and copper-bright. He roared again, slamming me to the floor so hard that something snapped in my chest. His foot caught me in the belly, digging into the soft tissue there.

“Kitten,” he spat. “Boy. *Weakling*. I let you live this long because of that, but you’re no more heir than your brothers were.” I hissed weakly, trying to rise. He kicked me again, knocking the last of the wind from my lungs. I sank back to the floor. “What am I to do with you? Hmm?” He knelt down so I could see his face, and smiled. “I know. Sleep well, little prince. You have failed me for the last time.”

His hand caught me in the middle of my chest, and before I realized what he was doing, I was falling into the endless cold dark of the Shadow Roads. A glimmer of light above me exposed the door he had opened to push me through...and then that slammed with the finality of an executioner’s axe coming down, and all was dark, and cold.

I do not know how long I fell. Only that the dark seemed endless, and that nothing stopped me falling. Finally, I forced myself to stretch a hand into the black, and grab the edge of a doorway I told myself was there. My fall continued a few seconds more before my fingers hit something solid, jerking the rest of me to a halt. I hung there, suspended and surprised.

Then I began climbing back up.

My ribs were aching, and the pain in my stomach was worse. I continued to climb, focusing on getting to someone who could help. The Cait Sidhe harm. We do not heal. Jill and Colleen needed me to get back to them—needed me to finish challenging Father, before he...before...

I pulled myself further up, reached out, and opened a door out of darkness, into light.

September looked up from the trunk she was packing, eyes going wide as I stumbled out of her wardrobe. I attempted to say something witty to put her mind at ease—anything at all—but the words refused to come. I hit the floor a moment later, and fell into a second, much warmer, darkness.

The pain in my ribs was gone when I woke, as were my clothes. I was tucked into a large bed, with a goose feather duvet stretched across me. I sat up, stretched, and rose, heading out in search of my hostess—or, failing that, my clothing.

I met September halfway down the hall, a bundle of clothing in her arms. She stopped when she saw me. "I see you're awake," she said, after a moment's uncomfortable silence.

I bowed. "I am, and feeling much the better. Your gracious hospitality is a true credit to your court. Now, if I might be reunited with my trousers, I truly must be going. Not that modesty moves me, but there is something of a draft within the shadows, and I prefer to be covered."

Wordlessly, she held her bundle of clothing out to me. I took it, noting without surprise that my waistcoat was gone. The tears from Father's claws were doubtless too great to be repaired. "You are too kind to a wayward fool," I said gravely, and bowed again before beginning to dress.

September found her voice as I tied the front of my trousers, saying, "What is going on, Rand? You fell from nowhere."

"Ah." I glanced up at her. "I fell from the shadows, where I was thrown upon failing to kill my father. I'm afraid there's no choice in the matter now. I must kill him or let all the Court of Fogbound Cats burn. I do appreciate your hospitality, my lady. You are the best of your kind."

"Rand—" She took a step forward, one hand out, as if to reach for me. Then she stopped, realizing who she was, who *I* was, and pulled her hand away. "Good luck, my friend."

I mustered a smile. "There is no luck, lady. But your wishes warm my heart. Now fly before

the flames arrive.” I turned, not letting myself look back—looking back has never brought anything but misfortune and pain—as I parted the shadows at the base of the nearest wall and stepped into the dark.

For the first time, the shadows did not fight me. I had faced them without fear, fought through them to a chosen destination, and now, at last, they conceded my authority. I ran through darkness, cutting through the space between the Lady Torquill’s halls and the Court of my father. In what seemed like only seconds, I was bursting back out into the world.

I landed on my feet, surrounded by a stunned ring of Cait Sidhe. “Father! Face me!”

The man at the room’s far end turned slowly, revealing the grave face of the man who bought me, raised me, and played the only parent I had ever known. I caught the briefest glimpse of the figure before him as he moved. She was pale and unmoving, and I did not need to see her face; her hair was like the London fog. My heart died a little in that moment.

“She did nothing wrong,” I half-whispered.

“She failed to counsel you to patience,” Ainmire replied. “She was never fit to be a Queen.”

“She was my sister, and I loved her.”

“Then you should have thought before you struck me.” He began to circle, setting the edges of what would be our battleground. The Cait Sidhe fell back, opening space. None would interfere. Not here; not with this. “You knew what you did. You did it all the same.”

“If we stay here, all of us will die.”

“How would you know that? The mortal world has burned before, and the seal-kin are not of our kind. Their prophecies do not bind us.” He raised a hand, claws extended and gleaming in the witch-light. “The world can always do with fewer human rats.”

“She was my *sister*,” I repeated, and leapt. Not toward him—into the darkness. The shadows opened for my passage, closing behind me.

Father’s frustrated roars still echoed through the room when I slipped out of the shadows, now feline-formed and clinging to the high beams close to the ceiling. I kept low as I slunk along, waiting until I was close to the wall before miaowing, loudly, and leaping into the shadows once more.

I emerged in the room’s furthest corner, and watched as Father transformed himself into a cat and scrambled up the nearest tapestry to the rafters. He stalked along, snarling. I straightened on two legs, cupped my mouth, and called, “Hadn’t you best kill me quick, Father? Your subjects will begin to question your command.”

He turned, hissing. I dove back into the darkness.

I expected to tire. I expected him to follow me onto the Shadow Roads, catch me by the

throat, and break my body against the dark. Neither happened. My fear and anxiety were gone, replaced by a cold core of anger. He would endanger his subjects for nothing but his pride, and his unwillingness to risk losing his Court. A fair concern, but not worth a single life. He backed me into the need to challenge him, and Jill—ah, Jill, my darling girl—paid the cost of his machinations. Nothing I could do this day would bring her back to me.

Navigating him into the desired position took what felt like hours, but was doubtless only minutes. I was a theatre cat. I knew the importance of blocking. When he stepped into the center of the room, below the point where once the sailors hung their nets to dry, I saw my cue, and I took it.

My drop from the rafters onto his back caught him off-guard. He snarled and grabbed for me, but my arm was already locked around his neck, and my knees against the sides of his ribcage. He struggled, magic gathering as he prepared to shift forms. I tightened my grip, hissing in his ear, “I will snap your neck if you become smaller than I am. Concede, Father. Do not make me kill you.”

His roar was muffled by the lack of air. Choking, he stumbled forward, one hand outstretched, while the other clawed at my arm, seeking purchase. I squeezed tighter, trying to hold the thought of Jill—pretty Jill, who never did any harm to anyone—in my mind. She should not have died. None of them should have died.

“You...want...to escape...a fire?” he wheezed. “Fine...then. I hope you...freeze.” His magic rose again, this time not to transform, but to open the door onto the Shadow Roads. He tumbled through it, me still on his back, arm still tight around his neck.

Some small time later, the shadows opened, and I stepped out alone. The Court looked at me for a long, appraising moment. In the back of the room, one of Father’s doxies began to cry, covering her eyes with her hands. I watched them impassively.

Then Colleen stepped forward, head held high, and said, “The King is dead.”

“The Prince has died in slaying him,” I replied.

She nodded, accepting my ritual response. “Who claims the crown?”

I thought of Jill in the rafters of the Duke’s Theatre, pulling me away before the play could end. I thought of Mercutio, who played the fool, and died for his sins.

Princes die when they become Kings. It is the way of things. But oh, I would miss the foolish Prince that I had been.

“Tybalt, King of the Court of Fogbound Cats,” I said.

The Court roared its approval.

It was no small task to convince the Court of Cats to leave. Over and over, I repeated the

Roane's message, until I began to understand, at least a little, why Father had been as he was. Cait Sidhe do not respond well to anything but shows of force. So I showed them force, drove them from Londinium with tooth and claw and threats of worse to come if they did not leave me be.

By the end of the first month, the knowes of the Divided Courts were empty shells, drained of everything that once made them so grand. I prowled their halls, watching the shadows creep in and claim them, and wondered how many of them would fall down into the dark, making the Court of the Cats even greater.

By the middle of the second month, only two Cait Sidhe remained in all of Londinium. "Come with me," said Colleen, grabbing my hand. "Please. I do not wish to see you burn."

"And I do not wish to see another sister gone to the night-haunts," I replied, pulling my hand away. "You are all the family I have left, Colleen, and I will have no other. You must go. When this city burns, I would know that you were far from here, free and happy and alive."

"What am I to do?"

I smiled a bit, caressing her cheek. "Find a theatre. Be their cat. Keep the rats from the costumes, and the shadows from the stage."

She nodded. "I wish you would come."

"And I wish you would go."

"Please."

"If I go, who will hold this Kingdom?" I looked at her solemnly. "Another King will come and establish a Court if I am not here to stop him. It is the nature of cats. And when the city burns, all their deaths will be on my conscience."

Colleen laughed. "A cat with a conscience. Is there anything more pitiful?"

"A king without a court, perhaps."

"Perhaps." She sighed. "Open roads, dear brother."

"Sweet shadows, and may the world forever run a step behind you."

"I will miss you," she said. Darting forward, she kissed my cheek. Then she whirled, pulling the shadows aside like the curtains of a stage. She dove into the darkness and was gone, leaving only me, and my ghosts, behind her.

Day by day, I stalked the streets of London, waiting for the flames. And still, when they came, I was not prepared. A mortal bakery caught fire in the night, setting streets and blocks ablaze before anyone realized what was happening. The knowes of the Divided Courts, abandoned by their holders, were not fully sealed; pixies, fleeing for their lives, pried open a door they should have left alone. Their burning wings and hair ignited tapestries and carpets, and Londinium

burned alongside her mortal sister.

Prophecies are tricky things. Had the custodians of those knowes not fled, would the doors have held their seals? Would the pixies have been left outside to burn, while all the Divided Courts and Court of Cats remained safely in our bolt holes?

I think not. I think that, once the fire was seen, it had to come, and the only question was who would be left to burn. But perhaps I think that because to do otherwise is to yield to madness. London is burning. Jill is dead, and with her, the boy who loved her as a sister and a friend. The night-haunts could not come for that simple Prince. He died in darkness all the same. I had become a King of Cats, and buried the Prince in shadows.

I sat on the edge of the Tower Bridge, watching London burn, and wondered whether the cold would ever leave me—or whether, in the measure of things, I would want it to. London is burning, Jill is dead. I am Tybalt, King of Cats, and all the rest...

All the rest is silence.

For Alligator.