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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Fiction; Cat's Paw; Amy Wolf

Cat's Paw

by Amy Wolf



he frozen expanse of Balion Wood was silent, save for deerskin boots crunching against snow.

"How much longer?" a feeble voice cried, emerging from a tangle of furs.

"I can see the Manor now." Duchaney, one of two retainers struggling with a litter, felt the cold spasm across his palms. Let it be over, he prayed; let him see what he's dragged us from the War to see, and then die.

"Hurry!" the man in the litter urged, his tone imperious.

Duchaney motioned for Rain behind him to pick up the pace. As they hoisted their burden through the pines, they left behind a macabre trail: thick drops of blood, diffusing into pale circlets in the snow.

"LORD ERIK DU-HALLIT!" Duchaney announced, propping the nobleman up in the center of a chamber. But a woman writhing in sweat-soaked sheets seemed oblivious to his presence; she screamed, her long hair whipping about her face.

"Push, M'Lady, push!" Grunhilde, the old serving woman, labored along with her mistress, finally wrenching a pink-hued, wrinkled mass from the bed.

"Well?" Erik demanded.

"The strain was too much, Lord. . . The Lady Clarissa--"

"Never mind that! Tell me about the child."

"The child lives," said Grunhilde, turning away. "But it is a girl, Lord Erik--"

"A girl?" Erik took a tottering step forward. "Do you know what this means? Now my lands and title will be claimed by my brother Thrace, the traitor who has killed me!"

Rain and Duchaney cowered in a corner as Erik clenched one iron fist toward the infant.

"You have ruined me, and upon your head I lay this Curse: may you suffer hardship, and pain, and enmity till the end of your days, for you were not born a man!"

His venom expelled, Erik sunk to the polished tile.

The babe began to wail, as if understanding, somehow, that its life began against a backdrop of death.

"Catalon -- you, Cat! Get a move on!" Hroth, the red-bearded proprietor of THE BLACK SWAN INN, yelled to a serving girl behind the bar.

You might try doing something for a change, Cat thought, handing a draft of ale to a young soldier, one of hundreds who streamed through Hallit, now that the War was over.

"Thanks, love." The soldier threw her an appreciative glance, taking in her waist-length blonde hair; lean, hard body; green eyes which seemed to give off a palpable light. "Say darlin'--"

"Don't even think about it," his comrade warned. "Don'tcha know she's the one that's damned?"

The two of them slid off their stools, moving hastily to the other side of the room. Cat smiled. Sometimes being Cursed had its advantages.

"What did I tell you about scarin' the customers?" Hroth propelled his six feet over the counter, delivering an enormous crack across Cat's face, sending her spinning into a stack of mugs.

"Sorry," she mumbled, wiping the blood from her cheek.

"You'd better be. Just keep in mind that I own you, girlie..."

Yes, Cat thought, straightening up the mugs, it's something that's hard to forget.

She looked up as a ragtag regiment came crashing through the door, led by a swarthy man whose red velvet coat, gold baldric, and broad-brimmed hat gave him the look of a dandy.

"Greetings, mistress." The man bowed deeply, his speech as polished as a courtier's, until he barked, "we'll want meat and drink, and plenty of it, brought to a room round back!"

Cat banged into the kitchen, loading haunches of venison onto silver platters. Giacomo Villein hadn't passed this way in years, and she was glad of it. The ex-pirate was widely known as the worst sort of mercenary, fighting first for Balion, then for Southlandia... whichever side could supply the most silver.

"There's a good girl," Villein nodded to Cat, as she set the steaming fare before him, along with a fair quantity of wine. He tossed her a coin, and she made for the door, but the Fuerenzan's booming voice stopped her cold.



"Do you ruffians know who that is? That's Catalon, Black Erik's daughter."

"C'mon," one of his men yelled, "she's nothing but a common serving wench!"

Villein regarded him coolly. "I tell you, that lass was sold into bondage by servants terrified of her Curse."

Another man, Rikfin, downed the contents of his cup. "What du-Hallit nonsense were you jawin' about on the road? "

Villein smiled slightly. "Only that old Thrace's gone and died, and now the son, Rodrick, is back from the wars, looking to claim his estate."

Rikfin threw Cat a shrewd glance. "Thank the gods they didn't make us women, eh boys?"

The room erupted into riotous laughter. Cat fled out the door, standing motionless in the hallway, a flickering wall torch illuminating her features. Erik du-Hallit! So this was the father she had never known -- the one who had cursed her. And now Rodrick, by virtue of his sex alone, would rob her of her birthright. Limbs trembling, she crept back to the tap room.

"Lord Rodrick, Lord Rodrick--" A fat alderman, his black robes sweeping across the floor, hurried over to a young officer. Cat saw in the new Lord's delicate features, lanky frame, and blonde hair, a vague echo of her own.

She stood across the room from him, ignoring the milling soldiers, eighteen years of degradation, of unspoken anger, making her green eyes flare like a cave beast's in the dark.

Feeling her gaze upon him, Rodrick raised his eyes to meet hers, and Cat could have sworn she saw there the dawning of a heartfelt passion!

"Wait!" Rodrick called, trying to run after Cat as she turned and bolted, but the alderman stood in his way.

Swine! Cat seethed inwardly, slamming into her room. I'll get you. I don't know how, but I'll get you.

That night, she lay sleepless in her bed, feverish with thought. She stiffened as a dull creaking rent the hall, followed by the soft slide of metal -- a key twisting in her lock.

"You'll not refuse me, will ya, girlie? " Cat could make out the hulking silhouette of Hroth, ale from his breath permeating even the corners of the room.

"Get out," she said evenly, tired of replaying this same scene night after night.

"I'll have you, young Catalon, whether you want me or not. You are my property, and--"

Cat leapt for the dagger at his hip. "I'm-not-property!" she yelled, "I'm--"

But before she could announce her proud lineage, both she and the Innkeeper tumbled through her doorway, landing in a heap in the hall.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" Cat screamed, clawing at his face.

"No doubt you will."

The two adversaries froze in midstruggle, looking up to see Villein lounging against the wall, twirling his black moustache.

"Now sir." The mercenary turned to Hroth. "It would appear your wandering nights are over. Release the girl from her servitude, and I won't lay a finger on my sword."

Hroth thought about this a moment, then nodded wordlessly, picking himself off the floor and lumbering down the hall.

"Well, this has worked out nicely," Villein drawled.

"I wanted to talk to you, and you graciously saved me the trouble of knocking."

"Spare me your jokes," Cat groaned, putting her face in her hands. "I wish you'd never come to Hallit--"

"The slave prefers her chains, then? I can call back our good Innkeeper, and--"

"No." Cat hoisted herself off the floor, staring Villein straight in the eye. "How do I know what you said about me was true?"

The Fuerenzan returned her stare. "A man in my service -- name of Duchaney -- confessed to me on his deathbed. Old boy always regretted spreading tales of your Curse through the village..."

"A lot of good that does me now," Cat mumbled.

"Would you consider fighting Rodrick to take back what's yours?"

"I'm no warrior!" Cat snorted.

"No matter. I could train you myself in a month."

"What," Cat demanded, arms folded, "would you expect in return?"

Villein was quick with his answer. "Twenty-five sacks of silver."

For the next four weeks, Cat worked harder than she ever had in her life. In an isolated forest clearing, Villein taught her the art of warfare -- how to swing a sword, sit a mount, hurl a spear with deadly accuracy. When she thought her bruised and aching body could stand no more, he proclaimed her ready.

"Now listen," he told her, as she and fifty of his men rode through Balion Wood, halting before the Manor, "Rodrick is a veteran soldier, but a poor one. He's never been that keen on fighting, and you've fire enough for the both of you."

Cat nodded, trotting up to the vast stone house. "Rodrick du-Hallit!" she called, her cries echoing across the pines.

A third-story shutter swung open. "What--?" Rodrick started to see Cat astride a barrel-chested gelding, clutching a halberd in one hand. He stared at her more closely. "Aren't you the girl from the Inn--?"

"I am," Cat retorted, "and I challenge you to come out and fight. If you do not, then you are a shameful coward."

Rodrick shook his head in puzzlement, disappearing, emerging at last with a hundred archers, who

began to let fly their bolts. But Villein, eschewing the bow in favor of the sword, was too quick for his opponents. Breaking his men into two ranks, he swept behind the cover of trees, then converged on Rodrick's forces, surrounding them on all sides. With no space to stretch their strings, the bowmen threw down their quivers with a clatter.

Cat turned to her hated foe. "You are mine!" she shouted wildly, kicking her mount forward and aiming the halberd at his heart. As she flung back her hand to release the spear, the gelding stumbled on a stray arrow, tumbling his rider to the ground.

Cat rolled to her feet, drawing forth a rapier from her hip, and Rodrick did the same, circling her warily. They came together with a sharp clash, thrusting and feinting like two evenly matched duelists.

"Lady," Rodrick grunted between clenched teeth, "why do you hate me so? Why attack when you do not even know me?"

Cat laughed, the hollow irony of the sound absorbed by the trees. "I think you know me, sir. I am Erik's daughter, the one you sought to bury in misery. But I will not be buried anymore!"

Rodrick stepped back, lowering his rapier slightly. Cat took advantage of his bewilderment slicing him neatly across the wrist.

"Ahhhhh!" Rodrick cried, dropping his weapon and sinking to the dirt.

Cat moved forward menacingly. "You needn't look so surprised. I'm sure Thrace told you of my birth after he murdered my father."

"Cousin," Rodrick groaned, clutching his wound, "we thought you had died in infancy. As for Lord Erik -- my father discovered him passing secrets to the Southlandians, and slew him for his treachery. I swear, I never meant to do you harm."

Cat snorted contemptuously. "I'd like to believe that. In any case, you're not the one who's had to live under a Curse -- only me!" She lifted her steel with both hands, the sun glinting off the blade, illuming Rodrick's form with blue fire.

"Cousin," the young man said softly, "I know you mean to slay me, and there is no avoiding it. But first, would you listen to what I have to say?"

Cat lowered her sword, clamping her jaw impatiently.

"In the days before the Great War, when I was just a boy, there was a teacher who lived in my father's house. His name was Bonaire."

Cat wrapped her fingers around her sword-hilt, but there was something in the gentle turn of



Rodrick's features, in the expression of his clear-blue eyes, which stayed her hand.

"Bonaire's way was not to instruct in the usual fashion, but to tell stories and let us draw from them our own conclusions. One which always struck me was the tale of the Hunter King and the white hart. It seemed that after many attempts, the Hunter King and his hounds finally treed this animal. But the white hart was so magnificent, with shining hide of snow and antlers which glistened like silver, that the Hunter King was moved to spare its life. He built for it a magnificent enclosure of gold, with walls fully six-feet high, at the right-hand side of the Throne."

"Some days the white hart would think of the mosses cooling the forest floor, or the rushing din of a nearby stream, which made it grow sad, but it was fond of its Master, and stayed. Twenty years passed in this fashion... When the Hunter King at last died, the white hart leapt over the walls of its enclosure, returning to the woodlands. After so long in captivity, it was free."

Cat dug her rapier into the hard earth, leaning upon the weapon as she absorbed this curious parable. What was it that Rodrick was trying to tell her?

"You are brave, cousin," she began, "to relate such a tender tale in the face of death. It is all very pleasing, but to me -- someone with a Curse on her head -- seems to bear little relevance."

"True," sighed Rodrick, lowering his eyes. "What significance could such a tale possibly have for you?"

But Cat saw him throw her a sidelong glance, and she struggled to collect her thoughts. "The white hart -- was it not Cursed in its imprisonment by the Hunter King?"

"Yet it chose to remain," said Rodrick.

Cat closed her eyes, seeing a darkness made golden by the strength of the sun. The white hart had

stayed, of its own volition... It seemed to have been Cursed, but might have freed itself at any time...

"Who has cursed me?" Cat suddenly burst out. "My father, or myself? For eighteen years, I've let Hroth, the villagers -- everyone but me -- decide my fate, when all the time I could have walked away." She sheathed her sword, shaking her head slowly. "It seems so absurd now -- for what shame is there in being a woman? How is this a Curse?"

"Today you have proved yourself the equal of any man," said Rodrick, rising to his feet.

Cat took a deep breath. "By virtue of this, do you agree to turn my lands and title over to me?"

"I cannot object," replied Rodrick. "You are the true heir, and I will fight to the death anyone who disputes that."

Cat gave Villein a signal for his men to release their prisoners; Rodrick wrapped his wound with a strip of cloth, calling for his horse, ready to leave the new Lady with her legacy.

"I can't help thinking," he said, turning about, "what would you say to a union between our two houses -- a union of equals -- with you presiding over your lands, and I presiding over mine?"

Cat regarded the man she had hated more than any other in the world; with a bemused smile, she nodded in assent. "I think that arrangement would work -- it would certainly be a first for Hallit. But let me ask you this, Rodrick: what would you have done had I not penetrated the meaning of your puzzle?"

Rodrick put his hand in hers. "I trusted in your good sense. Once your hatred had cooled, what else was there to take its place?"

Villein came thundering up on his mount, trying to mask his delight. "Do I hear correctly? A wedding! Who would have thought? Let me be the first to offer a present--" He winked over at Cat, "Twenty sacks of silver..."

She beckoned for him to lean down, kissing him on the cheek.

All right then," he whispered in her ear, "twenty-five, but don't tell anyone. I've a reputation to protect!"

With a whistle, he rode off with his men, turning back to see Cat and Rodrick ascend the steps of the Manor -- her Manor. Ω