

The Voiceless Cat



The sentry would not let them pass. Even when Wynter's father showed their papers, and explained that they were expected at court, the guards remained sneering and unpleasant, and refused to open the gates. Eventually, the sentry door was shut and Wynter and her father were left outside while the watchman went off somewhere to 'look see'.

They had been waiting there, ignored and bewildered, for an entire quarter of the shadows – two hours on the northern clock – with that heavy sentry door shut in their faces, and Wynter could feel her blood beginning a slow rise to anger.

The men that Shirken had paid to accompany them from the North had gone long ago. She did not blame their guides for leaving. Their job had been to get herself and Lorcan safely from one kingship to another, to get them home, and that they had done. She had no quarrel with them. They had been polite and respectful all through the long journey south, and Wynter did not doubt that they were good and honest men. But they were not friends, they were not *loyal*, except to Shirken and the job he had paid them to complete.

No doubt Shirken's men had watched from the top of the rise

as Wynter and her father had reached the foot of the hill and crossed the thick beams of the moat bridge. And no doubt they had waited until the two of them were safe within the protective shadow of the gate arch before turning back into the dark pines and heading home. Mission accomplished.

Wynter's horse, Ozkar, shifted impatiently beside her. He smelled the warm grass baking in the sun behind them, and the dark clear water of the moat. He was thirsty and hungry, and Wynter couldn't blame him for snorting and stamping his hoof. Still, she tugged his rein to get him to settle and shifted her weight discreetly from one foot to the other. Wynter, too, was tired, saddle-sore and generally weary to her bones of travelling. But, at fifteen years old, she was no stranger to courtly protocol and she remained outwardly stoic, as if undisturbed by this unending wait in the heat.

The well practised remoteness of her expression may have given nothing away, but she was, in truth, barely in command of her impatience. All she really wanted to do was throw off her boots and run up the meadows in her bare feet, fling herself down into the long grass and watch the sky.

They had been so long in the grey cold of the North that this singing heat and the clear sunlight of home were like white wine to her. She longed to revel in it. She longed to get her father out into the sun somewhere and let the summer heat bake some warmth back into his bones. He had wisely remained astride his horse, and now he sat there, so quiet that Wynter glanced sideways to check that he was still awake. He was. She could see his eyes gleaming in the shadows beneath the brim of his hat. He looked neither left nor right, his gaze focusing inwards, just

sitting, waiting for permission to come home.

His long body had a weary curl to it, though, and the palsy in his hands where they folded patiently against the pommel of his saddle was worse than usual.

Wynter eyed her father's trembling fingers with concern. Old men shook like that, not strong-shouldered craftsmen of thirty-three. *Stop fretting*, she told herself, looking forward again and straightening her back. *A good night's rest is all he needs, a nice dinner and then he'll be right as summer rain.*

She rubbed the tips of her fingers against each other, feeling the reassuring numbness of scar and callus. Worthy hands. That's what the two of them had. Worthy hands, capable of supporting them through anything. Out of habit, she glanced back at the roll of carpenter's tools on her horse's rump and then over at the similar roll on the back of her father's saddle. All present and accounted for.

Imperceptibly, Wynter shifted her aching feet again and, for once in her life, wished she was wearing her women's clothing and not her boy's britches and short-coat. It was so much easier to move your feet and legs when they were hidden by a skirt. She sighed again at the misguided enthusiasm that had sent her leaping from her horse. She had flung herself from his back on their arrival, expecting the gates to be swept wide and a boisterous welcome to have been orchestrated. What childish conceit. And now, here she stood, pride and protocol not allowing her to remount, forced to stand here like a lowly pageboy until the sentry returned with their permission to pass.

An orange cat trotted delicately along the base of the wall, glowing like a sinuous ember as it passed out of the shadows. At

the sight of it, Wynter forgot to be calm and courtly, and she allowed herself to smile and nod and follow the cat's progress with a turn of her head. The cat paused, one paw raised to its white chest, and regarded Wynter with affronted curiosity. Its very posture said, *Can I believe my eyes? Have you dared to look at me?*

Wynter's smile became a grin at the familiar weight of feline disdain, and she wondered how many generations of cat brothers and cat sisters had been born in the five years that she had been away. Before taking up her apprenticeship, Wynter had been the King's Cat-Keeper and she had known all her charges by name. *Whose great-great-grand-kitten-grown-to-cat was this*, she wondered?

She inclined her head and murmured, 'All respects to you this fine day, mouse-bane,' fully expecting the usual reply, '*All the finer for you, having seen me.*' But instead, the cat's green eyes opened in shock and confusion at her greeting, and it flickered suddenly away, a flame in sunlight, flowing across the bridge and disappearing down onto the loose gravel of the far bank.

Wynter watched it depart with a puzzled frown. Imagine a cat having such atrocious manners and such easily shattered composure! Something wasn't right.

The rattle of the sentry gate brought Wynter's eyes front and the shadows under the portcullis were sliced by a sharp blade of sunlight as the gate cracked open. The Sergeant of the Watch stuck his head out. He regarded the two of them without a trace of deference, as if surprised to find them still there. Wynter's court-face slipped smoothly into place.

Without another word to them, the Sergeant pulled his head

back in and shut the sentry door with a snap of the lock. Wynter's heart dropped, but rose again instantly as the heavy door chains began to pull backwards with a grinding whine of metal on stone. Somewhere within the wall, the Master of the Entrance was turning the big wheel that wound the chains onto their spools.

Yes! thought Wynter, *We have been granted access!*

Slowly, slowly the shadows under the bridge were eaten up by sunlight as the heavy horse gate swung open to reveal the inner gardens and the King's domain.

Victuallor Heron was striding down the wide gravel path as they passed through the gate, his office robe flapping. He must have been at business to be dressed so formally and, indeed, Wynter saw that his fingers were stained with ink. His wrinkled old face was filled with joy and he was advancing on her father as if he would rise up from the ground, a great amiable bird, and descend upon him, horse and all, to wrap him in a hug that would hide both of them from view.

'Lorcan!' he cried as he swept along the gravel, 'Lorcan!' and his immediate informality undid a thousand anxious knots in Wynter's mind. Some things, at least, were still all right.

Her father leaned forward from the height of his saddle and smiled tiredly down at his old friend. They clasped hands, her father's big splay-fingered shovel of a hand wrapped tightly in the long fingered agility of Heron's. Their smiling eye contact lingered and spoke volumes.

'Friend Heron,' said Lorcan, his warm, rasping voice an embrace in itself; the feeling going far beyond the words.

Heron's eyes sharpened and he lowered his chin a little, his grip on Lorcan's hand tightening.

'I believe you were kept waiting,' he said, his eyes flicking almost imperceptibly to the sentry. Something in the set of his face made Wynter glance at the attending guards and what she saw made her heart do a strange little pitter in her chest. The soldiers were openly staring at this exchange between Heron and her father. In fact, they were almost perceptibly *lounging* in the presence of the Victuallor. She swallowed down a lump of uncertainty and glanced back to where her father and Heron were exchanging a meaningful look.

Suddenly her father straightened in the saddle, drawing himself up so that his full height and the true width of his powerful shoulders became apparent. Wynter saw his face go very still. His eyelids dropped to hood the vibrant cat-green of his eyes, and his generous, curving mouth thinned and curled up on one side.

This was what Wynter thought of as The Mask or sometimes The Cloak. It pained her to see it here, despite its magnificence, and she thought wearily, *Oh Dad, even here? Even here must we play the terrible game?* But she couldn't help the familiar surge of pride as she saw him transform, and there was a touch of cruel pleasure in her smile as she watched him turn in the saddle and put the weight of his suddenly imperious stare onto the lounging guards.

Lorcan said nothing for a moment, and for that little while the guards met his eyes as equals, not yet registering the transformation from mere craftsman to something more dangerous. He sat, regally immobile, in the saddle, and he swivelled his head to take in each man, deliberately examining their faces, one at a time, as if adding them to a list somewhere in a dark closet of his mind.

His long guilds-man's plait swung in a heavy pendulum down

his back, seventeen years' worth of growth, uncut since the day he'd been pronounced master of his trade. The deep red of it was only recently distinguished with swathes of grey, and it gave him the air of prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner. Wynter saw doubt begin to grow in the soldiers' faces, saw iron begin to creep up their spines. Still Lorcan didn't speak, and as Wynter watched, the sentry crystallised into a military unit. Just like that. A gang of rabblorous louts one minute, a unit of soldiers at respectful attention the next.

'Bring me a mounting block,' said her father, purposely addressing one man, leaving no doubt that this was an order. That one man, the Sergeant of the Watch himself, took off as sharp as you like and crossed the lawn, disappearing around the corner into the lesser stable block at a quick trot.

My God, thought Wynter, *He doesn't even know yet who my father is, and there he goes. A carpenter – for all he knows a lowland shepherd's son, a fisherman's bastard, or any such variation on nothing at all – just told him to run fetch a mounting block, and look at him. He's off.* She looked up at her father in absolute awe. *And all with the weight of his stare,* she thought.

The Sergeant returned at a fair clip, a mounting block held out before him like some precious baby. He placed it carefully beneath her father's horse and stepped back a respectful distance as Lorcan slipped from the stirrups and dismounted. If it caused him pain to step to the ground, he managed to hide it, even from Wynter who was fine-tuned to see it.

'Take our horses to the main stables; leave them in the care of the head boy. Tell him they are the property of Protector Lord Lorcan Moorehawke and his apprentice. Tell him I will be around to check

on their comfort later today.’ If the softly rasped orders came as a blow to his pride, the Sergeant certainly didn’t show it, and it was to his credit that he didn’t bat an eyelid when this lowly carpenter’s powerful title was revealed. Instead, he snapped off a crisp salute and gathered Wynter’s father’s reins from him without any further antipathy.

Wynter met her father’s eyes. He would need to go with Heron now. Things were obviously afoot. ‘Go with them,’ he said, gently inclining his head to indicate the horses. ‘Make sure the tools are safe. Get some food and rest.’ He put his hand on her shoulder, briefly. She longed to tell him to lie down, to rest, to eat. But The Masks were on, for both of them now. And instead of daughterly concern, she dipped her head as an apprentice in deference to the master, and stood watching as Heron led him away up the broad sweep of gravel, to the King’s quarters, no doubt, and the entanglements of state.