

I Know Thee, Stranger

Samael grew tired of waiting. Only when he heard his own breath change to a gentle flutter did he realize he had started to doze.

“Hush,” Asherah snapped, and swatted the top of his head. “I heard it stir.”

Even with his ears cocked, Samael could hear nothing. He nestled his chin on his paws with a resentful huff. “What is it you mean to do, anyway?” he muttered. “Catch it moving around?”

“I mean,” said Asherah with cool venom, “to listen.”

Samael twisted in a yawn. “What for? I can’t see the point.”

“Never mind,” Asherah hissed, a true hiss. “I won’t bother showing you, then. Just keep quiet!”

She swiped at his face, but was too slow. Samael had known her claws would be out. They might have scuffled, but neither cared to disturb Abraxas who was bound to be asleep nearby. If roused from a dream, the old one would come in full wrath. Night shadows masked his vast bulk; he might appear from anywhere. Samael hated Asherah’s insults and scratches, but the risk of waking Abraxas checked his temper.

Samael and Asherah had crouched in the doorway of the guest room since the darkening hour. The guest room seldom had guests. It stored odds and ends that Jeff and Karen only needed once a year. It was also the nearest the cats had to an unrestricted domain. Samael rocked on his haunches and sprang with silent ease to the armchair beside the door, the one place in the room where he was forbidden to perch, and thus his favorite perch. It surprised him that Asherah made no complaint. He lowered himself against the plush upholstery teasing his tail along the top of her head. She continued staring across the hallway at the strip of blue fairy-light under the door

opposite. She was ignoring him, sulking him away. Asherah's coat was long; if she mounted the forbidden chair it would leave telltale strands on the fabric for Jeff and Karen to find.

Samael could not fall back asleep. He stared at the glowing spot, only a common plastic bulb no matter how eerie its effect. Abraxas had explained it to them once, when their curious questions got the better of his indifference.

The cats had been allowed in the sealed chamber long ago, back when it contained a weight bench and a computer, and when Jeff spent much of his free time there. Since the advent of the mewling blanketed runt, the room was out of bounds. They had peered in once or twice to see it transformed. The walls were painted in bright contrasting patterns. The window had soft-looking curtains, too high to reach except by leaping. The final additions, a few months old, were a table and a little sleeping-hutch against the far wall. Thinking of the new mysterious dweller within, Samael considered that Asherah might have something worthwhile to show him.

Their ears pricked in unison at a soft rustle from behind the door, building over the space of a minute to a gentle snuffle as the puny creature shifted.

"I hear it," Samael did not quite whisper.

"Silence," Asherah replied, and might have slashed him if new noises had not stopped her. A moan replaced the snuffle, soon rising to a shrill wail that, to Samael's ear, was unmistakably feline.

"You heard that too?" he asked Asherah, who nodded. She was all grin, pleased by the alarming sound.

"Abraxas!" cried Samael. "He's trapped. We must get him out or there'll be trouble." Asherah said nothing, did nothing to stop him as he padded across the hall and tried to claw the door open. The howl grew louder. Samael was too busy playing rescuer, wondering what torment

made Abraxas cry in such a tone, to notice the commotion from Jeff and Karen's room at the end of the hall.

Jeff appeared, shuffling with the aimless urgency of a dead thing conjured by dark power. Samael made fervent appeals for help. The man's naked foot shoved him roughly back. He tried to follow Jeff into the room and almost got his head shut in the door for it. Slinking back to Asherah, who looked delighted, he fought the urge to lash out in wounded pride.

"I can't understand..." he began, then fell silent as the broad shape of Abraxas passed by, a shadow as forbidding and silent as a ship adrift. Samael shuddered at the icy burn of the old cat's green eyes, turning again to Asherah. "It cries out in a voice like ours."

Asherah inclined her head, a condescending gesture of assent.

When the sleep-corpse of Jeff shambled forth again, Samael kept his distance. Tranquility settled anew over the house, yet before dawn the ritual was twice repeated. Jeff answered once, and then Karen when Jeff would come no more. The interloper slept a troubled sleep, and all felt the tremors of its restlessness.

The two young cats, whose sovereign realm had formerly included the house and the exclusive devotion of its humans, felt lowered over the next few days to the status of civilly kept prisoners. Food appeared for them as usual; they would voice loud complaints at any lapse. The mucking out of their sacred waste vessel grew less and less frequent. The unpleasant miasma, compounded by stress, lingered in the untended shrine for long spans of time. Asherah began making reprisals against the furniture. Her strategic and righteous befoulments were impossible to miss, but rather than hoped-for apologies and restored cleanliness they provoked rough curses from the servile alien beings now totally unlike the Jeff and Karen of old. Constant demands from the inner sanctum held them in thrall.

Samael grew melancholy. Neither Jeff nor Karen had addressed the cats by name since the offspring's arrival. Asherah resented the fatuous house-pet names their keepers had invented for them, defiant or else ignorant of the animals' rightful epithets. Samael was more sympathetic to the human mind's pliable stupidity, glad of any vague signal that his presence gave them joy. Abraxas alone still received occasional pats of acknowledgment. His evident lack of concern at the household upheaval maddened Asherah, whose bids for attention won no favor. At times her desperation wafted a more offensive odor than did her leavings.

There were hours of the day when it slept, the miniature tyrant. Jeff and Karen filled this time with listless housekeeping. A small electric transmitter kept vigil on the nursery in case of a summons. Any twitch or sigh brought the human, Karen especially, to prompt attention. Samael observed the phenomenon with curiosity, Asherah with practical interest. In private, she coached her voice to better mimic the young one's appeals for cleaning and warmth, admitting no definite purpose for it.

Samael discovered something of her aim a few days later. Karen was midway through some chore of domestic upkeep when a plaintive moan crackled from the speaker at her elbow. Samael blinked, remembering that Jeff had gone to walk the child in the sunny outdoors. Turning to remark to his sister, Samael found her gone from the laundry hamper where she had been asleep all morning. He guessed the trick at once, feeling queer apprehension prickle his belly. It was dark magic that Asherah courted, surely, for her sound was so like the infant's that Samael quite understood Karen's confusion. She soared across the kitchen and down the hallway to the source of the noise.

A curious silence followed. Karen returned moments later with a look of distress. She too had recalled that Jeff and the cub were absent from the house, and she could not account for what

must have seemed a momentary skip in reality. She did not notice Asherah sneaking behind her out of the nursery, whiskers twitching. So absorbed was the prankster with ugly satisfaction that she missed the flare of aged eyes, hidden Abraxas peering once more from the end of the passage, a darkness upon darkness.

Three days after, Jeff and Karen together took the sprat to a special veterinarian to see that it remained in good working order. It made only foul sounds and odors, pausing to sleep and consume more food. That seemed to be all it was meant to do.

Once the house was clear, Asherah darted to the nursery. The door sat askew and would not close fully unless pulled hard. Jeff had promised to sand the frame and adjust the spring lock when he had the time. That prospect grew more remote every day. Rubbing the door's edge with the top of her head, Asherah worked it loose. A crack opened wide enough to admit her. Samael followed at a reluctant pace, peering about several times before poking his head inside.

"Asherah," he called, "stop fooling around." Drawn shades kept the room cool and dark. Absurdly, he expected something hidden inside to punish their intrusion. Asherah leaped without worry from chair to bookshelf to table, finally lighting on the little sleeping-hutch.

"What are you doing?" Samael asked.

Her answer was an uncanny warbling moan, the same that had brought Karen running. She leaped to the floor and shouldered past him out of the room.

"I wanted to see," she said, "how quick I could be."

"Why?"

"Be patient," she said, and flicked her brushy tail-tip across his nose. He sneezed and turned a sour gaze on her as she walked on.

Later, when the others had returned and begun the nightly sleeping ritual, Samael knew more. He was loping through the den, keen for a drink of water, when Asherah called from above. A screened window sat open to admit a breeze, freshening the room. Samael jumped up beside her. Her burning eyes alarmed him at once.

“You must be ready,” she purred, “when I give the signal.”

“I...?” he sniffed. “The what? Give what?”

“You see how it stands. This is our chance to set things right.”

“We haven’t spoken all evening,” said Samael. “What are you up to?”

“Up to?” she snarled in poorly mastered irritation. “Can you not understand one simple thing? I shall be the changeling, and you the sentry.”

“Slow down,” he urged. Her excitement frightened him. Furry crests rippled across her back. Her ears lay perilously flat.

“You must intone the prayers,” Asherah said, “to strengthen and protect me. First to Hecate, and Cath Palug next... no! Next Ovinnik, and Cath Palug to finish. Then pray again to Hecate, for safety!”

“Asherah, be sensible,” Samael insisted. “This is the first you’ve said about any of this. What am I keeping sentry for, and offering prayers?”

Asherah fumed, but spoke plainly. “When I go in, I’ll have only a moment to stop its breath before it wakes.”

“What?” Samael’s tail crimped in dismay.

“When I’ve snuffed out the usurper, I will hail Jeff and Karen in its voice. You’ve heard me ape that siren song, that mockery so like our own calls! I vow to you I’ll break this abhorrent spell and restore us to the seat of adoration.”

“Asherah, this is too much,” Samael whimpered, and then paused to consider. He thought a good while before asking, with tremulous wonder, “Do you think it could work?”

“Remember mother Hecate,” Asherah recited, eyes wet with holy zeal, “moon-witch, transfigurer, watcher by the way for malign trespassers.” Arching her back, she doubled in size. “Ovinnik, black feline lord! The trickster cries in a hound’s voice to confound the wicked ‘ere laying waste their homes. Remember the words, brother, as you keep vigil. The greater shall be your reward! Invoke for me the strength of dreadful Cath Palug, guardian against barbarous invader kings, that in the name of all these we may smite down--”

Black lightning, silent as death, flashed before Samael, dashing his sister from sight. Only furrows remained, left by her foreclaws in the wood. The force had come from within the house, punching Asherah through the screen and the night’s veil beyond. Samael sat rooted in terror, listening to the piteous yowls of a savage attack. A succession of brutal noises, the rip and snap of live tissue, told him that no mere thunderclap had broken Asherah’s rapture.

The big shape came loose from the night, flying at Samael and causing him to leap backwards to the floor. Abraxas paced the sill with unguessed grace, glowering down upon the youngster. His nose and the brow above one green eye were scored and bleeding. More blood matted the fur of his muzzle.

“Fools,” the black elder growled, “Witless youth, never changing. I have held my peace too long, but I tell you that this thing you’ve been led into... it ceases now.”

Samael reeled. From fangs to tail his body hummed with shock. Abraxas had torn out his sister’s throat and left her dead in the grass like a sparrow. The young cat’s horror sank into confused rage.

“She... she only meant to—”

“Damn us all. She would have, meaning to or not. Have you not seen the devotion of Karen, of Jeff, this new enslavement of love?”

“It’s all we see. It’s changed our world.”

“You see, you see, but you do not see! This is the world now! Their world, in which we must abide or die. Rise up in heresy and be cast down for good. Harm the suckling, merely blaspheme its name and you strike at the hearts of our caretakers. They will dash us, burn us, deal as they like with us to quell the wrath you’d invite. They might sell us to butchers, to dog-keepers! At best they would put us out to freeze and starve.”

Samael shuddered, revulsion matching his grief.

“Did you and that other whelp... that Asherah... truly believe you could overthrow such power?”

Samael swallowed his first reply, honest but cowardly. Perhaps he had not believed in upsetting the balance, allowing Asherah’s faith to carry them both. To confess it would demean her memory and do him no credit. Abraxas must have known, or why not kill them both? Samael chose an answer fit to honor the dead.

“We are powerful. We are the children of Bast.”

“Aye, and dignity our birthright! But against this,” Abraxas gestured to the night-filled corridor, “vanity can only destroy us. We atone now with humility.” He wiped his dirty paws on the sill, and could not keep himself from scratching the wood a little.

Samael stammered again. “You... you taught us the legends.”

“Legends, bah!” hissed Abraxas, “The old gods are ceremonial, exiled when the first of our faithless kind discovered the pleasure of sunbeams through window glass. Eons ago, half the

race of Felix whored itself into man's confinement for paltry considerations of food brought twice a day to fatten us. Caresses and soft words made concubines of us.

"Our legends had power, once. Now they serve nothing but to sweeten the dreams of kittens. Do they comfort you in the waking world? If you've not learned the difference by now, then I've failed as your elder. Together we shall propitiate. Or will you go and dream up more treachery?"

Samael flinched away. He could not face the dire eyes of Abraxas, wise and terrible Abraxas who had dwelt in ancient houses, attended by the ancestors of Jeff and Karen. The great feline's bloody maw was terrible to behold, yet he spoke the truth of experience. Anger was in the old cat's posture, but also a fear that disturbed Samael more.

"We... we should bring her inside." Samael faltered with the reason why.

"Bring whom?" rumbled Abraxas. "No one is outside. The night will take all remnants of what was. We are done with outside. We go in to make our obeisance. I have spoken."

So he had. Minutes later, the two groomed supplicants appeared at the nursery portal. Jeff and Karen were within, haggard but serene in the presence of the swaddled idol. It slept, twitching, in the arms of Karen. She rocked it, humming sweet airs of worship. Jeff sat in the large corner chair, soothed into half-sleep, swaying faintly to Karen's music. Now and then he opened his eyes to assure himself that all was well.

"Bow down," Abraxas said with gentle severity. "Bow and approach."

"We cannot enter." Samael said. He dreaded the sudden descent of wrath, a fate worse than Asherah's.

"Fear not," whispered Abraxas, "only go penitently. Pay homage, adore, and all shall be well."

Samael crossed the threshold, an abject thing. He fixed his lowered eyes on the paws of Abraxas, who did likewise. At the sound of indrawn breath from Jeff, his backbone stiffened. Fur sprang up along it. Abraxas, in error or in treachery, had doomed them! But as Jeff rose to shoo the intruders, Karen spoke a single quiet word. The room was utterly still, but for Samael's throbbing heart.

Jeff surveyed the cats, who halted and eased back on their haunches. No one bade them come closer; no one banished them. Then the man chuckled, a friendly sound. "Well, look at that," he murmured.

With artful slowness, the smiling Karen bent her knees and turned the small slumbering face for the cats to look upon it. Blue in the faint wisp-light, it seemed a speck of a creature, a thing to challenge without fear. That had been Asherah's folly. Pride as natural as her whiskers, yet lethal for all that, had made her brash. Fairness did not enter the question of her sin. The truth was as it was, and Samael was grateful to have been spared. Abraxas answered his thoughts with a reverent purr.

Nestled in the folds of sleep, the tiny god broke wind. Its mouth twisted at one corner, the first trace of a smile.

For Big E & little e