

"En guard," Alaric yells to Gyb, brandishing his stick. He waves it around, but she only gives a halfhearted swipe, meowing in irritation and settling back onto the ground.

He pokes at her and she backs away, ears flattening. "Come on, fight back! You cowardly cat. How am I going to become a good knight if you won't practice with me?"

She licks herself. He rolls his eyes.

"Bad cat. Coward. You couldn't fight a beast," he sighs. Well, he won't let that stop him. He's going to be the best knight in the land one day, there's no time for laziness.

"Alaric," calls his mother from the doorway, adjusting the basket on her hip. "Quit poking her with that stick, I've got a chore for you."

"What is it?"

"I need you to take Gyb to the violinist."

"...what?" His heart stops. He's heard tales of the violinist, a huge, lumbering thing, half man half creature, who attracts werewolves with the eerie howling of his violins, and who kills cats to harvest their guts for violin strings. Many a cat in the village has been sold to him, and none have returned.

"She hardly hunts the rats anymore, and foods not cheap. Besides, she's old, it's time," soothes his mother. "And we could use a few shillings around here. Come now, don't you want new clothing?"

"No! I won't let him take her!"

She purses her lips. "Alaric. You will take her up to the canyon right now, and be sure the violinist gives us a fair price. And hurry, you don't want to be up there in the dark, there are dangerous things lurking out there."

Alaric stands there, stunned. He can't get rid of Gyb. Even if she is a terrible jousting partner and a horrific coward, she's his best friend. What would a fair price be to lose such a friendship? It would have to be a massive pile of gold to even tempt him to it.

His mother looks at him sternly. He turns and scoops Gyb into his arms, and he goes.

The woods outside town are deep and dark, winding roads throughout, maintained by lumberers who bring back tales of the violinist. They say his hut stinks of death and decay, naturally, as he plays his somber tunes and draws the werewolves in. The songs can be heard from miles away, carried far and wide by the wind.

Shadows paint the trees sinister, in the low light. Anything could be lurking. Gyb must be scared. He nuzzles his nose into her soft fur and makes a vow.

"When I become a knight," he says, "I'll vanquish the Violinist, and I'll save every cat from your fate, and restore luck to the town."

Gyb says nothing, naturally. She is ungrateful. And quite heavy. He sets her down.

"Walk on your own," he commands. He goes on, leading her like a true knight would lead his battalion. He looks back, and she is... still sitting on the ground. Okay. He hefts her back up, the fat old useless coward of a cat. It will do him good, though, to practice lifting heavy objects, because if one of his men is wounded one day he will need to carry them back home bravely.

Finally, they reach a small house with a single window like a glowing eye, and a chimney emitting ghostly smoke into the rapidly darkening sky.

He sets Gyb down again. He begins to reach for the knocker, and stops. His hand is quivering. It's from the cold. He is not afraid. A knight is never afraid.

"Come on, let's go to the door. Stop lollygagging. A knight is never afraid, remember, Gyb."

She meows and begins to lick her unmentionables. The poor thing is obviously terrified. Maybe they should go back after all. That's a good idea, he had better go back now, for Gyb's sake.

Then the door creaks open. Alaric freezes in place.

The man in the doorway is massive, his face covered in whiskers and his belly formidable. His eyes are mismatched, one black and the other white as a moon, eyelid twisted where it's slashed through with a long, purple scar. He stands in the doorway illuminated only by the setting sun, and he grins a wide smile, showing glinting teeth like fangs. Alaric might throw up. His heart beats rabbit fast and he clutches the stick close to his side.

The violinist opens his mouth as if to speak, reaching toward him, and Alaric turns and runs into the forest as fast as his feet can carry him, far away from the terrifying, huge horror of a man who kills cats, and who--

Oh no. He swivels, looking around him, and Gyb is nowhere to be found. She must not have come after him, the stupid cat. His heart sinks. She's still there, with that cat gutting beast, and he has run off and left her.

He will simply have to get her back. He turns around to go back to the house, but... which way was it that he ran from? The North, perhaps? It is fairly dark now, and his mother told him not to stay out after dark, because these woods are home to all sorts of things. He looks up, trying to find the stars to guide him, but the treetops block them out. To his sides, there are only trees which seem to close in and suffocate him.

He is well and truly lost.

"Gyb?" He calls, hesitant. "You bad cat, where are you?"

He stumbles in the dark, unable to see anything but what is just ahead. There is a howling in the distance, and it grows closer. He runs, and falls headfirst into a bush.

"Gyb," he calls again. She will not respond. She is a quiet cat, and being that she is old, she is rather deaf. Still, who else could he call for? Who else would hear?

Something moves in the corner of his vision, and he brandishes his stick.

"Who's there? I'll have you know I'm training to be a knight, so," his breath catches in his throat, and he's unable to continue.

A knight is never afraid. But Alaric is afraid, right now. He should have brought a torch. He should have stayed home. If he were truly brave, he would have run away with Gyb and insisted that she never ever die or get turned to violin strings or anything like that.

A creature with wild eyes steps out of the dark, and he walks backward slowly. It lunges, breath stinking of death, and he raises his stick to its jaw, knocking it aside so its sharp fang only splits his cheek. It knocks him over and moves as if to strike again.

He closes his eyes and awaits death.

But it does not come. The creature whimpers and backs away into the dark, frightened by some invisible force. He sits up.

The violinist stands in the dark, white eye glinting in the glow of his lantern.

"You alright, little fellow?" He asks, offering a gnarled hand to help him up.

"Yes," says Alaric. "...How did you scare it away?"

The violinist shrugs, like it was nothing, as if he scares away creatures like that every day. He reaches into his jacket and pulls out something fluffy, holding it in both hands.

It meows. Alaric would recognize that voice anywhere.

"Gyb!" Says Alaric, snatching her up.

"Cats repel werewolves," says the violinist. "You'd do well to remember that if you're going to be running around by the canyon at night."

Alaric holds her to his cheek, and winces as her fur touches the still bleeding slash along his face. The violinist sighs, and turns, walking away. Alaric trots along after him, unwilling to be left behind. He is certain now that the violinist can't be all that people say, after all, he saved Alaric's life, and he hasn't killed Gyb.

They walk with only the light of the lantern until the window of the house can be seen like a beacon to follow. The smoke puffs from the chimney, a stark contrast to the chilly outside. The violinist leads them through the doorway and into his house.

The front room houses violins of deep, rich wood, lumber and materials for the carving. The violinist sets his lantern down and moves into the next room, and Alaric follows.

Alaric blinks, taking in the sight. On every surface, there are cat toys, bowls of water and food. By the roaring fire, at least twenty cats lie on a rug together, snuggled warmly. He recognizes some of them, Mr. Mittens, who belonged to his neighbor before he was deemed too much work, and Jamie, who was the butcher's until the butcher needed extra money.

"You don't make the cats guts into strings?" He blurts, then slaps his hand over his mouth. The violinist raises a brow.

"No," he says, as if Alaric were stupid. "Why do you think I hunt werewolves? I use werewolf guts."

"Oh." He hesitates. "Can I take Gyb back, then?"

"Gyb?"

He lifts her up, and the violinist nods.

"You didn't pay me anything for her, so she's still yours. Now come here."

The violinist cleans his sliced cheek with a cloth and covers it neatly with a small bandage. Alaric touches his face gingerly.

"It's likely to scar," the violinist says apologetically, gesturing to his own face, cut like a crescent, evidence of his heroic feats. He's probably saved a million people from werewolves in the woods, and saved plenty of cats from terrible fates.

Alaric doesn't mind if it scars.

"All done," says the violinist, placing the last bit of bandage on his face. He steers him to the door and hands him a lantern.

"Wait, can't I stay the night? W-what if there's more werewolves?"

"They don't roam on the path. So long as you stay on the road and go straight home you will be fine. Don't wander."

"But--" The violinist shuts the door.

Alaric carries Gyb all the way home. When they get there, he stops outside the door and looks at Gyb seriously. He crouches to see her eye to eye. She looks back, eyes vacant as ever, but he imagines that he sees a new light in them, the light of a true hero. She licks her nose.

"Gyb," he says, "I was wrong about you. You were no coward tonight, you saved my life. For that..."

He lifts up a stick and gently taps her shoulder.

"I knight thee, Gyb the cat."

He taps the other shoulder.

"And you'll have to be the knight out of the two of us, okay? I decided I don't want to be a knight anymore." He stands again, looking out at the light by the canyon. "I have something else in mind."

He and Gyb will face his mother's wrath tomorrow. For now, Alaric gazes at the full moon, and listens to the haunting melodies carried by the wind.