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The air smelled of homemade stew.

The moon had risen **Good Metaphor** and in the **Inn Name** tavern at the seaside shore, a cat as black as night was not up for auction.

"What do you want, grandma? My seven horses, my two hundred sheep, a Vengaeli cake, my wife?"

The gratuitous congregation of men and women surrounding her made her claustrophobic. She noticed herself anxiously fidgeting around in her seat. The bench responded with the strained creaking of an old fishing vessel. Maybe if she closed her eyes hard enough the wood she clung to would take her out of this smothering situation on a stream of fresh, cool water like the thing could it was so imitating so disconcertingly. But alas it was just a bench, not even seaworthy enough to save her from drowning in this importunate crowd.

She opened her eyes again only to find herself staring beseechingly into the deep orange eyes of the black cat sitting on her table.

“Hear ye! Hear ye! Vandermoos ‘s trying to trade his wife for the cat. ‘Haps *she* should try trading *ye* for a Quillcow instead? Yer marriage might even lose a few pounds in the deal.”

As the roaring laughter rose like a raging wildland fire in the room, so did the red rise in the insulted man’s chubby cheeks.

“Just you wait and see if you’ll still be laughing after I’ve beaten you stupid, Managarl.”

“Hoping stupid I’d believe ye lot of sheep to be two hundred and ye donkeys to be stallions?”

He could barely maintain his balance on his chair, as if shaken by a fuming storm of laughter trying to yank him overboard, salty surge streaming from his exhilarated eyes. The man with the read face stood there for a moment, unbelieving with clenched fists before rushing through the tavern door as fast as the wind.

In the eye of this tempest of merriment, she finally found some calm and refuge from the cage piercing stares that had held her paralyzed ever since she stepped foot into this forsaken establishment. A grey strand of hair dangled in front of her right eye. She swiftly tugged it back where it belonged, pushing the question of how long she had not noticed it being out of place to the back of her mind. If only the obnoxious singer could leave her some peace of mind. The black cat laid on its back and looked at her with these knowing eyes, directly meeting her gaze. She felt judged for losing her posture not standing up for… she felt judged by a cat. Margot, you are losing your mind.

In an effort to sort her mind she adjusted her dark grey dress and her oversized travelling cloak. She was in dire need of quiet and privacy; it was high time to spend some of her coin on exactly that. The black ball of fur purred as she picked it up, and pressed it against her chest, hidden away from the world under her coat. Never again would she repeat the mistake of not concealing this singular specimen from the world. If only it were easier to conceal or at least not this unwilling to hide its unfathomable beauty from the sight of prying strangers. The way it presented itself, so full heartedly aware of its own beauty and the fascination it sparked in the hearts of mortals, she wondered how many of those self-aggrandising parades she could endure from the slender creature before it overstayed its welcome.

*Any and all of them, if need be.*

“Pardon?”

She looked up at the woman who just derailed her train of thought, immediately irritated the mess of unkempt hair that warded her scalp like an untamed animal worthy of the most ferocious of tales and songs.

“Mind repeatin’ *how* many rooms you fancy rentin’?”

“Just… just the one.”

She might have blushed if she had not untrained herself of this particular skill over the years, it only ever had meant trouble. Her habit of soliloquizing though, that one still accompanied her even to this day. And as she practised, the embarrassment crawled up her stomach, away from her cheeks, only up to her chest. No, this time it was not embarrassment creeping up her throat, it was the bloody cat—mind your language, Margot—squeezing itself out of her coat onto the counter and presenting itself like a gift upon mankind to be petted and admired, as if to test her newfound declaration of determination.

“Oh, how lovely!”

The awestruck innkeep extended a hand cautiously to ruffle the cat’s shiny black belly.

"I'm wishin' fo' a bountiful harvest, Erik leavin' behind bein' a craven and beautiful summers until the end of me days."

"This is not how these creatures work, it is a fine art that requires a tremendous amount of study and education you have obviously not been burdened with. Furthermore, I suspect these quaint requests of yours will only fall on deaf ears. It has yet to heed a wish of mine and it'd be nothing short of miraculous should you be bestowed upon what has thus far been withheld from me."

The woman looked at her through her tangle of blonde hair with this familiar expression she was all too accustomed to.

"Maybe it'll be different for me. The gods know I have a

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