

Alley Cat Blues

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From set *Streets of New Capenna*
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Kitt shouldered the leather bag, felt the vials of Halo shifting under her jacket, and asked herself how she'd gotten into this mess in the first place—her, just a small-time subway busker crooning for spare change.



Art by: Thomas Stoop

Sure, the subway wasn't the most pleasant-smelling part of New Capenna, not by a long shot, but the gig made her a living. People bustled up and down those worn marble stairwells as though the trains inhaled them in and exhaled them out in waves. Kitt had picked the most acoustic corner of Lower Bassomer Station that morning, her back to the iron balusters. Before she started, she always gave herself a few minutes of listening to pick up the mood of the moment, the tempo of feet, the syncopated patter of talk, the languorous rumble as trains slowed to a halt and then clickity-clacked their way onward, *ba da dum ba da dum ba da dumbadi dumbadi dum*.

Pigeons always settled in a row in the rafters, bright eyes turned to her. Even when no one threw her a coin, the pigeons gave her their rapt attention. She would start humming, then singing, riffing and harmonizing with the wash of sound. All the old tunes sounded better with the life of New Capenna as their rhythm section.

There she'd been, not a soul stopping to listen or grace her voice and presence with a coin, so she'd launched into the pigeons' favorite, "Birdnest Berceuse." They'd all rustled excitedly, wings fluffing out

as she rang her changes through the bridge, playing with a key change simply for the joy of launching her voice in flight. Why not? No one was paying her any mind.

And then just like in the flicks, a big, well-kempt man—leonin, just like her, but three times her size and donning a gorgeous, expensive jewel-toned coat that little ol’ Kitt had been jealous of the moment the fabric caught her eye—this bigwig had halted right in front of her. He’d watched her thoughtfully, his two-toned expression unreadable. Was he disgusted? Impressed? Bored? Was he tapping one sharply polished shoe just slightly in appreciation? Her nerves skittered, and for an instant, Kitt thought she would lose the beat and explode into frantic flight the way the birds did when they were startled, but she hung on. She’d been through worse.

She brought the melody through its final cadence and finished with a flourish: one last trill and the brush of a hand skyward as she sang the final line, “in our cozy little nest for two.”

The pigeons cooed.

The big man put a hand in his pocket, and she thought he was maybe even going to give her a real tip. Instead, he brought out a calling card, offering it to her as he looked her dead in the eyes. His gaze was molten amber, only an ear-flick of emotion in his lion’s gaze.

His voice held a gravelly authority. “Seems to me a little sister like you just needs a chance.”

Well! Wasn’t that what she was always telling herself?

She accepted the card with a polite purr, wishing it were cold hard cash instead. Until she glanced at the ornate writing that inscribed a single name: *Jetmir*.

“Boss Jetmir!” Kitt exclaimed, shocked into losing her cool.



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

“The same,” he said with a lazy affability that did not fool her one bit. The boss of the Cabaretti wasn’t anyone’s friend. But he changed lives, one way or the other. “The warm-up slot at the Red Room tonight is yours, little songstress. If you complete one tiny favor for me. Do you want it?”

The Red Room at the Vantoleone—did she want it!

So that was how she found herself on a Cloudponte Bridge train for the first time in her entire sorry life, holding tight to the messenger bag he'd given her. It had held an illegal stash of Halo for delivery to a Cabaretti agent up on Park Heights, but she'd transferred all the vials into the inner pockets sewn into her jacket so they wouldn't get jostled as much. Most importantly, the bag contained a gown, wrapped in tissue paper, for her debut.

"A songstress needs the right look," Jetmir had said.

She slipped her hand under the flap to fondle the cool silk, the most expensive fabric she'd ever touched. That satiny smoothness was the texture of success. She just knew it.

Then he'd lost the amiable smile and added, "Herculaneum Candy Shop at the Upper Bridge Plaza. Ask for Henzie. Be at the Vantoleone by seven. If you aren't, another singer will go on in your place."

She'd used the ticket he'd given her, a ticket she could never ever have afforded herself, and transferred at Upper Bassomer Station to a third-class train bound for the glories of Park Heights. The train started rattling up along the lowest tier of Cloudponte Bridge, the busy levels of the Mezzio beneath her feet and the glamor of Park Heights awaiting her above like a sliver of heaven.

She checked the clock set over the door that connected to the rear compartment and smiled with satisfaction. She had plenty of time to make the delivery on the Heights and get back to the Mezzio for the performance. For once, she wouldn't look like a smudged and unwashed street cat whose rag-pile scraps were held together with bent pins and discarded boot laces. She'd look like the star she knew she could be, all shimmering green with gold highlights as the faces of the audience turned up to her in adoration.

All her life, she'd dreamed of getting out of the blasted furnace of Caldaia, away from streets lit day and night by smoky lanterns because sunlight never reached the murky industrial depths.

Jetmir was right. She just needed a chance, and the big man had handed her one. That was how the Cabaretti worked. Once you were in the family, you were in.

Standing close to the front of the packed car, Kitt swayed and jostled amid white-eyed vampires, prim-faced elves, a leering devil accompanied by a trio of strait-laced and well-groomed leonin dressed in maids' uniforms, and a pack of sweaty ogres headed for some muscle job among the wealthy. Laborers who worked up in Park Heights had to be clean and neat, but even so, this was a crowded third-class train. The pungent smell of all those bodies was enough to make her fur prickle. There was a single open seat, but no one was sitting there because an unknown individual had left behind a puddle of glistening goo. By its blueish color, the culprit was probably a cephalid.

Cabaretti family didn't travel on third-class trains that had to share the rails with heavy freight loads. "Family" got seats on the second-class trains that ran on the tier above, or if they were big enough in the family, in the first-class luxury trains that ran like fat golden centipedes alongside the graceful top deck of Cloudponte Bridge.

Kitt would sit in that first-class train someday; she'd look out to the horizon over the glittering city, bare just a smile's sliver of fang at her polished-window reflection, and the whole sky would be hers. She just had to make her mark.

What songs should she pick? Four, Jetmir had said. Her lucky number. First a swinging, saucy beat like "Wiggle Waggle Boom!" as she sashayed onto the stage in the gown that would mark her as The Real Thing, a crooner to catch their eye, a tasty treat to titillate their interest.

She'd follow that up with a big, brassy number to showcase her range. "Be an Angel and Lift Me up on Your Wings" would do the trick. The pigeons loved that one almost as much as they loved "Birdnest Berceuse," which would be the perfect sweet romantic ballad for her third number, a little soppy and just the right amount of low-rent for folks who never wore a dirty shoe or scrounged dinner out of a garbage bin in their lives.

And for a lasting impression on the fourth, a real showstopper—

With a jolt, the train stopped dead. It lurched forward with a wheeze, halted again, and gave a drawn-out hiss. The people around her fell silent the same way, all breaths held. When the train didn't start up and no announcement was broadcast, a murmur of anxiety traveled through the crowd. One belligerent rhox pounded at the doors, which didn't open because the train was stopped between stations—there was nothing but track and service railings between them and the drop to Caldaia. By now, the train was perched above the main level of the Mezzio. The tinted windows looked over a twilight marked by lights atop the Mezzio's many girders and rooftops and by the straight lines of the huge pillars that held the city up, rising out of smoky Caldaia all the way to Park Heights. Nearer the track, the ubiquitous and sparkling pigeon nests, woven from sticks and thread, gleamed with a tincture of Halo.

Here and there, the dull red glow of Caldaia was visible through holes and cracks in the multi-level tier of the Mezzio. It was a long way down into that pit. Kitt refused to go back. She had to make this chance work, move up in the plane. Be the star she knew she could be.

But this third-rate train sat dead on the tracks, and she was stuck along with all the other passengers. How soon would mechanics get here? Through the window nearest her, she could just get a glimpse up and down the line along the wire maintenance walk, but there was no movement, no one coming to check on them. Could they bring up another train on the rails alongside? Would the passengers have to trudge on the emergency walk back down to Bassomer and then get a new train back up? How much time would that take?

Kitt checked the clock above the connecting door at the front of the car. Even with all the noise in the car she could hear the second hand's doom-laden *tick. . .tick. . .tick. . .*, each passing second a tiny slow dance of a cut against her skin. Her *one big chance*.

No. She wouldn't give up. With a flash of teeth and a press of shoulder, she wedged her way closer to one of the windows, trying to squeeze past the devil. If she could open the window, she could climb out and ascend along the maintenance walk. She'd trudged farther distances in her life.

"Scram, alley cat!" the devil hissed.

The three maids all in a row curled back their lips to show their fangs at her, but Kitt flexed her shoulders and fluffed herself bigger. She'd clawed tougher meat than them. Their ears went down.

The devil elbowed her hard. "I said, back off!"

The blow caught the bag instead of her ribs, the pressure sinking into the precious gown inside with a rustle of crushed tissue paper.

"Mind your own potatoes," Kitt snarled.

The devil's leer wasn't belligerence so much as bravado by the way he stepped back with a startled gasp, thinking his horns and ugly face were enough to intimidate her. Not likely! Thank the angels she'd moved the vials of Halo to her jacket, out of harm's way! But even as the pressure released, the rustling grew so loud that others began to notice and turn.

Boom! A heavy crash shook the tracks.

All conversation ceased, then burst into crescendo as everyone spoke at once. What was that? A collision? Fireworks? Kitt didn't have time for this!

A second, sharper *boom* blasted louder, bigger, shaking the whole train. The explosion's bang shocked the ears, followed by a *whoof!* of air, like the plane's biggest pipe organ, that spattered flecks of grit against the windows. Pigeons nesting along the nearest beams took flight in a burst of wings.

The birds weren't the only ones startled. The crowd at the rear end of the car closest to the noise panicked, pushing and shoving toward the front, where more people were already crammed teeth to muzzle, horn to chin. Kitt didn't have a pole or bench to hold onto, not even a windowed wall to press herself up against, so the surging flood forced her forward, and she barely kept to her feet as a besuited ogre stumbled against her. Iron footfalls thudded from beyond the closed door like doom approaching. The door into the rear compartment screeched, torn aside by a powerful arm wielding a wrench the length of a crowbar.

A big, muscle-bound viashino wearing the coal cap of the Riveteers ducked through the door and halted, looming over the now terrified passengers. Her stare kindled with inner fire, her scaly muzzle with literal fire. The devil lost his leer and huddled behind his maids.

"That's a boiler!" the devil muttered. One of his maids hushed him before the Riveteer heard the rude nickname and took offense.



Art by: Andreas Zafiratos

The viashino slapped the big wrench against a meaty palm. Her slow, deliberate, fire-licked words were punctuated by smacks of the wrench.

"I am just letting all you fine eggs know that if you don't want to be broken today, you'll pay attention. You have been delayed because my crew is under orders to dismantle the rails before and behind this train. As you know, we use only the most sophisticated engineering methods."

Another explosion sounded. *Dynamite*. The nobs up in Park Heights were going to be furious when their freight and their servants both didn't arrive in a timely manner. What was worth it to the Riveteers to go hard like this?

Smack! went the big viashino's wrench against her palm. Every gaze was gripped by the sound.

"Now, we could hurry along this process with a little help from a lucky volunteer." *Smack!* But not a soul stepped up. "I know you know who you are and what you's done. So don't think you'll be getting away easy." Green fire licked the air as the viashino roared the next words, pointing with the wrench toward the quivering, frightened passengers. Even the ogres looked ready to wet their trousers. "This is why you don't cross the Riveteers!"

Like anyone needed a reminder of that! Kitt kept her muzzle mashed tight. This was not the time to be a Witty Wanda. Someone not paying their debts to the Riveteers wasn't her problem, not that she wanted to find out whose problem it was. She tucked her tush, wedged a boot in between other feet, and slid a half step away from the fire-spitting Riveteer. The viashino was a big, bold, brassy dame if she'd ever seen one, a real torpedo. Better to get out of range, if she could, and figure out how to get on her way instead of getting stuck in some janky business.

"Now then!" roared the Riveteer as she peered across the crowd with a too-keen eye, like she already knew what she was looking for. Her red-rimmed gaze halted on the three maids all in a row. "There's somethin' our old pal Henzie owes us, and he knows it, even if he don't want to admit it."

Henzie? A sick hairball of an idea caught in Kitt's throat. *Henzie*. She closed her arms tight over her jacket, clutching the bag closer against her.

Smack went the wrench against the palm. The passengers closest to the viashino all flinched, but there was nowhere to retreat. A second viashino appeared in the compartment door, not quite as big so probably a male, carrying a hammer. The car went as quiet as a church mouse just before the owl swallows it up.

The first viashino showed all her teeth, and they were very white and strong and pointed. "Here's how it is, my good eggs. We got word that our old pal Henzie intercepted some of our goods and passed them on to a leonin lass for transport. Y'hear that, my purrful petite? You can show yourself now, hand over the parcel, and we'll let you go on your way as light as a pleased pig after the wallow party is over. How about it, doll? We Riveteers don't begrudge a gold digger her shovel, but this isn't the heap that's yours to keep. So be a wise egg, and there'll be no more trouble."

In the cramped train car, folk swiveled to look at the three leonin maids as Kitt hunched her shoulders to make herself less conspicuous. She had managed to edge away from the devil and was now crammed between a vampire's behind and the knees of a shocked-looking human in shopkeeper garb seated on the bench with their back to a window. Everyone was still looking toward the viashino or at the maids, although the vampire was starting to sniff as if they had caught the scent of Caldaia ash around Kitt.

The vials shifted beneath her arm in the padded pockets sewn into her old jacket, because sometimes a girl had to transport bits and bobs of illicit cargo to make her rent. It would be so easy to step forward, confess, hand over the vials, and skedaddle on her way.

If the Riveteers let her go. No guarantees on that, were there? And then she'd have to deal with the Cabaretti, maybe even with Jetmir himself. When she remembered his amber eyes and his confident way of taking up space, she knew the questions he'd ask wouldn't be nice ones. With a boss like that, disappointment could kill. And if it was just her life, well, that was one thing. She had a career at stake.

Even if no one laid a blade to her flesh, Kitt's chance at the singing spotlight she deserved would be over. Her career? In ruins. Sure, she could keep singing for the pigeons in the subway station, with a coin or two thrown at her, but what kind of life was that for a leonin with pride? Anyway, come to think of it, she had a lot more confidence in her ability to out-manuever a big lunk of a viashino and her Riveteer friends than to double-cross the canny Cabaretti and that Jetmir, who'd seen what she could be.

Musicians had to be as fast on their melodic feet as any fleet-footed Park Heights messenger winging from one spire to the next, so Kitt made up her mind right there.

"Eh there, *you're* a leonin," whispered the vampire as if it had taken this long for their sluggish thoughts to register Kitt's presence.

With a hard twitch of her hips, she slammed the vampire sideways, knocking them into a pair of ogres, then stomped on the heel of the shopkeeper. The human shrieked in pain, buckling over, which allowed Kitt to grab their shoulders and heave them off the bench head first into the vampire, who smacked the ogres again. With a roar, the ogres forgot the threatening viashino and puffed up with grunts and oaths, cursing the vampire. People began to push and shove and shout as they fought to get away from this new altercation.

Kitt jumped up onto the bench and, with a heave of her shoulders and a burst of adrenalin, popped open the window.

"There she goes!" bellowed a thunderous baritone.

No time to figure out who was pointing the finger! Kitt jumped out the window, an easy enough caper for a gal with plenty of practice squeezing out of sticky situations. As she landed soft-pawed on the tracks, she looked up and down, gauging her best route. Running back toward Bassomer would take her straight into her pursuers, but when she turned to head up, she saw a mob of mechanics swarming the train that had been running half a bob-mile ahead. The enthusiastic Riveteers were literally dismantling the train car's glimmering outer shell like ants stripping the exoskeleton from a giant beetle. Wowzers, they really wanted this Halo, and her stuck in the middle of their ruthless schemes. Well! Either you swam or you sank, and this cat was not going to drown today.

What route was left? The upper tiers of the bridge were too far to jump, and she couldn't fly. That left the Mezzio's rooftops and the beams and pipes with so many roosting pigeons watching the proceedings with attentive interest. There was a garden rooftop about ten feet out and fifteen down from the edge of the track, so just within reach. Beyond it, she might be able to jump up and grab one of the beams, then run along its narrow span to the roof of the Merchants Guild Hall and shimmy down one of its pompous statues and get into the Mezzio that way.

The train car door cracked open about twenty paces from her. The big viashino leaped out onto the tracks with a solid thud she felt in her bones. That fiery gaze aimed straight at her. "What's it gonna be, doll? The easy way, or the hard way?"

Buskers knew when to ignore catcalls. Slipping one foot after another away from the brute, Kitt warbled the opening of "Be an Angel and Lift Me up on Your Wings" and caught a rustle of pigeon interest, hundreds of dark eyes turning her way. Birds were her first audience, and she'd learned there was a lot more to the pigeons of New Capenna than folk realized. How pigeons watched over her in exchange for the melodies they craved. Warned her of trouble coming. Pigeons weren't mere featherbrains. The angels had left threads and twigs of power throughout the city's heights and depths, and people always overlooked the least flashy and most ubiquitous denizens of the levels. Even birds could be touched by Halo's uncanny powers.

She jumped, tucking tight at first to get speed and then relaxing so she hit the rooftop into a boneless crouch, steady on her feet. But she hadn't taken one breath before the roof shuddered under the shocking weight of the viashino, followed by a pair of smaller males. Who knew those clunks could be so nimble!

Kitt dashed toward the far side of the roof. A firework splatter of dynamite went off among the beams, scattering the pigeons in a flurry of angry, frightened wings. Nests sprayed, torn into pieces, chaff fluttering downward with sparks and flashes of Halo-touched glow. From the railing, she saw a construction platform within leaping distance, this one braced above a half-finished roof. The three viashino closed in behind her, spreading out so she couldn't bolt past them to the stairwell that would lead down into the building. No choice now. Kitt climbed up on the railing and jumped again. It was farther down, the wind whistling past her ears and rippling against her fur. She hit the platform, tucked, and rolled over a shoulder and back up to her feet to absorb the impact.

Thuds shook the platform as the three viashino pursued. Kitt raced to the edge of the platform, but there was no beam in reach, no craggy spire, no route to the roof of the Guild Hall, just a long way down through the gaps of the Mezzio's buildings and levels into the dull red glow far below. Folk said cats always land on their feet, but this cat couldn't fly. If she leaped from this height, she'd be dead.

Smack! went the big wrench against the palm.

Kitt turned, back pressed up against the safety railing, bag clutched to her chest.

The big Riveteer grinned as green fire licked ominously around her muzzle. "Ya can't outwit ole Ognis, kitten. An engineer like me plans for every trick in the book. You hear the snap of my trap? Now hand over the goods. This is your last chance, 'cuz I'm on a strict timetable today."

And it *was* her last chance. Kitt wasn't going back to Caldaia, not today, not ever. Ognis and her cronies might be engineers, but Kitt had a lot of practice landing on her feet when the fall looked awfully grim.

"Big words, parakeet," Kitt said, meeting Ognis right in her fiery gaze. "Better make sure you don't cook your own eggs." She inhaled and sang right into their startled faces, jumping straight to the second verse, yanking herself away from the licking flame of the viashino like she was taking a turn on that Cabaretti stage. "Be an angel and lift me up on your wings, remind me how your love brings me all the way to *heaven above* "

Poised at the edge, the Mezzio and dirty old Caldaia far below, Kitt broke off and held the bag out beyond the railing. Oh, it hurt to do it, but she had no choice. She met Ognis's gaze with a steely one of her own. "You want it, boiler? Then you can go get it."

Opening her hand, she let go of the bag. Ognis's mouth dropped open, and the fiery dame full-on *snorted* with astonishment and disbelief. But Kitt didn't wait for the Riveteers to get their ganders back in gear. She clambered up the railing, paused there balanced for an instant, because that was all she had, as she launched back into the song again.

"Be an angel—"

She crooned. She flung out her arms.

She jumped into the vast empty gulf of air, still singing.

And the pigeons flocked, they swarmed, they massed together to make a big cloud of gray-white feathers. They caught her amid their hundreds of glittering wings and lifted her up and up and up, all the way to the lowest rim of Park Heights. To a little rim-ward parking lot where a vampire attendant was dozing in a chair overlooking a squad of fancy cars.

The squawks and chirps of the flock startled the vampire awake, blinking through sluggish eyes as Kitt stumbled onto solid decking and got her bearings with a whistle of thanks. The birds spun skyward and scattered.

She caught the railing and looked over the edge. She'd never been up so high, and for a moment, she wondered if she had time to double back down into the Mezzio or even Caldaia to look for that bag. That beautiful, high-class gown.

One close call was enough. Too bad she wouldn't be there to see the viashinos' faces when they discovered they'd been had!

A clock chimed, then tolled the hour with a brassy *bing bang bing bang bing bang*.

She had only one hour to go, and she had to find Henzie, make the drop, and get back down to the Mezzio all without being spotted by any more ravening Riveteers.

"Eh?" said the vampire attendant, who clearly hadn't absorbed enough Halo or blood recently. "Was-sit? Stop there, miscreant!"

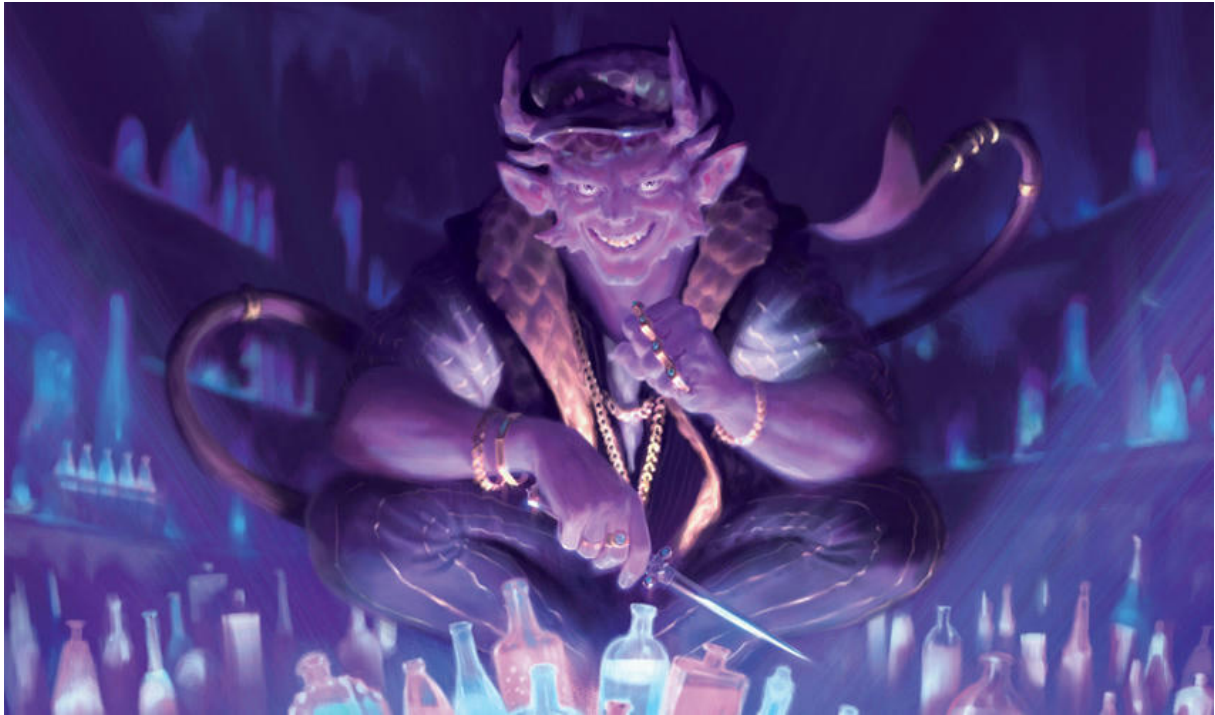
"No time for a coze," Kitt cried, and bolted out past the parking lot's gate.

Jetmir had given her a map of Park Heights along with the bag. He was fair like that, even if he'd tossed her straight into the boiling pot either to test her or because he didn't want to sacrifice one of his trusted lieutenants. Well! She'd show him what she was made of!

The fancy folk of Park Heights and their sober-looking servants did look twice at a scruffy street cat making tracks through the broad boulevards. She didn't have time to sight-see, gape, or goggle at the swanky storefronts, the glamorous gowns and shapely gams, elegant edifices, and magnificent plazas where light from the sun touched the faces of those fortunate enough to live at the top of the heap. No, she'd have time for that later, when she was a crowning jewel.

The stained-glass and beetle-shell sugar candy shop sat two blocks away from the Crossponte Bridge Station, a place where folk from the Mezzio could buy pretty twizzle sticks and Halo-infused lollipops for the long workday and where the adventurous among the Park Heights set could try out the bitter-sweet horehound candy drops that Caldaia's overworked mothers used to cut the sting of hunger in their babies' bellies.

She sashayed in to find a customer browsing a rack of taffy. A short devil was seated behind a counter, a peppermint whip of a man. He had slicked-back pomaded hair to match his horns, a nose that had been broken once too often, and a jeweler's glass in place of his right eye.



Art by: Johannes Voss

“I’m looking for Henzie,” Kitt said.

The proprietor looked her up and down, but waited until the customer left and the bell on the door tinkled before saying, curtly, “Lost the bag, eh, kitten?”

“I have what you want.” One by one, with a flourish, she set out the vials, counted them out loud, and took a step back, waiting.

“I’ll be a clam’s uncle.” Henzie cocked his head as an expression of respect settled onto his thin face.

“Didn’t think I’d make it, did you?” Kitt said, flashing a bit of fang. “You got a ticket for me?”

He regarded her for a moment more, then nodded, pulled a stub of printed cardboard out of his suit pocket, and slid it across the counter.

She snatched it up. “I hope you don’t mind if I don’t hang around and chew the breeze. I’ve got a stage to catch.”

“And a fancy emerald gown to dazzle ‘em in, if I don’t mistake,” he said with a curious look at her empty arms.

She didn’t think about that—couldn’t think about that—as she ran to the station. Pigeons flew overhead like scouts, and she kept her eyes peeled for any sign of Riveteers.

At the station, a pair of glowering coal-capped viashino—not the torpedo or her gang—lurked by the main entrance. A flock of pigeons circled down in a squawking mass as if some do-gooder had scattered bird seed at the feet of the Riveteer lookouts. While the pair flapped their arms to cover their heads and cursed like thunder, Kitt scurried past, head down, and caught the next train just as the doors shut. The tracks clicked and clacked in their spry rhythm, a beat to soothe the agitated soul.

The gown was gone, sure. But she still had her voice and her performance to make her mark. And wasn’t that what caught Jetmir’s eye the first time? *Sure*, the voice inside her purred that she couldn’t

show up looking like a stray to a high-class shindig, *but it's all flash up here. You gotta have both to succeed, kitten.*

Jacket flapping, Kitt raced from Mezzio Station, slipping and sliding and elbowing her way through the crowds on the after-work streets. Rich scents spilled from restaurants welcoming folk in for evening appetizers. Clerks and barristers laughed too obviously over drinks at fashionable bars. She had no watch, no way to know the time and no time to detour to one of the clock pillars set in the squares. She just ran and panted up to the backstage door of the Vantoleone just as it opened and a stolid doorman in Cabaretti colors stepped out.



Art by: Bud Cook

“Are you the singer?” He looked her up and down with a skeptical grimace. “Not the duds I imagined, but you *are* just in time. Six minutes to showtime.”

Six minutes! Kitt gave the man her best cheeky grin because he seemed a friendly sort, or at least one who wouldn’t judge until he had to toss you out the door. “Can you put a word in the ear of the conductor? My song list.”

“Sure, kitten.”

“It’s Kitt, if you please,” she said with dignity. “Kitt Kanto.” Begin as you mean to go on, and she meant to go on.

As Kitt entered the back passage, a beautiful elf in a dark red gown came gliding up like light shining across a pool of oil. Her perfect features curled into a sneer as she, too, looked Kitt up and down.

“You aren’t what Jetmir gave me to expect. I have a certain standard for my stage. He assured me you have the right kind of look for the Red Room. Isn’t there a gown?”

Kitt squared her shoulders and gave a confident twitch of her ears. “I have my act all sorted out. It’s sure to be a hit with this fancy crowd. Is there a dressing room, ma’am? What may I call you?”

Red Gown’s frown was smooth and icy. “We’ll do introductions later, since you’re late.”

“Had a spot of trouble, but it all worked out.”

“Did you, now? Jetmir and I had a wager on whether you would make it. This way.”

The elf led her down a hallway. Spikes of laughter and the roar of excitable talk rumbled from the front of the house where plenty of people were waiting for the show to start.

“Five minutes to showtime, and then two minutes of introduction, that’s all the time you have to get fit for performing,” said the elf with a condescending lift of an eyebrow, clearly doubting Kitt would ever be fit for the Red Room stage. The tiny bells tied to the elf’s dark braids tinkled musically, and Kitt hummed a little descant, which made the elf glance back in surprise before shutting the door.

The dressing room was plush enough for an opening act, with a sofa, a makeup table and mirror, and a screen for dressing. It was small but way fancier than her little hole of a room tucked into an abandoned warehouse down in Caldaia. Bright lights burned on either side of a big mirror. Her reflection stared back. She was filthy and sweaty, and her jacket had a rip in the hem she hadn’t noticed, not to mention its mended elbows and feathers stuck in her fur. No use crying over spilt milk. Descending Crossponte Bridge, she’d decided there was only one option left: Be who she was, and make it sing.

While doing a hasty batch of vocal exercises to warm up her voice, she ditched the jacket, unbuttoned the top two buttons of the old stevedore’s shirt she wore, brushed off the feathers, tidied up her style, and smudged the grime on her face to give it a more theatrical look, like she was an actress playing a street cat. After a second thought, she picked up the jauntiest feather, one with a bit of Halo glow, and stuck it in one of the buttonholes.

A knock rapped on the door. It cracked open. Red Gown peered in and spoke with the precise diction of an individual very angry at having to deal with the trash that has washed up on their doorstep. “You’re on, Miss Kanto.”

Kitt followed the elf to the wings of the stage. A faint rustling met her ears. When she looked up, she saw pigeons—so many pigeons—gathered on the rafters up in the darkness. How had they gotten in? The same way she had, on a wing and a gamble.

“And now,” said a bodiless announcer, “for your pleasure: Miss Kitt Kanto.”

Kitt put on her best street attitude as the band struck up the opening bars of “Wiggle Waggle Boom!” The house lights had been turned down, but she had a cat’s ability to see in the dark, and darned if there weren’t Riveteers in the crowd, even that torpedo of a viashino lass. Bless her fiery stars! Was it Kitt’s imagination, or did ole Ognis’s eyes glow with frustrated anger as she recognized the songstress strutting into center stage with a swagger?

Wiggle waggle boom!

Wiggle waggle boom!

Ya think you caught me but

Wiggle waggle boom!

Kitt punctuated each *boom!* with a saucy waggle of her hips. The Cabaretti druids adored it. No love lost between them and the Riveteers, after all! At the end of the song, the Cabaretti howled with laughter, and the Riveteers scowled. Even the pigeons chirped, then fluffed up with pride as the band swung into “Be an Angel,” and after that settled with contentment for “Birdnest Berceuse.”

For her final number, she’d changed her mind six times on the train from Park Heights down to the Mezzio before she’d decided to pledge her loyalty and strike a blow for the Cabaretti at the same time.

It was a gamble. If she lost, and she left here without a contract, even a street cat with her smarts wouldn't last long once the Riveteers tracked her down. As they would, unless she won oh, yes, unless she won.

The orchestra segued into an uptempo twist on a classic melody Kitt had specially requested on her set list. She knew how to change lyrics on the fly, and this tune was going out to all the Riveteers in the crowd—but especially Ognis.

Pack those vials one by one, up to Park Heights, on the run, bye, bye, boiler, Kitt crooned, shifting into an exaggerated street gait, cocky and sure-eyed, twice the bravado of the devil on the train with a side of macho to top it off. She leaned into the heat of the spotlight, looking beyond the stage, beyond the front crowd, beyond even Jetmir in his gallery-box seat, right to meet Ognis's furious gaze for a second time. Kitt tossed her head back, puffed out her chest to really show off that feather and belted the song in the viashino's direction with her throatiest croon, a curled, triumphant grin to punctuate each line, just like the smack of the wrench of a certain pushy engineer climbing the tracks.

Now my dreams will come true, as I bid goodbye to you, boiler! Bye, bye!

The final crescendo rolled through a drum cascade and her last note, pitch perfect. Then a held breath, drawn out into a long hush. Above, the pigeons chirped excitedly, the sound abruptly drowned out by a roar of applause and even a few whistles.

Kitt took her bow and was about to leave the stage, shaking with exhaustion and relief, when the curtain at the wing stirred and a hulking figure moved lithely out into the spotlight. Jetmir strolled out on stage, raising a hand that brought the theater to a complete can-hear-a-pin-drop silence.

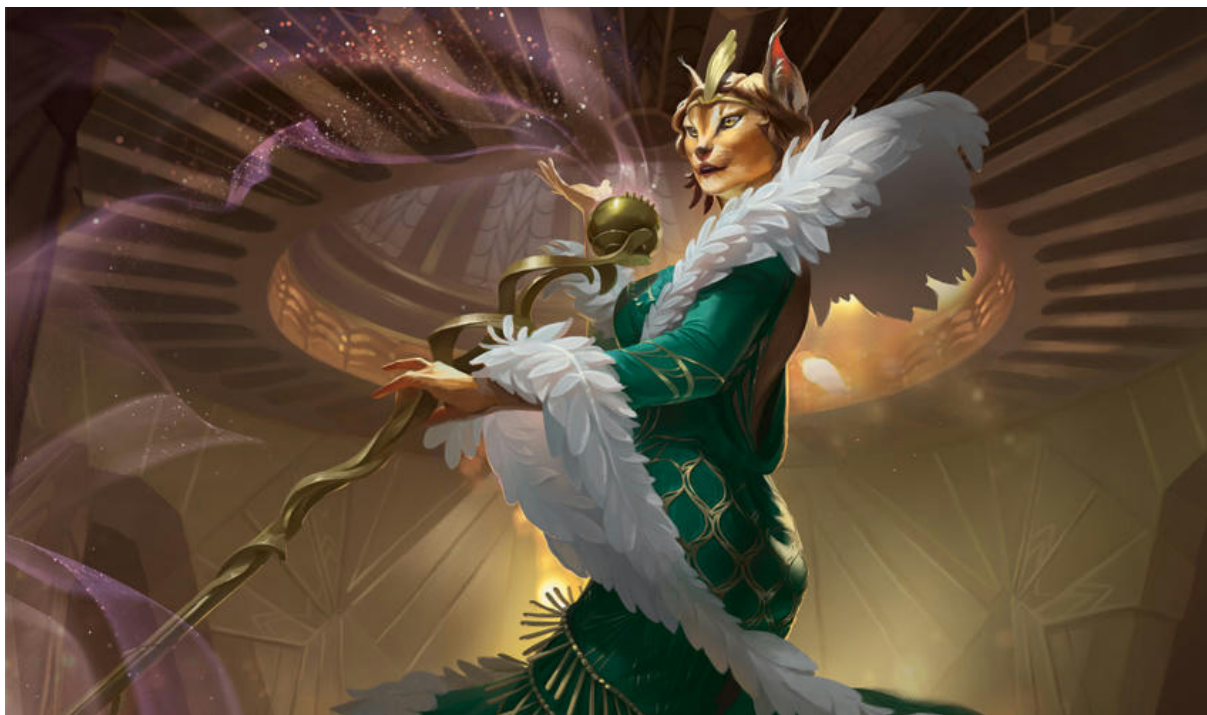
"Great voice! Great spirit! What'a'ya say, brothers and sisters?" Sustained applause and enthusiastic cheers filled the house, cut off when he again raised a hand. His gaze touched the elf standing just off stage, and he nodded at his stage manager as with an unspoken message, then turned back to the auditorium. "We'll see Miss Kitt Kanto again tomorrow night, with a higher billing and a few more songs."

He gave Kitt a nod, said to the band leader, "How about an encore of 'Birdnest Berceuse'?" and walked off the stage.

For a moment she was voiceless. Breathless. But no, she'd heard him right. She'd passed his test with flying colors.

Cabaretti, here we come. She was in. No longer a street cat, Miss Kitt Kanto was now a high-class songbird singing at the ritziest joint in town. No sky the limit!

From the rafters above, the pigeons cooed.



Art by: Fariba Kamseh