



The Cat Burglars

A short story by Graham Price

Mira was looking over the rooftops of Melbourne City, watching the lightning strike at the palms lining Albert Park Lake. Any minute now the torrent of rain will come. She shrugged her shoulders and shivered a little, remembering that close encounter last night. Sebastian had been somewhat offish, didn't wish to go with her on her adventurous tour of some of the better rooftops in Melbourne. She found that difficult to accept, after all he was one of the best cat burglars around. His history of entering and thieving was world renowned. Hadn't he taken the best and left the mediocre behind — scraps as he had called it. Not worth pinching. She'd been with him when the cops almost nabbed them the other night, but they were fleet of foot and had run down through the wet alleys, keeping Victoria's finest at bay. Lost them! No match for Mira and Sebastian. She laughed at that, for they were the best; there were no other cat burglars in Melbourne that even came close to their activities, simply none.

She could see the deep grey cloud formation sweeping across the bay, headed for her. The lightning strike came again, this time too close for comfort. Better find some shelter, she thought — the old boat shed where the gang met and planned the next burglary was close by. Better get there fast.

Someone had said that the old shed was up for demolition. She hoped not, because it had been the gang's home for many years, just kind of out of sight from the inquisitive public and the Port Phillip Council. She hoped that it was simply a rumour, which had no substance in fact, because where would they go? What new hiding place could they call their own, the ginger haired Sebastian, the calico torty Misty, and the black jester Orlando. had shaken their heads at the news. Many years ago they'd all belonged to some families who didn't care for them enough; left them alone when the families went on holidays, and they had escaped. Somehow, they had all met in the vicinity of the boat shed, formed a gang, and made it their home.

What name shall we go by?" Orlando had said, brushing his whiskers with his left paw. The others put forward various names, but in the end it was the one that Mira liked — Shadow, the Shadow gang. And like shadows they were— creeping, sliding, soaring into the night air when most humans were tucked up in their warm beds. Sebastian was known for his clever planning of heists, Misty for her ability to find food when required, and the black Orlando just like a shadow for his invisibility at night. As for Mira, the Egyptian goddess Anubis had come to her dreams of the night and had conferred upon her a special status—she could now read the human mind. Other cats could read humans emotions just fine, but only Mira could tell exactly what humans were thinking. This attribute was useful in determining what night watchmen or security staff were thinking. Anubis had also conferred upon Mira a variety of other powers—x-ray and infra-red vision night and day, the ability to tell the time, together with an injection of superior leg muscles which allowed her to almost fly through the air from one rooftop to another. No one could perform on the rooftops of Melbourne like Mira. Her speed was a phenomenon in cat society. Even the old tom with the scars around his nose who they bumped into now and again, Great Caesar, the leader of the Blackpaw gang, grudgingly gave her heed. The Siberian fence and valuer, Nero, also watched his words when Mira was around. Secretly, he admired her, always keen to clap his eyes on her deep brown Tonkinese coat and those swimmingly jet blue diamond eyes. He shivered when he was near her, not from fear but from devotion.

Nero's human associate in shifting the stolen valuables on, Narki Beezle, had tried to capture Mira several times but Nero had thwarted him by rushing between his legs, threatening to topple him over. Narki cursed the cat. He was determined to get hold of Mira and lock her up in his dwelling, a large rusty tin shed at the rear of an aged Victorian home where strange incantations came at night. A witch lives in the house, thought Mira. She had seen the dark, sharp-faced woman once or twice through the front cobwebbed windows, where on the windowsill sat a large black cat almost twice the size of Nero. He had said to Mira one day that the cat's name was Dremora—Demon of Dark Chants and Whispers.

"Don't look into her eyes," said Nero. "Because she will ensnare you to be her slave forever, and not only in this life, but forever."

And Mira had felt the coldness of the stare and quickly averted her eyes. Just as well, she thought, because even in that instant she felt the sting in her own eyes. She had sat and licked her paw, quickly wiping across her eyes, but the sting remained with her for the remainder of that day. She shuddered. What kind of power was this that caused her so much distress? She must commune with Anubis about this strange development.

On the following Saturday night when most humans were out and about drinking, partying, dancing the night away, the Shadow gang met on the rooftop of the Palais Theatre to carry out their next heist. The ginger-haired Sebastian slapped his paw onto a plan of Chapel Street, pointing to a multi-storyed building on the east side. "It's a bit too close to the police station for comfort, but as it's a Saturday most of them will be out on patrol. I think we can safely say that there won't be much to bother us. We'll go in from the building next door." He moved his paw and pointed to the second building, much



older and slightly shorter. “It’s an easy climb on the associate building as the bricks are all cracked with movement across the years. The high-rise, also no problem; the architects had given us joy with lots of inbuilt ridges to grip on, easy peasy. Are we all set?”

“Raring to go,” said Orlando. “Should be a fruit cake, this one. We checked it out last Saturday and most of it was in the dark, and of course some of the more scaredy-cats left lights on inside to pretend they were at home. No movement inside, so what do they take us for, eh? Don’t they realise that our hearing is ten times theirs?”

Nero touched his right paw to his head. “Brainless chooks.”

“Let’s go,” said Mira. “I can’t wait to relieve some of them of their jewels.”

The Blackpaw gang were lounging about in Carlisle Street, having a party in the garden next to the town hall. Great Caesar was holding sway, giving a speech as was his wont under the shining of the moon. After all, what else was there to do on a Saturday night except to run around near the police station and annoy the coppers at St. Kilda. He’d once slipped inside the sliding doors of the station following after some inebriated human, jumped over the counter before the duty cop could prevail, whizzed around the inspector’s office and taken a look at what was on the desk, before catapulting himself out the rear door. Ah, but that was in younger days. Now, he was content to let some of the more juvenile ones of the gang carry out those high jinks — in particular his grandson Louie the light-fingered Torty, known for slipping into the fish and chips shop and nicking a bit of fillet now and then. Sure was scrumptious the others had thought, as he spread it around the gang for them to get their fangs into. Nice one, thought Great Caesar. He will go far.

Nero thought the kid was a bit of an upstart, trying to take away his position as lieutenant to Great Caesar. He gave the kid a few smacks over the head when he knew Caesar wasn’t looking, knowing that the kid wouldn’t spill on him — for that was the code of the gang. Never dob in your mates no matter what. Anyway, he thought to himself, the kid’s still in diapers, so even though he might try and slip one over on me, he still doesn’t have the intelligence to be lieutenant. Well, that is, I surely hope not.

Come near nine-o’clock with the full moon shining down upon St. Kilda, the Blackpaw gang were considering moving on to South Yarra where there might be more superior pickings, but Great Caesar put a hold on that—his joints were creaking somewhat and he didn’t wish to be seen falling behind on such a journey. The young ones were keen, but as leader his word was not to be queried. No, they would slip over to Luna Park and cause some havoc there—especially in the Ghost Train. With what he had dreamed up in the dark tunnels, those humans who were silly enough to venture late at night, would pee their pants.

Mira had scaled the old building and was about to jump across to the high-rise with her super new leg muscles when her eyes picked up a dog in the window opposite. Sebastian said “What are you waiting for?”

“What? Oh, nothing much. There’s this Rottweiler over there looking somewhat sad. Seems the humans have gone out and left it all alone.”

“I can’t see a thing, but then I guess it’s those powers you’ve been given that allow you to see through almost anything.”

“I expect so, but he really does seem so sad. Shame we can’t go in and liven him up a bit.”

“Mmm, if it’s a Rottweiler as you say, then I think it better to leave well and truly alone.”

Mira chuckled. It’d be a challenge, wouldn’t it?”

“What?”

“To get in there with that guard dog and steal something, just to show who’s in charge here.”

“You’re mad . . . let’s get on with the plan.”

“Yes, the plan . . . okay, but on the way back, perhaps . . .”

Using the strength of her new-found muscles, Mira leapt across to the high-rise, landing on the balcony above where the Rottweiler was. The apartment was in darkness, but the one above yielded a slightly dimmed light. Mira and the gang were not interested in those with lights out which could indicate simply that the occupants had gone to bed. No, the plan was to spy out one of those with dimmed lights — simply just security lighting left on after going out. No one at home. She leapt up and with her new magnified eyesight she scanned inside. Nothing was moving. There was no indication of anything living within. She noted the rich furnishings, the expensive stereophonic gear, the large wall TV screen—there was money here and probably a wall or floor safe. This would do. As was almost normal among the high-rise apartments, the balcony door was not locked. She slid her paw into the corner of the frame and slid the glass door open. Something moved behind her and she turned with eyes blazing and claws out, but it was only Sebastian, huffing a little from the exertion of having followed her across.

“It was so easy for you,” he said, trying to regain his breath, “but boy, that was a hard leap. For one moment, I thought . . . well, if it had been a few centimetres further . . . !”

“Wimpy boy,” she said. “We’ll have to toughen you up, kiddo . . . get you out more at night.”



Sebastian gave a little blurt. “My mum said I was born in the daytime, so I guess I’m more active around then. The night shadows now worry me a little, not like you. Night is more of a friend to you and the others. Besides, my age is showing; little grey hairs mixed in with the ginger.” He patted the little pouch that was slung around his left shoulder, making sure he had not lost it during the great leap. By the look of this apartment they might be able to fill it to the brim tonight. He stared at some of the paintings on the wall of the living room and then his eyes, having adjusted to the light, caught sight of a three-dimensional picture of an African male lion. He shivered, was it alive? It was staring at him with those large eyes, chilling him out. On the opposite wall was the head of a zebra and next to it an antelope. Shock—these people were hunters! *I’m not going in there.*

“C’m on,” said Mira, “What’s holding you up?”

“I’d rather stay out here, keep a lookout this time, just in case. Not as young as I used to be.”

“Please yourself. I don’t really see the point, after all, Orlando is keeping watch below.” Mira scanned the room. The wall ornaments didn’t impress her, but one of them might be hiding a wall safe. She scanned them with her new vision. Nope, nothing there. Now, where can it be? Suddenly the antelope head cracked with a sharp bang and fell off the wall. Mira looked at the broken pieces on the floor and wondered—had Anubis given her more powers than she thought? If so, she would need to temper them somewhat while around the gang, otherwise who knows what harm might befall them. If a simple eye scan through objects could destroy them, what else could be accomplished? She turned her attention to the zebra head and began the scan. It cracked in three places and fell to the floor. My my, she thought, what if I up the power a little? She concentrated her vision upon the three-dimensional painting of the lion. Nothing happened. She tried again—nothing.

“Hey, what’s going on in there?” called Sebastian.

“It’s alright, everything’s under control.”

“You’re making a lot of noise.”

“It’s fine . . . settle down. You’ll bring attention to yourself.”

“Mmmfff!”

And then there was this roar which seemed to come from nowhere as the painting fell to the floor. Mira jumped back, half expecting a real lion to spring forth from the painting. But there was nothing, nothing but the broken glass and the painting undamaged. Her eye caught something floating in the air . . . a piece of paper, which a light draft was sucking toward the balcony. She leapt and grasped it between her teeth, placed it on the floor and turned it over. There were numbers written on it—four sets of them, which spelled out loud and clear to her that it was a safe combination. But no key. Where was the key? Perhaps there wasn’t a key? She memorised the numbers and made her way into the interior of the apartment, checking behind every painting or wall hanging. She even checked the edging of the wall-to-wall carpet where it appeared to be loose. Nothing. Where could it be . . . in plain sight perhaps, where one would not expect it. That was a trick people often used. The bathroom or the kitchen, perhaps. Ah yes, plenty of places there. Inside the handle of a hollowed out toilet brush, or hidden in the lining of the shower curtain. A myriad of places where one would not normally look.

She was turning from the hall into the kitchen when she heard something . . . heavy breathing behind her. She jumped and spun herself around, practically one twist movement to face the way she had come. The eyes that looked deep into hers were unfamiliar. Oh, she recognised the breed of course, but it had been many years since she had seen one—a male Maine Coon, and twice the size of her. Underneath all that startling grey and black fur she could imagine strong muscles rippling . . . she would be no match if it came to a physical confrontation. Even Anubis could not have prepared her for this.

“I presume,” said the Maine Coon, sitting back on his haunches and giving his whiskers a quick wipe with his paw, “that you are an intruder. In fact, I would go so far as to say that you are one of those ragged street urchins that run in gangs. Well, I am not interested in who or what you are, but only why you are inside my home? Just as well my humans are not at home, my sweet, just as well, otherwise . . .”

Mira sat back and stared at him. A silence reigned. “Well,” said the Maine Coon, “Has a mouse got your tongue little pretty?”

“I . . . I didn’t know you were home.”

“You didn’t know I was at home? You didn’t know! I thought cat burglars such as you would have known that, after all my scent is all over this place. I brush up against everything I see in front of me. If you come a little closer I might brush up on you. After all, it seems to me that you are quite a living doll.”

“Yes well, I’ve had a bit of a cold lately and . . . and.”

“And what, my dear?”

“Look here, you caught me fair and square whatever your name is, so why don’t you just move aside and I’ll be on my way. You see, they’ll come looking for me if I don’t make an appearance soon. And you know the stories about the Blackpaw gang . . . well, I can tell you they’re not just stories and they don’t take lightly to one of their own being held captive.”

The Maine-Coon shook his head. “Haha, good one my sweet. You don’t look like a member of the Blackpaws . . . I know all about them and their mad ways. You see, I am an honorary member of Darkness Security and we keep tabs on what the gangs in this neighbourhood are up to. Blackpaws indeed. What a laugh. You’re a long way down the list from them,



sweetheart. And if you insist, they call me Regent. And no, you're not going anywhere. "I'll nick up and close that balcony door."

Their ears pricked up as the sound of a lift issued through the wall, followed by a click as a key slid into the hallway door.

"On second thoughts, come with me. They mustn't find you here. We'll blame the mess inside on some human cat burglar. Won't be a problem."

Mira had no option but to follow the Maine-Coon. Well, she could still flee through the balcony door but something told her that she was not in any danger from this Regent bloke. Besides, perhaps he knew where the safe was located. She felt the gust of air that followed the front door being opened and she leapt after him. He led her through several passageways into what appeared to be a storeroom. As soon as she was inside, Regent pushed the door closed.

"They never come in here, like . . . well you know, once a year perhaps."

"Oh, so what's all this rubbish then?" Mira eyed the heap of cardboard boxes piled one on top of the other.

"It's stuff they couldn't find room for, left over from their last move. Behind those boxes there's a rug I sometimes sleep on. C'mon. You'll be safe here."

Mira nestled down beside him. She couldn't help but notice that his paws were twice the size of hers and that great big bushy tail that flicked over her ears, was like a broom coming at her. "There's not much room here."

"There's enough if you stop wriggling about."

Mira sighed. It sure has been a weird night. Now what? She couldn't stay here forever; what if the humans had locked her in? Wow! The very thought of humans unleashed her new powers—she could hear them talking. As clear as . . .

Male voice: "I don't believe this. Here we are ten flights up and some cat burglar has broken in! The mongrel must have come down from a helicopter!"

Female voice: "I told you not to bring those trophies back from Africa. I knew they were bad luck. Nothing's gone right since we acquired them."

Male voice: Oh don't go on . . . bloody superstition . . . but looks like they couldn't find the safe, so took out their vengeance on the trophies, and my lion, my poor, poor Leo."

Female voice: "Did you check the safe?"

Male voice: "I'm about to . . . give me a chance for god's sake."

Female voice: "Just asking. No need to get into a huff."

Mira, forgetting where she was, murmured "Ah, now we'll find out."

Regent turned toward her. "What's that?"

"Oh, nothing, just saying hope they don't find us."

"No, they'll be too busy cleaning up."

Mira listened to the humans quarrelling and then heard Regent snoring. It couldn't have worked out better—she could sneak out and watch the humans checking the safe. She eased her body away from him, stopping to check, but he was sound asleep. The inside handle on the door wasn't a problem and soon she was out into the corridor. The voices were close by and she scooted along the carpet-lined passage, stopping at a laundry door. It was half open and the two humans were in there, moving a floor-mounted dryer to one side. It slid easily, revealing a small steel safe which required no key. Bingo, thought Mira, there it is and I have the combination. She eased herself back out of sight, listening to the humans and hearing the tumblers click into place. There was a tiny squeak which was probably the sound of the safe door being opened, then several sighs of relief from the humans. All was well.

Male voice: "I'd better change the combination, just in case."

Oh no, thought Mira. Don't do that.

Female voice: Leave it. I'm tired, you're tired. Let's clean up and go to bed."

Mira skipped back down the hall, waking Regent as she snuggled close to him.

"Where have you been? It's not good to be roaming around while those two are awake. If they find you, you'll end up in the pound, and then . . ."

"They won't find me, besides, I heard the female say they're off to bed."

Regent stared at her. "You can understand them? That's more than I can do. How come?"

"I was given some special powers by the goddess Anubis."

"Really! Do you think . . . perhaps, I can be as blessed?"

"Mmmm, maybe. What is it that you would wish for?"

"Well, there's lots of things. For instance, stronger claws that would open a can of sardines. Sharper hearing when they're out so that I can tidy up before they get back and pretend that I've not been naughty."

"Doing what?"

"Oh, sleeping on her pillow. She doesn't like me doing that. And the feather duster—I like playing with it but sometimes the feathers fall out and she'll get mad if she sees them lying around the floor. If I could hear them driving into the underground car-park, that would be wonderful . . . what's that noise?"



“Oh heavens, it sounds like my lookout rattling the balcony door. Excuse me!”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got to stop him before the humans hear him.”

“I’ll come with you, just in case they do.”

They rushed into the darkened hallway, which proved that the humans had gone to bed, but at the corner Regent held up his paw. “Just making sure,” he whispered. “Okay, seems safe. Let’s go.”

Mira arrived at the balcony door first and there was Sebastian with his front paws on the glass. She was shaking her head. “Quieten down . . . you’ll waken the dead!”

“When you didn’t come out I was worried. Oh my lord, what is that behind you?”

Mira stuck her paw into the frame edge and slid the door further back. It rattled slightly and she looked around to see if the humans had been woken. But there was only Regent standing behind her, swishing his fluffy tail. “I’m Regent, and you are?”

Sebastian was in awe of the seeming giant in front of him. “I . . . er . . . they call me Sebastian.”

“Hmmm, handsome little fellow are you not, with all that fine ginger coating. You’d better not come in; it’s enough having to put up with your fiery friend, Mira. What a mess she made of this room. It seems that these powers that have been given to her cannot be fully controlled.”

“What p . . . oh, of course. Yes, she’s special and you better not harm her or you’ll have me to answer to.”

The Maine Coon tittered. “Oh you do make me laugh, little fellow. You will have to grow some before you can take me on, do you not think?”

“Well, I . . . it’s just that we watch out for each other and you’d better be careful, otherwise we’ll have our friends the Blackpaw gang up here.”

Regent sniggered. “Haha, will you now? Your Mira has already tried that one on me. I know of the Blackpaws and they won’t be coming to help you or anyone else around here. Now, you are causing a draft, so are you going away or what?”

Mira frowned. “I don’t think . . .”

“I’ll come in.” And before she could stop him, Sebastian leaped over the threshold and into the living room.

“Now,” said Sebastian, “where’s the safe?”

Mira hissed “Whoa, that’s not . . .”

“So that’s what you were looking for, eh?” said Regent. “I’m a bit slow on the take up, but now I see what your little game is.”

“Well,” said Sebastian, lead the way prince Regent. The sooner we get this done, the sooner was can get some shut eye before dawn.”

“I don’t know where it is,” said Regent.

Mira and Sebastian looked at each other in surprise. “Holy catfish” said Mira, “you’ve been living here all this time and you don’t know where that safe is? I don’t believe you.”

“No, no . . . I really don’t.”

“I think he’s telling the truth,” said Sebastian. “He hasn’t got a clue.”

Mira chuckled. “Well, I do. I know where it is.”

Regent blinked. “You do?”

“Yes. Follow me!”

Before anyone could change her mind, Mira had leapt away, spinning down through the corridors and into the laundry.

“Can’t be here.” said Sebastian, looking disheartened.

“Oh yes it is.”

“Where?” said Regent, his tail swishing wildly until it hit Sebastian in the face. “Ouch, watch what you’re doing big feller.”

“Sorry, it’s just that I can’t see anyone hiding a safe in a laundry.”

“Best place of all,” said Mira, “Now, we’ll all have to put our paws and claws here on the edge of this dryer and pull it away from the wall.”

“Crazy,” said Sebastian. “Just crazy.”

Mira sighed. “C’mon, it’s on some kind of hidden wheels. Pull!”

Six paws gripped the edge of the dryer and six paws pulled. “Pull harder . . . harder!” said Mira. The dryer squeaked on the linoleum floor, then squealed loudly and came away.

“Well I’ll be a cat’s whiskers!” said Regent.

“Shush,” said Mira, “Just checking to see if we woke the humans, or not. Be quiet and listen.”

Something rustled. Mira, with her superior hearing could detect it, followed by a click, then some scraping or shuffling noises, which Mira put down to someone searching for their slippers.



“Quick,” she said, “Shut the door!” Regent slowly moved the door to close. “Now,” said Mira, “no noise, I think one of the humans is awake . . . yes, it’s the male human, he’s out of bed now and walking toward us. Oh dear, he has to come past us if he wants to check anything untoward, unless he simply wants something from the kitchen. Shush now.”

There were more rustling noises. “I can pick up what he’s thinking if I concentrate hard enough . . . oh yes . . . yes, here it comes. He’s feeling irritable, not quite angry but almost. He’s now in the living room and he’s spotted the balcony door open. Heavens, we should have closed it. Now he’s looking at all the mess on the floor. Seems they didn’t clean it up prior to going to bed after all. Oh, here comes trouble. He’s looking for you, Regent! He’s out on the balcony, looking down I think. Probably looking everywhere . . . only a matter of time before he discovers us here. I think he yawned just now. Oh, and he’s calling his female human some names. I’ll not repeat them to you blokes, too rude. Oh, he’s slammed the balcony door shut. More rustling noises, he’s coming back.”

Sebastian sneezed. Regent clamped his paw across the ginger cat’s nose. “Not now,” he whispered. “Not now! Look, I’m going out to greet him. That way it will save you from being discovered.” He looked at Mira. “Is that okay with you, boss?” She nodded. Regent simply reached up with one of his paws and opened the door, then quickly sneaked out, waving his bushy tail. He heard the human male in the kitchen, wandering about. Probably had too much liquor that night, thought Regent. Wish he’d tone it down.

With Regent gone, Mira and Sebastian stared at the steel wall safe in front of them. Did they dare open it? “It’s what we came for,” whispered Mira. “If Regent doesn’t care, then why should we? This could give us tons of independence to set ourselves up in the country, far away from the Blackpaws. Perhaps the Maine Coon will come with us, eh? That would be a cool thing to do . . . get him away from those annoying humans who don’t seem to care much about us animals.”

“Open it.”

Mira spun the tumbler, then set about slowly clicking off the numbers she had memorised from the paper. “Here goes!” She pulled the handle down with both her front paws and with a sharp clack the door opened.

“Bingo!” said Sebastian.

“Ooh lookee here!” said Mira. “Bright and shining!”

“All that glitters is not gold,” said Sebastian. “Knowing these people, there could be fake stuff in there.”

“But why would you put paste jewellery in a safe, Seb? Doesn’t make sense.”

“Hmmm, is that a ruby on that ring, or just glass? Sink your teeth into it and see if it marks.”

“We don’t have time to waste. Get your little bag up here and I’ll shovel all of this into it.”

“Okay, here goes.”

Mira emptied the safe, including a thick wad of \$100 bills, together with some foreign currency. She handed the bag back to Sebastian who instantly complained. “It’s so heavy. I won’t be able to leap back to the lower building with all this lot.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll find another way out.”

There was a light tap on the door, then it opened to reveal Regent. “He’s gone back to bed. So, what have you discovered, eh?”

Sebastian huffed. “You’ll have to help me with all of this. It’s just too much for me to carry.”

“Yes, it does seem to weigh you down,” said Regent. “Perhaps if you give the bag to me?”

Mira’s pupils widened. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Oh come now,” said Regent. “How do you think he’s going to get out of here with all that weight on his shoulders?”

“We need his help,” said Sebastian. “Otherwise, we might as well forget it.”

“Well . . . I suppose . . . all right, if you two stay together. Now,” she said staring at Regent, “How are we going to do this? It’s time we left, and you are coming with us, are you not?”

“Yes, I can’t stand these humans any longer. For me they are on the lowest level of human society, going off to Africa as they do and bringing trophies back to show off to other humans. Disgusting, murderous, nihilistic, heathen, pagan, totally unwholesome.”

“My word,” said Sebastian, “you do have a vocabulary!”

“Right then,” said Mira, “how do we get out of here?”

Regent brightened. “This building has an option which not many have. In fact the idea is so new yet so old, not many humans know about it, but this architect sure knew his onions, so to speak.”

“What do you mean?” said Mira.

“Have you heard of the utility called the dumbwaiter?”

Oh, you mean that little . . . well not so little . . . elevator thing that is at the back of apartments and goes all the way down to the basement or whatever?”

“Spot on, Mira. We have one here.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. “You do?”

“Yes, I’ve ridden in it a number of times. Piece of cake. It’s becoming the in thing these days.”



"A blast from the past," said Sebastian.

"Exactly, little creature."

"Don't call him that," said Mira, "Just because you're a different breed, doesn't give you the right to call us names."

"My profound apologies, sweet one."

"Yes well, it's not nice. Now, where is this thingamajig?"

"The dumbwaiter? Follow me."

\ Mira couldn't believe how easy it was. They jumped in after Regent had made some adjustments to the keypad on the wall, then the hinged door slowly closed in on them. "I'm not happy with these confined spaces," said Sebastian, "Are you sure this will work?"

"It's a breeze, watch."

There was a slight thump and the dumbwaiter slowly moved downwards, passing through kitchen after kitchen. There was a loud scream at one of the floors as they came past. A human female was washing dishes in the sink and saw the cats go by. She dropped a plate which smashed to pieces on the floor, spilling scraps of food onto her bare feet. She screamed again as the dumbwaiter moved out of sight and several floors down the trio could hear her calling out "Robert! Robert! Someone's put some cats in the dumbwaiter. Come quick!"

"Five . . . four . . . soon be there," said Regent, "Cosy, isn't it?"

Sebastian was holding the pouch tightly, squeezed as he was between the other two. "I can hardly wait."

The dumbwaiter made a rumbling noise and settled to the basement."

"How do we get out?" said Sebastian, shivering slightly.

"Easy peasy," said Regent. "This model has a safety feature. If it's empty nothing happens, but see, the door opens automatically because of our weight. C'mon, let's go."

"There's someone in that security van," said Mira.

'Regent paused. "Yes, but it's going out. Quickly, we can follow."

Within seconds they were out of the building, watching the security van disappear down the street. Then there was a sudden screech as another van pulled up beside them. Mira froze — the driver was Narki Beezle, and the passenger Nero of the Blackpaw gang. What were they doing here?

Narki got out of the van and faced Mira. "We got a tip-off about you lot, that you'd be somewhere around here with a bag full of jewels. Someone wishes to meet you, so you'd all better come with us — into the back of the van if you don't mind."

"In your boot," said Sebastian. We ain't going anywhere with you lot." Nero translated this to the human.

"Well, you'd better," said Narki, "We've got one of yours tied up in the back. I believe you know him, goes by the name of Orlando."

Mira whipped her tail sideways. "Orlando! I don't believe you."

"Smart ass aren't you. See for yourself." He walked to the rear of the van, opened the door and there was Orlando trussed up, blindfolded and gagged.

Narki stood in front of the rear door. "Now, he's not going anywhere soon, but if you lot don't come with me then he's going to look like a very damp cat when we throw him into Albert Park Lake. Now, get in."

Mira looked at Sebastian and Regent. "I don't think we have much choice — come on, it can't be all that bad."

Sebastian jumped up followed by Mira. Regent sat on the footpath, making no attempt to move. Narki stared at him. "You too, otherwise you'll never see your mates again."

Regent slowly padded around to the rear of the van. "As much as I dislike humans telling me what to do, for the sake of friendship, I'll come. Just another experience to notch up."

With the rear door closed and locked behind them and the van then heading off to who knew where, they attended to Orlando, freeing him of his bindings.

"How did this happen?" said Mira to Orlando. "You're almost invisible at night."

Orlando look sheepish. "I was waiting for you two to come back and could smell some fish cooking just around the corner. But before I could get my teeth into it, Nero had spotted me and then that Beezle fellow had thrown a net over me. It seems someone in our Shadow gang has ratted on us."

"Can't be," said Mira, "Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" said Sebastian.

"Oh, never mind. We must concentrate on how to get out of this mess. We don't want to end up in Albert Park Lake, do we!"

Sebastian pointed his paw to the floor of the van. "There's a hessian bag there. You don't suppose . . . ?"

"That he means what he says?" said Orlando.

"Frankly," said Regent, "I wouldn't trust that fellow as far as I could throw a litter box."

"Me neither," said Sebastian, "I wonder who is this someone he is taking us to — could it be Great Caesar?"



Mira sighed. "I don't think so, Caesar I can handle. He's no threat to me. It has to be someone higher up in the chain of command. I always thought Great Caesar was the top, but now I'm beginning to think he's not, that there's someone or something else behind all of this."

"What's that smell?" ventured Regent.

"Mmmm," sniffed Mira, "I hadn't noticed, but now . . . yes, it's candle-wax!"

Orlando gave a little hiss. "And we know who uses candles, don't we?"

"Holy mother of Moses!" Sebastian licked his ginger paw. "Not her, surely?" He lifted his blue eyes to those of Mira's and saw her give recognition in return. "Yes, the one of the crystal ball, the incantations, and the darkest cat you have ever met—Dremora, Demon of Dark Chants and Whispers."

Sebastian jumped up and pawed at the rear door. "I'm out of here . . . c'mon, we have to get out. If everyone pushes we can get this door open."

Nice try," said Regent, "But I heard him snap a padlock onto the door back there. Fifty of us couldn't get it open."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"When he gets to the destination and goes around the back to open, we'll all rush him together."

Mira blinked. "I have a better idea. When he opens the door he's going to have a plan. He'll have some weapon or a net or something. I'll go first and head-but him where it hurts those humans, you know, down below. With the extra strength Anubis has given me it'll be a breeze."

"And Nero?" said Orlando.

Mira chirped. "Ha ha, he'll melt. Not a problem, I think he has a soft spot for me."

"As long as you don't have a soft spot for him, eh?" said Sebastian.

But the plans came to nothing as the van eased into the drive of the old Victorian villa. Out of the side window they could see half a dozen cats from the Blackpaws gang surrounding the van. "Looks like we're cornered again," said Orlando.

Regent looked out. "Hmmm, does seem so. Perhaps, if we put on a submissive look they'll leave us alone until we are inside the lair of she who gets her powers from the full moon."

Mira looked up from washing her front paws. "You seem to know much about that witch."

"Oh, in my former life I met many witches. She won't be any different; all we have to do is to find her vulnerable point."

Orlando flicked a scrap of paper away from him. "And how will we do that, maestro?"

"Well, Mira could help there, since she is the one with special attributes. She should be able to see right through the witch's outer skin. There has to be a vulnerable part of her that we average cats cannot see."

"In your dreams," said Sebastian. "Well, the sooner we get this over, the better. This bag is dragging me down . . . so heavy!"

The rear door swung open revealing Narki with five Blackpaw gang cats surrounding him. "Come along my little thieves; the Queen of witches wants to see you, so you'd better be on your best behaviour, otherwise my little angels she will make you disappear in a puff of smoke, ha ha ha! Oh I do find that highly amusing, ha ha ha. Just jump down here and if you try to escape, these Blackpaw mates of mine will hunt you down."

Mira couldn't see Great Caesar among the Blackpaws, but there was Nero in the background casting his eyes to the ground. Feeling guilty, are you, thought Mira. You've ratted on us and here we are to meet the real underworld ruler of the Blackpaws. She stared at him and with her new and powerful eyesight didn't realise that she'd almost sheared off the tip of his left ear. Crumbs, she thought, look at that! It's smoking! I wonder if I can do the same to the witch?

Guarded by the Blackpaws, Narki herded them around the back of the house where vines grew unhindered, where the windows sank at crazy angles and where there was a deep well with a sign: DUMP YOUR NUISANCE CATS IN HERE.

"See that!" said Narki, "that's where you lot will end up if you don't behave."

Sebastian unconsciously moved as far away from the well as was possible. The door into the house resembled a cave opening where a black crow sat on top, repeating "Fools in, never out! Fools in, never out!"

"Shut up Sylvester!" said Narki. "Get away with yer!"

The crow flew to the top of a pine tree, where it sat crying out NARK! NARK! NARK!

"This is creepier than Luna Park's tunnel," said Orlando, staring at skeletons embossed into the dark walls, of possums, rats, mice, and other unidentified animals.

"I don't like this," said Sebastian, hardly seeing where to put one paw in front of the other. "I know you're in front of me Orlando, but 'cos your coat is so dark you've become invisible."

"As black as," said Narki, "Some say black cats are lucky, some say not. Well, you're about to meet the one black cat who will change your lives. Ha ha!"

At the end of the corridor was a massive oak door, fortified with iron studs and copper edges. There was a keyhole, but no key. Narki looked down at Nero: "Say the word, kid. Let's get on with it."



Nero spat out a few syllables and the massive door creaked on its hinges, slowly opening to reveal a darkened room with the smell of candle-wax and incense. Narki pushed the cats forward.

The furnishings of the room were mostly dark green with all windows covered over with what appeared to be ancient scrolls, the letters of which stood out in a golden light that flickered in the darkness. There was a cauldron in one corner where a foul-smelling liquid bubbled over the edges. The enormous black witch's cat named Dremora was asleep on a scarlet cushion near an open fire that never required feeding due to the magic coals that would burn for all eternity.

And next to the fireplace was the object of their captivity, a grey-haired witch in a stark black robe with a tiara on her head which glowed in the dark and emitted tiny silent flashes of light, similar to lightning. Her eyes were hollows of darkness with a tiny red spot in the centre, which contrasted to the pale green colour of her face. She was seated on what appeared to be a highly-polished wooden throne, with a footstall inscribed with hieroglyphics. She was holding a sharp-pointed sword in her left hand. The cats froze, while Narki and Nero stayed in the background. The silence was something that Sebastian never wanted to feel again — it settled around them like a blanket of grey fog.

The eye sockets of the witch moved from left to right, surveying the three newcomers. "I am Queen Narcissora." It was as if her lips had never moved—the voice appeared to have come from all around, full of vibrancy, sharp as a butcher's knife, thundering deep within their eardrums. Sebastian felt faint.

The queen's voice thundered again. "I am able to speak your cat language, so easy, oh so very easy. Now then, I know of you three from the thieving Shadow gang, but who is this large fellow who dares to come here with you?"

Mira nudged Regent and whispered, "She's talking about you, mate."

Regent had been looking around the room, but now those red specks were firmly centred upon him.

"I am Regent."

"Oh, are you now! And pray tell me how you have managed to procure that royal name? You are not of my kingdom."

"No, your kingdom is of charred ashes, so how could I belong there?"

The red spots flashed. "You are rude and you try my patience."

Sebastian, standing on the right side of Regent, whispered. "Hey, knock it off, will you. She'll have us all fried for dinner."

"I am waiting." said the queen, leaning forward on her throne. Mira looked at Regent and noticed that his eyes had taken on a warm amber glow. But he didn't seem to be in a hurry to answer the witch.

"Speak!" thundered Queen Narcissora. "Speak now, or I'll have you thrown into that well outside, from which there is no escape from the thousand snakes that live down there."

Mira nudged Regent again. "You have to do something or we're all dead. Do something."

Regent sighed. "Before I continue, great Queen, let me introduce to you the powers that my good friend, Mira, has. Let her demonstrate before you, oh adorable Queen, what she has been blessed with by the goddess Anubis."

"Anubis! You dare speak of Anubis in my presence?"

"Oh, I assure you, great Queen, this is true. Mira is loved by Anubis so much so, that the goddess has given her special powers."

Sebastian whispered out of the side of his mouth "You'll get us all killed, stupid."

"What tricks are these?" roared the queen. "Show me, then!"

Regent whispered to Mira, "Concentrate on everything you've got and just like a laser beam, pin that concentration onto Dremora . . . fry her fur . . . you can do it, because when asleep she's vulnerable to your powers."

Mira remembered what had happened to the trophies back at the apartment, how they had split and fallen to the floor. Now she was to try her special powers on something living. But what if Dremora awoke before the powers worked? She heard Narki shuffling in the background. "Don't let her do that, my Queen. It could be dangerous."

"Don't interrupt Beezle, or your head will be off by my sword. Go ahead cat. Just go ahead with your magic trick, whatever it may be."

Mira turned her head slightly, so that she could see Dremora asleep on the scarlet velvet cushion. She concentrated, remembering how the technique worked before with hardly any effort. But now the stakes were high. If she failed she would not only have the queen to answer to but also one of the most fearsome creatures that ever lived.

At first there was nothing; she concentrated deeper upon the sleeping body, remembering how it didn't work with the Lion in the beginning, but still nothing was happening. She could feel the queen getting irritated, but dared not take her concentrated gaze away from Dremora. She could also feel Regent beside her, urging her on, when a globule of light appeared on the forehead of Dremora. She concentrated harder and the light grew. It was not a flame but an ever growing and dazzling pure white light. Harder and harder she thought and then she was thinking, larger and larger, until the light covered the whole of Dremora's body. Suddenly there was a bang and the scarlet cushion was empty. Dremora had gone.

The queen screamed. "What have you done! What have you done! Where's my Dremora?"



Mira, her concentration still strong within her eyes, turned to look at the black queen to beg her forgiveness, but immediately a small globule of light appeared on the witch's forehead. Oh, I can't stop it, it's growing larger and larger. Stop it, stop it, please stop it! She'll kill all of us. There was an uncanny silence in the room followed by a loud bang.

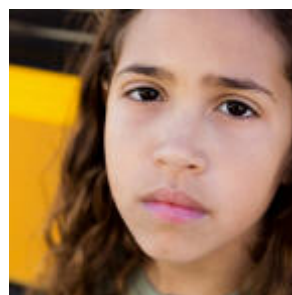
Later, when they had come out of the darkened house, complete with Sebastian's bag of jewels and notes, Mira looked at Regent with a smile on her furry face. "Regent, there's more to you than meets the eye. You knew what was going to happen, didn't you? No more Dremora, no more Queen Narcissora, no more Blackpaw gang. Shadows rule now . . . three cheers for the Shadows! And, you're really not from here, this earth, are you?"

Regent laughed. "No, my ancestors didn't come from America where they first bred Maine Coons. My people came from far away. We came from the planet Zellarin and I am he of the nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine lives. And all of you," he said, sweeping his paw around to encompass Sebastian and Orlando, will be the same one day. Because we are royalty and all of the humans on this earth are our servants." •



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