

Cat and Meese

by

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He took her while she slept, and with her lips he spoke a promise to her shadow. Her eyes moved under their lids, deep in the REM of slumber. With a smile on her lips, he listened through her ears to the shadow's answer. He knew the shadow. They were kin. And this deal between devils would benefit them both.

*

“Meese,” said her boss as she stepped out of the elevator and into his office.

“Aidan,” said Meese as she crossed the floor and gave him a Look.

“You’ll have to miss some school. Got something for you.”

He swivelled his chair around to face her, and she belatedly saw the office was unusually empty. It was just her and the fire god tonight.

“I can’t. I got exams.”

To accentuate this point, she slid her backpack off and dropped it, not lightly, onto the floor. It made a satisfying *thunk*.

“I need you to find someone. Underground. She can give you some answers.”

“That would be cheating, Aidan. I’ve got to study.”

“She’s an elemental.”

Meese paused. She wasn’t sure what “elemental” meant, but she could guess it had little to do with chemistry. She wondered what he meant by answers. She looked, again, at the suspiciously empty room, and thought she could guess the answer to her next question, but she asked it anyway.

“Why me?”

“You’re the only one that isn’t. Besides, you did pretty well the *last* time you went down there.”

That time, too, Meese had only been armed with dumb luck. And it had been an act of desperation on Aidan’s part. A matter above life and death. He didn’t seem desperate now. She thought again of what he could mean by answers- it was a vague tidbit, but it piqued her curiosity. She made a quick calculation in her head, and gauged the time to her first exam.

“Okay, but I want \$1000 if I find her, and \$300 for trying. And I can only spare tonight.”

“\$700 and \$200.”

“Deal.”

*

Deep beneath the city streets, in a temple of pain and shadow and dark, crawling things, he was born. Or, shall we say, re-born, for he had existed for some twenty-three years that he remembered and, he suspected, quite a bit more that he didn’t.

This birth was more of a free pass. A bail paid by a god he now owed, freed from the psychological prison of someone else's mind.

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Her phone chirped, and she wondered, vaguely, how far she was from the surface. Close enough for reception, apparently. Her phone's face told her it was near noon, but with the tunnel's cool, damp dark, lit only by a trail of lights on one side, the sun was a distant, bright memory. There was a smell down here, in the tunnels which wound through the bricked doorways of the old, long-buried city, of stale air and mould. Meese tried not to think of just how precarious the electricity was down here.

She wasn't sure how deep she was, but her little phone still had one bar of service clinging to the upper world. She dropped down from the tunnel to an old, cobbled street and watched it disappear. She felt more alone for it, though the street was familiar. It had less lights but, because it was straight and open, the light went farther. It didn't go very far, but the street was as wide as it had been when in use. Cobbled stone to each raised walk and storefront.

The downtown core was well-lit. Everybody who was anybody had a business front lit up by electricity and signs. She was still several blocks from the Core, but she was already walking past the small mom and pop shops of the underworld. Often, she knew, they paid tribute to the larger contenders to keep their windows intact and product unstolen, but there were exceptions.

Like the innocent-looking munitions shop she was headed for now. Maury, the owner, was too much of a badass. No one fucked with him, not when he kept 'demo' rounds in a range of guns within easy reach behind his counter.

For some reason, he'd taken a liking to her. She hoped it was in a protective, uncle-ish sense. The bell rang as she walked in, and the burly man behind the counter straightened up.

“Meese! Long time! I been savin' this one special for you!”

He leaned forward and she heard a drawer open. Then there was a tiny gun in his hand.

“I wanted to save its first shot for you, but you haven't visited. And last month this jerk laughed at its size. Sorry, but I had to shut him up. Second shot is still good, eh?”

She was never sure how to respond to him. Dutifully, she admired the gun, which was dwarfed by his hand.

“I'm sorry, Mo. He shouldn't have laughed.”

She didn't like guns. She was skittish around them, but some would argue that she was skittish around everything.

“Meese should have protection down here. Gotta back up your rep, little girl.”

“Rep?”

“Reputation. You're the latest celebrity, don'tcha know?”

“What?”

“Well, except for Kitty mind you. But she's old news that came back.”

“Actually, I'd like to hear about Kitty.”

“Why Meese, didn't you come down to visit me?”

Meese gave him her most guilt-free smile.

“Of course, Mo. She's just business.”

“Business? You're not after her, are you?”

“Maybe.”

“Meese.”

“Just kidding, Mo. I just gotta chat with her.”

“Chat, huh? I think you better take the Mieshka.”

“Miesh...ka?”

He pushed the gun toward her.

“You... named it after me? That's so sweet, Mo.”

“Your name is just so perfect sounding for a gun, Meese.”

She picked up the gun carefully with both hands. Maury nodded with approval.

“Mo...”

“Yes, Meese?”

“I dunno how to use a gun.”

*

Freedom, he learned, was comprised of promises. He'd known this all along, bitterly holed up in her mind, but to experience it was entirely something else. No longer did he view the world as on the screen of a television. Everything around him stirred with life, though perhaps not the life most of the world would associate with the term. His life was made of sticks and stones, and the shift at the edge of one's perception. He was a whisper that turned a dream to nightmare, which was what he'd wanted his entire existence, except this dream was reality, and the claws in his paws were very, very real. He left one dead at her door, and another was coming up the temple stair.

*

Mo was a great source of information. Despite the small size of his shop, most of the underground staples dealt through him. Another reason why everyone left him alone. He was better than a bar for gossip, especially for her since she'd be too nervous to walk into one. The underground thrived on gossip- people, literally, lived and died for it. There wasn't much known about Kitty, but rumours flew in the face of ignorance. She was known only as Kitty, which was normal. The underground was big on code names. She was high priestess of the trickster god and, since going rogue, she's so far offed a priest, a prostitute and an idiot. And she was an elemental- that word again, which Mo said was exactly as it sounded.

The Core was an underground city that averaged three stories high until you hit the roof, though Meese knew the buildings went far higher than that. The ceiling was hard to see, since only the main level was lit, but Meese had seen it, and it wasn't all that impressive. Dirty old concrete.

The buildings here were old and mostly brick. Between them, without exception, spanned metal and wood beams. To the people of the underground, structure was a necessity. Especially since the Core was located near the above-ground city center, and supported a lot of weight. A few of the Core buildings were actually connected with the new city's buildings. Without structure, the whole place came tumbling down. Meese knew that- she'd seen it happen, though in a sense of chaotic society instead of rubble.

Mo lived near the edge and, two short minutes later, she was walking down old

wharf street- a name shared by its counterpart in the thriving business center of the above-ground downtown. It was no longer anywhere near a wharf, but the name had stuck.

She walked by the storefronts of the narrow street relatively alone and definitely unbothered. She hadn't been down here enough to become a familiar face. She knew what they saw- some young, fair, orange-haired teen, too skinny and shy to be a threat. Though, if what Mo said was true, everyone knew her name. She still wasn't sure what she thought of *that*.

“Hey. Hey you girl. You lost?”

She turned around and eyed the guy.

“Nope.”

He must have just come out of his store. He had on an apron, and the shop display had a scattering of Chinese characters, which told Meese which group controlled this section of town. She gave him her most winning smile.

“But I'm looking for something. Someone.”

He was wiping his hands on a rag. Slowly. While he gave her a long, considering look she knew most people down here possessed.

“Someone? Who?”

Her turn now to mirror his look.

“Kitty.”

His hands stopped wiping.

“No one find her. Why you look?”

“My boss wants me to.”

“Boss?”

Time to go, she thought. She had no idea what terms Aidan was on with this guy's boss. Instead of answering, she gave him another winning smile.

“I only got tonight. Thanks, though.”

She gave him a little wave and walked down the street. She could feel his stare on her shoulders and she willed herself to not look back.

*

Three down and an entire world to go. His claws he'd licked clean, but found the blood to be entirely unsatisfactory. Besides, he thought, the image was too cliché. He was above that ideal of a monster. He was independent from that thought. She, he thought, knew this, but still she chased him, hunted him, in true monster fashion. She had a gun and, though it had no silver bullets, she had enough power backing her to make her a serious threat.

*

“Ah, Meese,” said a voice she'd previously hoped had died.

“Roger,” she said, and turned to face the eel-like Chinaman. “Roger and company,” she amended when she saw that he seemed to be accompanied by what, if slippery looks were any indication, appeared to be extended family.

“Long time no see, Meese. How's Mary?”

She wondered if he ever spoke without sounding like a Bond villain.

“Out of the hospital. How about Stan?”

“Dead,” said one of the relations.

Oops.

“Oh. I'm sorry. Shall I send her your regards, Roger?”

“It would please me, Meese. I also have a missive from my employer to yours, if you'd be so kind.”

He produced a letter.

“Not a bomb, is it?” Their bosses hadn't gotten on well.

“Quite the opposite, I think, Meese.”

He stepped toward her, the letter held close to his chest. She could see the delicate way he held the envelope. He always presented himself as poised, but she knew just how quick the genteel façade could slip. The humour he carried now could, in a single, crucial moment, vanish and before her would stand a very dangerous creature. Far more dangerous than the eel or snake she'd likened him as.

He drew the letter out between them, to her, in slow movements. As if to not frighten her away. It wasn't that he perceived her as dangerous, but a pigeon he needed to catch so he could tie a message to her leg. She remembered how dexterous those fingers were when they held a knife.

“My employer, Meese, is not dumb enough to send a bomb to kill a fire god.”

She swallowed and remembered to breath and act casual. Then he threw her another kind of bomb.

“We lost her in Southside.”

“What?”

“Kitty. You're looking for her, aren't you?”

His face remained impassive. He watched her with the same meticulous care he gave everything. This close she could see his eyes. Dark. Brown, she guessed from his race.

“Oh. Thanks. I'll, uh, get this to him.”

“I expect you will.”

She tried not to relax too much when he turned to leave. He'd probably sense it.

*

What she didn't realize was that he knew all her little secrets. He knew her tricks and he knew her trades. He knew her back-up plans and he knew her weaknesses. He knew how to dodge her lightning, and that made him near invincible to her. He wondered, vaguely, if he could kill a god. He doubted it. His benefactor wasn't that stupid.

*

Meese was lost. She doubted she'd managed to get anywhere *near* Southside, which was just as well because Kitty probably wouldn't be there. No one stuck around with Roger on their tail.

She grumbled from one alley to another, all with varying heights and all narrow enough for her to touch both walls easily. She kept, out of habit, a hand lightly brushing the wall to her left. A lot of these alleys had little to no lighting, and Meese was a member of the clumsy club. It was her legs, she blamed, they were too long and she felt like a giraffe. Or a stork. Ostrich. She stubbed her toe on a box and sent it forward a few inches. She could see its shape by the next alley's faint glow.

Light. She picked her way to the corner.

Someone had, to Meese's joy, strung the rafters with Christmas lights. A few different strings, she noticed, as the colour changed a few times down the old way. She saw stairs at the end.

"Hey. Hey!"

She looked up.

"Hi."

There were a pair of well-worn soles standing on the rafter above her. She could see their red tips poking out over the wood. She moved back from the alley's entrance, and found a pair of legs squatting over them. There was a body too, and a face she couldn't see looking down at her.

"It's dangerous down there," said the stranger, who balanced on the beam with her wrists resting on her knees. A gleam caught Meese's eye, and she noticed one of the hands held a gun that was, casually, pointed at her head. She moved back another step, swallowed a jump of adrenaline, and felt the corner of the intersecting alley nudge the back of her arm.

"It's dangerous up *there*. I could fall."

"I suppose," said the woman, and Meese's eyes followed the gun's barrel as the woman lifted it and aimed it farther down the alley.

"But down there, *he* could get you."

Fear tightened her stomach, and she felt it turn in her gut. Despite herself, Meese turned and followed the gun's gaze. The other side of the same alley wasn't nearly so festive, and the rafters lifted to give the woman an open range in the narrow maze. There didn't seem to be anything remarkable about the, from what Meese could see, *empty* alley. Just the usual darkness they came with, the same as what she'd just been stumbling around in.

But something moved, in the dark. It was subtle, and quickly over. She could have imagined it, except it happened, with all the velvet smoothness of the last, again, and the dark of the alley seemed much more alive for it. Perhaps it was a trick her mind was playing, but the shadow seemed much darker and denser now.

Bang!

Meese jumped, and the shadow did too. She was deaf for a few seconds after, and when her hearing *did* return, it came with a ringing. It wasn't just the bullet the woman had fired. Meese had seen, with all the attention of a bystander to a car crash, a form jump away from a blinding, dancing arc of electricity. The Christmas lights flickered.

"There's a chain ladder on the wall a little way back," said the stranger over the ringing of her ears, and Meese didn't need telling a second time. She turned and ran, which is what a Meese does best.

Bang!

This time she heard it: a loud thunderclap with the gun's retort. She didn't hear the woman swear, and she didn't look back a second time. She was pretty sure she didn't want to know who 'he' was until she could look down on him. She almost missed the chain, but luckily some lights were wrapped around the top rung. She scrambled at it.

"You *bitch*, can't you leave me in peace?"

It wasn't the woman talking. This voice was male and odd in a way that made Meese scramble harder. It spoke slowly, and its pitch wavered a tiny bit through the sentence. The ladder jangled and swung stubbornly.

Bang!

Another thunderclap boomed through the scene, and the flash left little dots in Meese's vision. There was a shriek, and something scraped the wall. Meese jumped, grabbed the highest chain she could, and pulled her legs up to push against the wall. She pulled herself up a few steps, then ran out of ladder as she reached the rafter. She heard something move below, like claws on the ground, and jumped for the beam. Then the woman was there and pulling her up. A few seconds later, she was straddled over the support with her legs curling up and out of reach of whatever was below.

She looked down and saw a kitten.

"Quick, get the ladder up," said the woman, who aimed a gun at the kitten. It looked up at her with piercing blue eyes she could see even in the alley's gloom. It had a soft, grey, blotched tabby coat.

"What the f-" said Meese, but stopped when the kitten moved.

She wasn't sure why the movement drew her attention, when she really should have been focused on the gun, but she looked down.

It was reaching for the ladder. It, which should have been less than a foot high, was sitting on the ground and, with a foreleg grown grotesquely longer, *it was reaching for the ladder.*

"What's wrong? thought I was a cute little *kitty*?" It snarled over the last word, and she looked to see those blue, blue eyes blazing much higher than the kitten had been.

But not, she noted, high enough to reach the beams. She hooked the ladder with a foot, and pulled it out of its reach. The woman grabbed the rest of it and draped it over the wood. As she watched, the kitten-thing edged along her gaze, and slid back into a smaller form as it paced. A grown up version of the kitten she'd first seen, with long, skinny limbs, and a longer face. He had very prominent canine teeth and his eyes, which she now saw were sunken into his face, never wavered from her. She could still see their blue, the most prominent colour in the alley. His long tail moved madly, and a shadow snake writhed on the floor to its beat.

"What the fuck?"

"It's complicated," said the woman. She was, to Meese's fairest of the fair, several skin tones darker. Her hair was black, and pulled into a rough pony tail. There were lines of fatigue under her eyes and, this close, Meese could see a slight shake in the hand that held the gun. A number of hairs, strayed from the ponytail, completed the image of someone wanting for coffee.

"You're Kitty, right?"

"Yeah," said the woman who watched the cat.

"Is he-"

"No, he's not the reason I'm called Kitty."

"Ah?"

"He used to live in my head. No one knew about him till a week ago."

Meese decided to digest that first part later.

“When you killed the priest?” She said.

Kitty looked up, and Meese could see the gleam of light on her eyes.

“That wasn’t me.”

Meese raised an eyebrow.

“That was him.”

Meese looked down for a long moment. The shadows, which had multiplied in his presence, seemed to swim around him. The black blotches of his coat bled like an ink wash painting, and lingered in the air where he’d been. His face twisted in her gaze, and fury bristled his back. His form shivered and distorted, and his blue eyes watched her. She could feel their gaze, like a poison in her mind. She believed Kitty.

“So who’re you?”

“Meese.”

“No shit?” The woman gave her a once-over. “I thought you’d be taller.”

“Her tales certainly are,” said a gentleman’s hiss from directly below.

“Shush you,” said Kitty to the cat, like they were old friends. His eyes were back to staring at Meese again. She thought she detected a change in their expression, though the venom remained.

The lights flickered.

“He’s trying to turn them off.”

They flickered again, and Meese looked up at Kitty.

“Let’s go.”

Left unsaid between them was just how neither of them wanted to be in the dark with the thing below.

*

What he didn’t know was her new little red-haired friend with the big underworld reputation. He was not one to underestimate an enemy, despite how she looked like a scared little girl. It was time to end her. He pulled and felt the tug of the dark god’s gift within his reach, like a boat moored to his soul, bumping with the weight and drag of the lake it floated on. This time the lights went out for one long, delightful moment. Kitty fired at him again, and he dodged, but the burst was enough to drop his focus on the dark. He realized he would need some time to work his magic and, with a sneer, he walked away from his prey and into the quiet of the shadows. He left them the stair to run with, but he doubted they’d take his offer. He wasn’t a very trustworthy character, after all.

*

The ceiling above them rumbled and shook. Meese gave it a worried look.

“Subway tunnel,” explained Kitty, and then turned the sentence around in a way Meese was beginning to expect of her: “You smell like one.”

“Like one what?”

“Like a fire girl.”

“Oh.”

She remembered. She remembered her fingers like kindling, dancing to a heat that sang from her flesh. She remembered how she’d trip and get lost in its flame. She’d almost burned down the building.

“I burnt out. It was temporary.”

Though Kitty leaned back against the wall, she seemed to have more energy. She regarded Meese with a smile that Meese wasn't sure how to interpret.

"You sure?"

Meese didn't answer, and the silence hung between them for another long moment. She pulled out her phone, and was pleased to see they'd gone high enough to hit one bar of reception. It was well into the afternoon now. The sun would be setting in another couple of hours, though that meant nothing to the underground city. She remembered what Aidan said, about getting answers. She wasn't sure she knew what the questions were.

"What's it like?" She asked. "Being an elemental. Where's it come from?"

"If you're a fire girl, you ought to know."

"I'm a normal girl."

Meese was determined to keep eye contact. Another long silence drew out, and Kitty got this look in her eye of pure mischief. She wondered if that look was a prerequisite to working for the trickster god.

"It's like I can feel all this big energy around me, everywhere. In the wires, in the air. My nerves, my heart... it tingles when I use it. Sometimes it hurts, but I guess that's the risk you take. It feels awesome. I don't get it."

Another turn of topic that Meese couldn't follow.

"Get what?"

"How did *you* get such a hardass rep down here?"

"Oh." Meese knew what she meant. Meese wasn't the hardass type.

"It wasn't *my* fault."

*

He found them. It wasn't that hard- he knew Kitty so well, after all. He was the size of a collie now, with a tail that lashed long and mad. His ears were grown in length, but not width, and his teeth as well. His claws touched the brick with every step, and when he jumped, they left small scores in the clay. Behind him he dragged a pool of shadow. Sometimes he would hear it laugh, but he didn't think much of it. It was allowed to be a little not right in the head; it seemed par for the course. He paused on the edge of their hiding place- a small rooftop that didn't quite hit the ceiling of this world. He liked this world for that. Everything knew exactly how high it could go, and they were all at the mercy of this cement sky. He watched her look up and shout. The darkness, roused by her voice, flooded by him. He laughed a hearty, savage laugh, and followed its lead.

*

They ran away from the dark, from their roof-top hideout and across the shakier roofs of lower buildings. It had been an instinctual thing, the direction they took, and Meese was glad it was an instinct they both shared. She did not want to be alone up here.

For about a minute, they seemed to be getting away. But then the vague, moving dark neither of them looked at, gained and no amount of fear was going to keep it back.

They hit a ledge to a solid, concrete building. Meese jumped down, hit pavement, and kept running. Kitty was, she assumed, right behind her. She felt the hairs on her

entire body stand up all at once, and the light around them left for one long, terrible moment. Something, and she could guess what, hissed entirely too close to her. She heard a clang, and then a bang followed by Kitty's electric signature. When she regained her hearing, she heard Kitty swearing. Then she was blinded in a long, bright flash that lasted as long as the dark had before. Meese heard herself breathe, and then the air erupted around her in the sound of sheet metal tearing.

Beside her, Kitty yelled. Something dropped to the ground with a clatter. Meese realized, with time slowed by her adrenaline-piped blood, that it was Kitty's gun. Its barrel was nearly clawed in half. There was blood on the handle, and Meese looked to see Kitty holding a bloodied fist to her chest.

"Hello, my pretty," said the cat, who had now turned his gleaming grin to her. He walked- stalked- toward her with a predatory ease. She backed up and fumbled for the gun at her back, tugging it free from its leather holster. He paused when he saw it, hardly bigger than her hand.

"Now ain't that cute," he said, and chuckled.

"You know what happened to the last person to laugh at it?" She said, conscious of how her voice wavered and broke and did little to promote confidence.

"No. *Enlighten me.*"

She paused and thought about it.

"Actually, I don't either."

She pulled the trigger and the gun went off with something similar to a bang, but completely lacking in volume. The bullet bit the concrete several meters behind the demon. She saw Kitty skitter to the side, out of the way, and slink along the wall. A part of her felt the energy the woman gathered, readying another attack. She remembered what Kitty'd said, and tried to feel the burn of the element she'd once had. Maybe *this* was what Aidan'd meant by answers. The Mieshka held three bullets, and the demon's smile had grown at her lack of aim. He moved, with the smooth waltz reserved for ghosts and shadows, toward her. Resisting the urge to close her eyes, she tried to picture the fire she'd held before, dancing, within her reach.

She pulled the trigger.

*

They struck both at once, and his very real body went through some very real pain. He hadn't known the little redhead was a fire wielder. His heart, black thing that it was, stopped beating when the electricity hit it. He'd tried dodging it, but the fire had made him hesitate. And now he was burning to the tune of life. He realized he was about to be acquainted with Death, who probably did not offer deals. At least no deals he could take. Someone already had claim to his soul, and he wondered if that claim meant he would be doing a lot more burning in the near future. Perhaps, he thought, the devil had more use for him than that. Perhaps, he hoped, it was in the devil's best interest to keep him alive. His fur was burning, and he smelled the sulphur of it briefly before the fire took his nose and lungs. The darkness he kept fled from the fire, though some remained in the corners of the place. It would lick up his ashes when he was all burned away. He wondered why he ever had wanted to be alive.

*

They watched the fire burn the beast. Meese, who still didn't think she'd done it, had stumbled to the side with the little gun's retort, and kept stumbling until she was next to Kitty. Her hands tingled and stung and shook, mainly from the shock of gunfire. Something burned in her heart. She couldn't read the other woman's thoughts, but Kitty's mouth was a grim line as she watched the flames burn her enemy to the ground. They stood like that for a long, long time, until the cat was coal. She could see the sparks on the embers, and the air waving a lazy heat, lounging after a big meal. Ash frosted the coals, and the smell, though she'd gotten used to it, still made her ill. She looked at the coals, still rippling with heat. She wondered if this was the answer Aidan'd meant.

"I guess you hadn't burnt out, huh?"

She'd only known Kitty a little over an hour, but she could tell there was something missing in her tone, something reflected in the glow of the fire she could see in the dark girl's eyes. She let Kitty end the silence again.

"Now that he's dead and gone, my head feels so empty."

"That's okay. My head feels like that, too. It's normal."

She caught Kitty's eye.

"At least, I *hope* it's normal."

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