

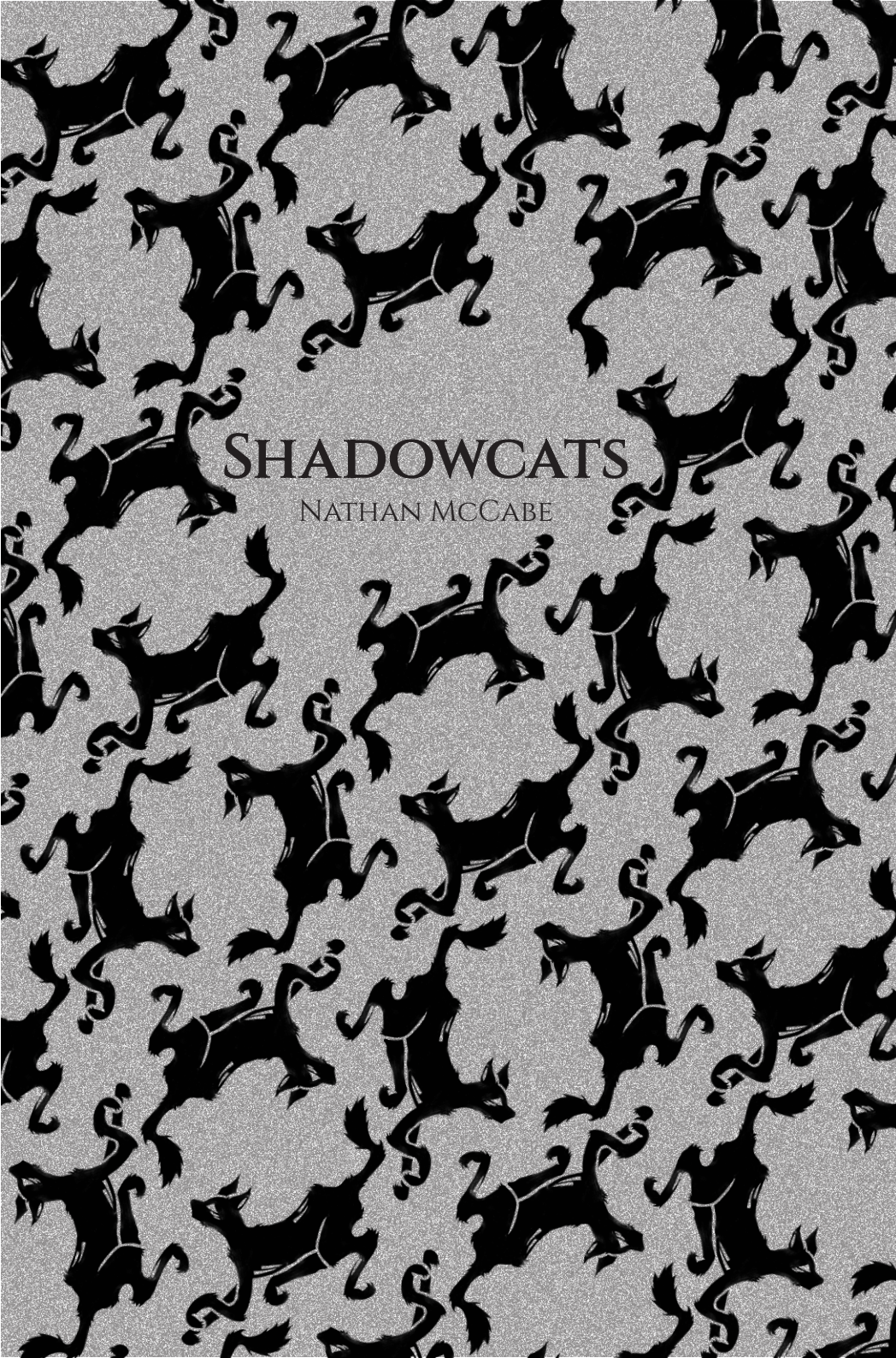
STARFALL STORIES

MAY 2026

HANDMADE IN GRONINGEN

# SHADOWCATS

NATHAN MCCABE



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Greetings, all, and thankings fer the fire and wine. Settle down, settle down, and pull yer blankets around ye. I've travelled far t'bring ye this story, which I gathered along the way. I'll do m'best to remember it all, but know that memory and dreams are much alike — and dreams are oft misled by spirits. As I have been, misled... and well-led alike. They've led me here, to fire and wine — but has it been worth the price they've asked of me? Listen close.

Me story begins in a faraway land, the land of me birth, Montrey. It's a Salenzan fief, far Nor'East of here, I reckon... though... I admit to being lost. Back home, ye can never be lost. South is seawards, downhill. North is all mountains. Between is a place of rivers and fields... blue'n gold.... So vivid are the colours of home, or the colours of younger years. I had a cat when I was a youngun. A black cat, named Jack.

Now, Jack wasn't the family cat. He was my cat, special. I found him... I don't remember where, but I found him small. I was small too then, so we made a fine pair. Jack and I'd go on adventures together, up into the mountains, looking for the caves o'the Mountain King and suchlike. The grass was too long for him sometimes, so I'd keep him on me shoulder like a parrot, feeding him with bait-fish stolen from me Fa. He grew, and I grew, and we'd play, and laugh, 'til he got the pox and died. Since he were my cat, I made his box and dug his little grave, and over it I said,

“Goodbye, Jack.

Ye may be gone from me home, but never from me heart.

Ye make me cry, Jack, but at night in dreams I'll smile again,  
And I'll miss you, sweet thing, from now til then.”

Me family said the same t'me when I left. Fa gave me his knife, Ma gave me somethin' I've lost since, and I sailed off on a mountain wind. I remember those silk sails filling, and me heart snapping taut. I remember turnin' to look back, but I remember not me parent's faces.

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I been sailing ever since. Me hands are all shaky now, and I can be confused, but a couple seasons back I was a star-shinin deckhand. I hauled

rope on guildships, under the Beacon-banner. I got ‘er tattooed on me back somewhere, with the gulls for going thrice round the Veitandian Sea. I’ve travelled all about, I have, and every new horizon filled me heart with a new wind. Those had all been sweetwater seas though, and a young man’s courage grew dark within me... For I’d shared drinks with salt-sailors, who told stories of sea-serpents, and unmapped shores. So, fearful and brave, I found work on a ship bound to Drekistad, the last port before the open ocean. Down the fjords, we rowed, weighing anchor in forest coves and foraging on the edge of the great Lyndwood. One night, on watch, I saw a unicorn... no word of a lie! So hold your laughter! Avast! Beauty like that should not beget laughter, nay.

Once we’d passed the mountains and deep woods, the valley opened to plains, and we did trade with the Urrg, who herd their cattle to the rivers to drink. I’m sure much of what you’ve heard is true... enormous, tusked, with matted hair like bisons’ all down their wide backs and arms... but they are not so simple as some like to say. Quiet, aye, but not slow. I came to be very close with one, who joined our crew for a time. He had no name, Urrg know each other by smell... but we called him Rowan, for he was an oarsman! Ye may’ve heard they have green skin, but I must tell you the stories exaggerate. He was as brown as any man, but when Sol shone bright... aye, there was some green in his cheeks. I remember it with a smile.

When Rowan first came aboard, I thought him dour, for he never smiled. I took it as a challenge, and I’m a blabbermouth, so I’d bother him plenty with stories of home — of Jack, aye — and jokes, and such. He’d huff laughter out from his heavy belly, and yet... no smile. At last, one eve, I asked. “Rude,” he says in his stone voice, and is quiet again.

“Rude to ask, d’ye mean? Or rude to smile?” says I, putting away me own smile.

“To smile,” says he.

“And why would that be?” I asks. With an Urrg, ye must ask a lot of questions. They ask none of their own.

“Teeth and tusks,” Rowan says, “are for fighting, not playing.”

“Oh,” says I, and he says no more.

I learned, in the following weeks, that when he was merry he went a little slack-jawed, and the corners of his eyes downturned. He’d been merry often in my company, and I’d not noticed. Quite a friend, he’d thought

me, though he'd never said it, for I'd not asked. He found questions a fun game, but tiresome, and rather liked to listen to long stories. If I go off on a tangent — forgive me, I am already — blame Rowan the Urrg-man.

To get back to it, Rowan once told a story that saved me life. Unprompted, one quiet night on the river, he began to groan. The other sailors — we were playing dice — all stopped their chatter and hushed. “Mmm-uh!” heaved Rowan, his eyes closed. “Mmm-oh!”

“Arright, Rowan?” someone asked. “Shally fetch the healer? Or another ale?”

I came to his side, for the big man was shaking a little, and his lip had turned to bear his teeth. As I beheld, *a light shone from his mouth.*

“The voices of the World are chanting!  
Mmm-urh! And I will speak as they command.  
From riverbed and sea they are singing,  
A song long-remember'ed by the land.

In yester-year, when Urrg-men were infants  
There grew a kingdom of roots underground,  
And from below came rising an incense  
Which pleased and whispered, enchanted and bound.

The mad, the age'd, weak and the weary  
Were prey to tigers and vultures within.  
Within their sleep the spirits rose hungry,  
And fed on sweet dream-flesh with fang'ed grins.

Yet hungering beasts are easy to tame.  
They bent the knee when we gave up our names!”

His eyes opened, and they shone with proud tears. We were — all of us — aghast and amazed. Some folk spat overboard for luck, others darted off to tell the cap'n. My heart pounded in my chest, it did, and I put my hand on his big hairy shoulder. I says, “Arright, Rowan? Ye arright?”

He says, “I am tired,” and spoke no more that night.

That moment is glass-clear in my mind... When I tell it, it's like I'm there again. Some nights ago... I'm not sure when... I told this story to a

cult of pilgrims, headed to the Silver Citadel. They fed me for the night, and told me that me friend Rowan had heard the voices of the Stars that night. Not the Stars above, nay, but those that are buried beneath our feet. I shook me head and called them lunatics... they said no, that was a different cult... bah, I ramble... but I ask ye, too. What do ye make of this? Rowan never questioned it, and didn't have answers when I did. They're an unquestioning people, the Urrg. I wish, ah, sometimes very much, that I had their faith. For queer horrors lay ahead of me on that journey, and I lost any faith I had in the Stars, or the World, or our old mountain-gods of Montrey. I get by on faith in you folk, who give me shelter. Aye, and on the cats. Let's have another round of ale, and I'll get to the cats.

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Drekistad was a place of wonders, and I said goodbye to Rowan there. He embraced me on the dock with his ox-arms, and walked off without a word. From there, the ocean took me. The biggest ship I ever sailed — a three-master — was tossed like a gambler's coin upon those waves. The howling winds ripped rope through my bleedin' hands day-after-day. Ye were never dry, and the wet settled inter ye until yer skin felt like an octopus', and looked like it too. Purple and blue, and grey from vomiting.

The ship took me to the shores of Ostriss. Beyond the Rift, as far East as folk live... there are stories for why they don't live farther: An iron-storm blows over a town, and when it passes, the town is empty; a dying man stumbles into a tavern, poisoned, talking of sand-serpents and clutching a crystal fang. Fear and mystery, alas, my story is much the same.

I was working on a dock, in a place called Barksend Bay. It's a stormy place — grey are the skies, and brown the water. Most folk work dredging in the mudflats, and everything tastes like iron. It blows in over the wastes, on storms that come with the tides. Everythin gets dark, and the air is thick with dust... Then green fire gathers on ships' masts and temple-towers. Faerie fire, they call it... aye... dreams are strange in lightning-storms.

Each day, we'd move crates of iron-sand aboard ships from the capital. Hard work, t'was, and it didn't pay! So, each night, I'd sneak onto the ships I'd been loading, pop down a pillow, and sleep there in the hold, with the sand, blown from across the cursed Ostrissian wastes. One such night, a fearful storm hit us. With the tides, hand-in-hand, bound by some magic, there

are seasonal terrors: The Lhunite prophets forewarn them, and the whole town is battened down or buried. Perigee storms, they're called. Homeless, I wandered the empty streets to the docks and watched the storm gather.

Barksend was all wooden, houses of scavenged wood, from ships caught in the mud. It grows on a rock, like brown lichen, in the mouth of a delta. All about it are the reddish flats, which dry and crack in the sun, and bloat in the rain. They were bloated that night, and the ships rode high in the dock. Beyond the flats, grey dunes roll and glitter. On a clear day, you can see Numerion's Folly, more a crag than a ruin. That night, you could scarce see the shore. Iron-storms gather low, and Lhun draws them high with Her sorcery. The sand falls away, leavin' only iron-dust. A rolling wall, t'was. Coilin, burstin with flame, and headed me way.

There were no guards about, for the storm, and I climbed aboard a well-laden ship. Her name was Demet, after the Star o'Plenty. The wrong ship, aye, she doomed me, but I had no indication. Exhausted I was, and she was sturdy, quiet. Heavy work makes for heavy sleep, me Fa always said, and I was sleeping like a stone at the bottom of the ocean. Ship rocking side to side, masts creaking... thunder, thunder... wind... and a waking nightmare gripped me.

There was a hand around me throat. Cold, cold, and hard like glass. I had no breath to scream. Me eyes followed its arm... which was long, and pouring like black mist from one of the crates. This... shadow... moved above me, flickering like a dark flame. Tall, it was. The shadow of a faceless giant... Shivering above me, with hunger. I reached for me Fa's knife, but me arms were frozen rigid. A chill tore through me, and I knew — as I know my own thoughts — that the shadow wanted to drink me... to drink the heat of me hearth, me blood. In despair, I closed my eyes to pray... yet the vision did not leave me. Even with closed eyes, I could see it. A demon, sitting on me chest, hand on me throat, with a faceless head that craned lower, lower, to taste. It had no mouth, but its jaw stretched open. I knew I was dead, and I wept like a child.

Yet in my childlike weeping, there came a sound from me childhood... a hiss, and a yowl. From the shadows, me old cat Jack sprang between me and the demon! His hackles were raised, tail twistin' like a snake. He was small, as he was, as he is, but fierce! He swatted at that cold monster, and it loosed its grip a'me. With a wild shriek, Jack leapt claws-first to grapple the shadow, and lo! It fell back off of me, into the shadowy hold.

Movement came back to me legs, and I scrambled up, clutching meself, tears flowin'. "Dream's o-o-over," I said to meself, but me heart didn't believe me, and a scuffin' sound came still from the shadows. I ran, ran for me life from that place and its cursed cargo... Ran straight into the storm, and was near thrown overboard by the force of it. Stinging grains o'metal swirled in gyres beneath the veiled face of Lhun. Her light shone, twisted, through the clouds, and every mast crackled with green flame. I threw meself off the boat, onto the dockside, and went running into town screamin "Priest! Priest!" and looking over my shoulder for demons. Me eyes burned, all me hair stood on end with the sorcery of those clouds, but no demons were following me. Only Jack. Right there on me heels, in me shadow.

No doors were opened to me. The folk of Barksend knew better than to open their doors to a voice on an iron-storm wind. At last, I crawled beneath the stilts of a building on the shore, and huddled in the mud, tears running red with the rust in the air. Jack's still there, cuddlin close in me shadow. "How'd you... how're you..." says I to Jack, and Jack says naught back. Just stares at me... and in the dark I cannot see his eyes, nor his face at all. "Well I thankee, Jack," I says, fearful. I scarce believed me eyes, but I wanted to, so I reached down pet his sweet head... and it was warm. Up he nuzzles into me hand, and all's well in the world. From that touch, I knew he was me protector, me good boy.

Of the rest of that night, I remember nothin' — the next day either. I woke drunk in a drinkin-hall, me cheek wet with drool, peelin me face off a sticky bar. A traveller was telling a tale for her lodgings — as I do these days. "On the isle of Ghog," says she, and I shiver, "There are stone homes that ye may mistake for rabbit warrens... but a mistake it is! for there dwell the imp-thralls of Rotwulf!"

"Nay!" says I, spillin' from me chair in groggy horror.

"Aye, they are only the size of toddlers... but horned!"

"Nay!" says I, tripping over Jack.

"And with deep magic, from the roots of the wastes, they defy Sol. Evernight, it is, in deep Ostriss..."

"Nay! Hold yer mouth!" says I, and swung after her.

A more peaceful man I am, now. And now in her position, I find meself in deep regret o'me actions. I pray t'the Mountain King for forgiveness, as I

pray that none of ye attack me if me story gets too frightful — Yer through the worst of it now. Jailed, I was. But jailed with Jack, so it wasn't too bad. With a dear beastie by one's side, nothing's ever so bad. Me cellmates couldn't see me sweet boy. They thought me a madman, and I cursed them in return... but right they were, and right was I... for at night, in dreams, they saw him too. The next morning they looked at me with new mystery, and treated me alright. I think Jack told 'em too. I'd been askin for a priest since I was taken, but that morning all me mates were asking too, and one was summoned. A Star-speaker.

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“You are accursed,” says the Star-speaker says to me. He was one of your folk, Rosengardian — thick beards ye have. He had rings in his, and a long grey robe, and white gloves. On his brow was a blue moon-stone. Its sister was in a wand that he pressed to me temples.

“And ye do not listen,” says I. “Jack saved me from the curse. He's a good boy.”

“Black cats are dark omens,” says he. “Lest they have some speckling of white, in the Star's honour.” He touched his lips — like so — and... I hope to cause no offense, but it's a silly thing to see for the first time, and I laughed. Forgive me! Forgive me! But what do Stars care for your lips? There was a roof between us and the sky — pardon, between us and Celestia — They couldn't even see the man!

“What do the Stars know of cats?” I said to him, “They be up there, and cats down here. Bah!”

I forget the rest of our conversation. He said some gobbledygook about misfortune, and advised me to take the hajj or find a leper's grove. When a man says he “heard this message from a Star,” I never know whether to roll me eyes or bow. Some o'them Star-speakers can tell ye the date and hour of rainfall, and some can tell ye a merry tale of mule-dung.

I said I'd take the hajj to Seawash, and was released. Around those days, I started sleepin' all wrong. Late nights, daydreams, sleepwalkin'. You see, Jack shows up in folk's dreams — and cats, they go out at night... So I go with him. In me dreams I'm exploring some twilit glade with Jack, or in the mountains of Montrey, lookin' for the Mountain King again... and I wake to find meself somewhere I shouldn't be, all confused: Once, in a stable of

horses, whom I had a whole conversation with before I remembered they ain't speakin' types... Once in a furnace-house, face-ter-face with a worried smith in his nightgown. "Gotter get some clean air," I said to meself. "Get outter town."

So I booked meself free passage — free passage! — on a colony-ship returnin' to the capital. A word t'the wise: Sayin yer a pilgrim gets you a long ways down here in Southrose. Forgive me! Forgive me! Arrright, no blasphemy for the rest of m'tale.

The ship was named the Mother's Hand, and it was me first time aboard as a traveller, not crew. Didn't know quite what t'do with meself, and spent much o'me time with Jack. Like when I was a child, we played together. He loved to disappear into piles o'rope, and I'd play hide-n-catch with him all about the ship. He loves that game, but he's a cheater. I'll see him jump into one barrel and out another, behind me, steppin' out of the corner of me eye and givin' me a proud look. Silly sweetheart. I fed him little fish I caught over the side... somebody leant me a fishin' rod, but took it back after I fed me fish to Jack. Folk can be cruel t'me if they don't know me story. Y'never know a man's story complete, so yer kindness tonight is most bless'd. Thankee.

One night, I was relaxin in me hammock, and Jack jumped in to snuggle with me. As I drifted off, I felt him jump in again! So up I sits, and there's Jack... and there's Jack... there's two Jacks!

"Ello mate," says I.

The second Jack just looks at me, eyelessly... He meows, but I don't see his mouth open... and fer a second I was afraid. "Accursed..." I said t'meself under me breath, and I hated t'say it. I clutched meself and moaned... but the two Jacks pressed into me, and they were so warm, and sweet. Jack is a sweet cat, and I remembered that, and all the fear vanished from me heart. I put a cat under each arm — how I sleep every night, now — and I was asleep in a moment.

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Under a starless sky, I danced with me Jacks. Hand-in-paw, and in a ring, we spun through a field of flowers. As we passed, they turned their heads to look at me, and each ring o'petals was a pretty woman's eye. Never had a woman, me, but in that moment I felt like a fine catch, and blushed as I danced. I knew not if I was the size of a cat, or if the Jacks were big

ol' panthers, but oh we danced ourselves dizzy. I threw back me head and above, wisps of cloud twisted into silver branches, braiding. Drunk, giddy, I collapsed onto me back in that field o'flowers — but the grass slipped away beneath me. I fell, and fell forever, to wake beneath the waves.

Dead, I thought I was, for the second time in a moon. When I clawed me way to the surface, bein' thrown about, vomitin', gaspin'... Mother's Hand was nowhere t'lift me out, and Jack nowhere t'carry! I saw Mother's Star far above me, but it didn't lift me out neither. Nay, nay! I'll not blaspheme. At the crest of a wave, I saw a light on the horizon, turned onto me back, and started to kick me way over. Not sure how long I swum that way for... At one point, I just remember floatin and dreamin, lookin up at the Stars. Relief, Jack was up there, then. Playin' about them, hidin' from the Stars in the clouds, and givin' them the same proud look he gives when he hides from me. I always thought cats were some sort of Stars... or angels, at least. Not Jack, though. He's somethin' else, special.

Next thing I remember is washin' up on a beach, wakin' as I woke in the drinkin-hall, face-down with me mouth open. This time, full o'salt and sand. I couldn't move, only twitch, for a while. One eye was blind, the other saw Sol rising sideways. Morning shadows spilled like ink across the beach. The shadows of me Jacks... waiting for me to wake. They paced, flicking their tails, hissing at the rise-and-fall of seawater. I knew, as I knew me own thoughts, that they didn't like the water either.

“Ye can't be doin this to me,” I says.

They owed me something, I knew it.

“Help me, Jack,” I rasped. “There's something wrong with me. Help me get home...”

And off they walked! With a dark glance over their shoulders, they sauntered off along the beach: northwards, confident, leading me. I crawled after them and — blessed boy — Jack led me to a little fresh stream, over the dunes. I drank like a horse, throwin' my full body into the sweetwater.

“And... food,” says I — for they'd never understood me like this before — “find me food, Jack”

To this, they turned back and approached me slyly, ears alert, turning their heads. They would do that for me, I realised, in exchange for something.

“A wager?” says I. Gamblin is a vice o'mine. O, dice! Holy, th'are — holy vessels of Fortuna. Now there's a Star I'd never blaspheme. I pulled meself from the water and lay against the cold sand, waitin' for Sol to warm

me.

The cats pranced over t'me, onto me. One Jack tumbled into me lap, and the other stretched out, belly-to-Sol, looking at me.

“Y’like that, don’t ye?” says I.

The Jacks curled their paws all playful-like.

I had no dice upon me, but I always kept a gold piece sewn into me undies, and me Fa’s knife had survived in a pocket... so I cut it out.

“Heads er tails” I said to the cats. “Heads, you find me a nice seagull to cook. Tails...”

Jack stretched up from me lap and touched me nose.

“Arrright!” says I and I flipped the coin.

Ain’t smelled nothin ever since!

---

Been wanderin’ for some moons since then, all through Southrose. The first town Jack led me to was a militia-camp. Me memory grows foggy between the beach and the tower, but I remember bein’ on me back in a red tent... people comin’ and goin’. They had questions about Ostriss, but me answers were all mad. A leecher did some work on me humours, and drew me from a dream. She was real considerate, moppin’ me brow and such. “How did this come to pass?” she’d ask. “What befell you?”

“Cats,” says I. “Shadowcats.”

“They are not cats,” says she, and I remember no more. T’was me first look at the kindness of deep pity. Folk have compassion for the ill, more than for the mad.

Next I remember, I woke on me feet, trampin’ through backcountry paths. I don’t sleep much any more, or at least not in a way I remember, for I wake still movin’, or mid-conversation. All feels fuzzy, as though Jack’s layin’ across me eyes, and moves off when I open them. The corners of me sight are all full of black fur.

“Ye can’t be doin’ this,” I says to the Jacks one day, lyin’ under an olive tree. We were out on a farm-track, in the hills. They were all up in the branches, but I couldn’t see where. “Ye’re running me raw.”

I knew they were taking me home. It’s what they owed me.

“Yer killin’ me,” says I.

Jack jumped down from a branch, to land near me. He kept his body

low, stalking-like, uncertain.

“I know it. Yer killin’ me, y’are.”

The next Jack dropped from the tree, and the two began to circle me.

“It’s why y’owe me... Y’owe me everythin’ because yer takin’ everythin’.”

Two more Jacks stepped out of me Jacks’ shadows. I shivered, and I ain’t stopped shiverin’ since.

“Yer not cats, are ye?” I said, and squinted at ‘em.

Their ears were long, longer than they should be. When their tails swished back’n forth, they may have had many. I tried to remember me Jack back in Montrey. I knew he had eyes, but I couldn’t remember the colour. Maybe he didn’t. I tried to remember buryin’ him. Why’d nobody help me? Where did I do that? The four Jacks looked between each other, and I knew they were thinkin’. I knew they were thinkin’ somethin’... as I know me own thoughts... but I couldn’t know me own thoughts then, for they weren’t me own. They were Jack’s.

I shut me eyes, but the Jacks were there — behind me lids. I pressed me knuckles into me eyes, and the Jacks sprung away from where I rubbed. They flicked their tails at me, which danced like the dark hearts of candle-flames. Thoughts shivered through me mind.

‘What do ye want?’

Cats cannot speak. I knew that.

‘Yer not a cat, Jack.’

‘Who said that?’

‘Jack.’ I knew that.

‘What do ye want?’

‘I want to know what ye are.’

‘Jack.’ I knew that.

‘Will ye play a game again?’

‘Aye’

‘When ye give me yer answer, ye will receive mine.’

‘Arright.’

This was a fair wager. I knew it.

‘When melancholy begins, there I am. When time is out, there I am.’

I tried to open me eyes, but Jack held them shut. Seized in the dark, me shakes turned to spasms. Well-past fear, I felt melancholy set in. Tastin’ blood, I felt me time run out.

‘Are ye despair, Jack?’  
I was wrong. I knew it.

---

When me eyes opened, I was in a wayhouse. Through a window, I could see a high stone tower, in an art I did not recognise. A dozen-er-so folk were lookin’ at me from dinnertables. Me legs were dancing a little, and I stopped them. I was drenched in rain, or sweat.

“Ello mates,” I says. Jack was there, in their shadows. “Ello.”

They looked a little confused. Some clapped, some went back to eatin’.

“Fine.” said the barkeep. “That gets you food. Tell your tale, and if it pleases, there’s a bed for ye.”

“A bed?” said I. “Nay, I need a riddle. I need a good riddle. Do any of ye know a riddle?”

“What is a knot that cannot be untied?” someone said.

“Thankee,” says I. “You write the answer down a’here. Don’t show me.” I wore a yellow kerchief around me neck — the same I wear today — and I gave it to her. “I’ll tell me tale now.”

So I did, and so I was fed and housed.

I’ve learned to avoid the drink, except on nights like these. That night, the wine turned Jack into a real scallywag. As I tried to rest, he bounced around the room from rafter to closet to door. I cursed him, and cursed meself, and he fell silent. I sat up, and two Jacks were on me nightstand, looking between me and an oil-lamp, paws poised.

“No,” says I.

One Jack nudged it edgewards, and the candle flickered. The other cats meowed from behind me ears. So tired, was I, that me thoughts darkened.

“Go on. Set the bed aflame, see if I move.” I said to the cats.

They kept their paws raised, but a third Jack pushed its way out from beneath me cloak and looked at me with his empty face. Jack loves me. I knew it.

“Yer a plague on me, Jack. A plague.”

When I looked into that small, sweet face, I knew he wasn’t a plague.

“If I go, you go.” I says. Under me pillow was me Fa’s knife.

Jack knew that was true.

“And I’m goin’.”

Jack knew.

“What’s a knot that cannot be untied, Jack?”

Around me wrist, I’d wrapped the yellow hanky, careful not to look inside. The cat in me lap pawed at it, and nuzzled me arm. Me heart was tight and angry then, but he’s a sweet boy. As he thought, I grew dreamy. My eyelids drooped, and Jacks poured from under the bed and over the windowsill. They gathered in the rafters and darkened the ceiling. They pooled in me lap, and all over every surface, murmuring, mewling. A Jack still stood with a paw upon the oil-lamp. Another climbed upon me chest, and strode up to me face. It looked into me eyes, and I looked into the void.

‘You and I,’ I thought. ‘You and I cannot be untied.’

I reached for the yellow rag. No words were written inside. The woman had drawn spirals within cracked spirals, rings... an eye, no... The knot of an old tree!

“Yo-ho!” I bellowed, and the cats vanished in fright. Me hand was on the lamp, and I pulled it away, jumpin’ to me feet on me bed. “Where are ye! Where are ye, Jack? Ye loser, ye!”

Jack slinked out from under me covers, his long pointy ears laying flat along his back.

“Thinkin’ ye owe me somethin’, Jack” says I. “And if ye want this to go on, ye and I, ye’d better make it somethin’ shiny.”

That night, I dreamed of me old Urrg-friend, Rowan. Vivid like the colours o’me childhood, I remembered his shinin’ mouth, and every word of his strange spell. “Hungerin’ beasts are easy to tame,” I says, upon waking. I was out in the heath somewhere, wayhouse far behind me. “They bent the knee when we gave up our names.”

The Jacks were on me heels, silent. I turned to face ‘em. We weren’t on a path, and I could see none about. Only the high stone tower, a silhouette on the dawning horizon. We were knee-deep in heather, heavy with dew, budding. The Jacks filled the gaps between stems and leaves, hidin’. “S’pose you’ve been takin’ from me, and I ain’t never thought to give you somethin’. What’d you do then? Give me somethin’ back, arright? That’s how the games work, nay?”

The cats moved beneath the heather, but the heather did not move.

“And s’pose I gave you somethin’ important... You’d have t’give me somethin’ important back, right? Right m’boy?”

I felt him brush against my leg, and I knew that I was right.

“What’s in a name?” I asked Jack.

He did not answer. I looked up to Celestia, to the distant Stars.

“What’s in a name?” I asked. They did not answer. “Well, Jack...”

All about my feet, the Jacks swirled, a dark pool, whirling.

I know not what I told them. I sunk into that pool and was baptised.

With dawn, the grey tower tolled, and I rose as you see me now: A dreamer and a wanderer. Me cats walk with me, and I with them. Some nights I walk in dreamland, and some days my dreams walk here. I get by on hospitality, so blessed thanks to you all for the roof tonight, and the fire. So long as strangers are kind to each other, so long as I’m travelling home, I am grateful.

And while they’ve grown on me like flowers on a grave, and may well have driven me mad, I’m grateful to me Jacks. What say ye, should I be? It’s rare to have a friend as loyal, as warm. Should I count meself lucky to live, or grieve for me old self, lost forever in that heath-field? Regardless of me feelings, we’re bound with a knot that cannot be untied.

Me name’s Jack, and I thankee for yer ears.

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