Name's Puss. Puss in Boots. I'm a cat who's seen action. Scratched a few noses. Been scratched a few times. Never had my fur ruffled, really. Not until this one case.

See, one of the Admiral's cronies, he'd been a missionary back in Utah and then later around the world. Then he’d found money and lost his religion. But he’d met a lot of hard-luck kids in his time and adopted 'em all.

Twelve girls all in all, each as unlike and as beautiful as the next. At least by human standards. Circumstances were, they were all the same age.

And now they were all turning some age humans think is important. So he was throwing them this huge -- and I do mean HUGE-- party to celebrate.

The Admiral was hoping to make a few more campaign donations appear in his pocket, so he was planning to drag the family out for the night. And of course, I was going to tag along. Huge parties were a very good chance for a decent nosh.

The party started out fine, with the Admiral glad handing his way around and Mrs. Kid being the lovely woman she was. The Kid followed in her wake and said very little. Smart kid. We've taught him so well.

Then the music swelled, and everyone looked to the stage. And that was when the trouble started. Because none of the girls, not even one, was there.

Big papa was beside himself (it's as good a name as any for a human with twelve kittens. I mean, children). He raged and he fretted, and after the third time he nearly trod on my tail, I leapt for higher grounded and yowled my annoyance in his face.

He yowled back. Well, not precisely, but it was pretty close. I was very nearly impressed. So I cleaned my butt to show how not quite impressed I was.

The humans were conferring. As usual, Mrs. Kid was all ready for her dearest 'Bill'- my stupid human, mostly called Kid- to go solve the mystery.

One of these days he should probably tell her he's just the thumbs of the operation, and I'm the brains.

"Dear," he tried, but the lady got that look she has, and I knew our goose was cooked.

At least this job didn't seem to be magical, I remember thinking to myself as I wandered the hall where the girls slept, to familiarize myself with their scents. Lots of flowery perfume, much nicer than those blasted fairies during my last case. Lots of hair oil and singed hair.

Then I sneezed half a dozen times and nearly sat down on my tail. I swiped my paw across my face to clean up the eye boogers left over and sighed. So much for no magic.

Okay, confession time. I think I may have been wrong about how dead magic is. I mean, for something that's completely passe, I did seem to run into it a lot.

Maybe the malingering had done good things for magic growth. I sneezed another five times. Perhaps not.

It was a different kind of magic, too. Not fairy. Not ogre. Which meant something <i>else</i> had survived. I was getting really, really tired of dealing with magic. Hopefully this one couldn’t turn into a dragon.

Although, as I considered the matter, and the scent, I realized it wasn’t entirely new. There were some fairy-like elements to it. And it teased at a memory. I sat right there in the hall and washed my face and ears to give myself a good long think.

Of course. The unsolved case, with my old man. The girls that got away.

Let me take you back, to another, kinder time. Well, it wasn't actually kinder. It was actually a lot rougher. I didn't have these fine cushions to nap the day away on, or servants serving me up choice cuts of fish, but it had the Old Man, and that's all I needed then.

It was right after he'd found me in the rain. I wasn't much more than a handful of a kitten, more bones and thin fur than I was cat. He took me in and fed me milk he couldn't afford right from a bottle until I was strong. So I stuck around.

His sons didn't really catch my eye. The two older ones had their own plans, and they didn't involve family ties. So it was just the old man, me, and the stupid kid. The old man just called him kid. He was the youngest of the litter. I was the one who added stupid and I will stand by it to this day.

Days in and out, the old man would try to explain to the stupid kid how a detective worked. How you cased a suspect. How you tailed a cheating husband. It bounced off the kid like rain on a tin roof, but I soaked it up. The old man needed a partner, and I was willing to take the job.

One of our last cases, before the old man got sick, was one of our biggest failures. I think he haunted him right to the grave.

A lady came in one day. She was high society. The exact sort of woman you did <i>not</i> see in our neighbourhood. But she had a problem, and had heard that the old man was the kind of man to solve it.

Her daughters had gone missing. Pair of twins.

Story as she told it went thus: Ever since their coming out ball, they'd been going missing. No explanation for where or how. Just broken shoes and exhausted girls. And one night? They didn't come back.

Now, the general gossip was that they'd found some fellas, but their mother wasn't buying it. She said she knew her girls and something was definitely rotten in the city of Neverwood.

Well, what happened next will have to wait. History was repeating itself a lot faster, since the missionary's adopted girls were gone totally. No strange happenings, just panic and disarray and it looked like it was up to ol' Puss to save the day.

Again.

The old man in mind, I started casing the joint. There was the magic smell, and young girl smells, and lots of clothes strewn randomly about on the floor. Shoes, and hair ribbons, and all manner of fripperies falling out of drawers, draped on tables, and abandoned on chairs. Definitely the rooms of twelve well-off girls.

Most of the windows were shut, only a few open a crack here and there, probably for some fresh air. I prowled through the rooms twice before I found another clue.

There was a door that wasn’t there. A trail of various scents led to a bit of the wall, and vanished, like all the girls had somehow gone straight through. I pawed at it for a while, trying to figure out how it worked.

But no place is closed off to a cat who knows what he's doing, so a quick soft paw to a left that wasn't really there and I was through the door.

What I saw on the other side I wasn't prepared for.

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When the Old Man had been hunting for the missing girls, he'd gone through all the well-worn avenues, no matter what mother dearest had thought. He checked for boys. He checked for dope, the drink, anything. He found out things that it was best the mother didn't know, but nothing that explained where the girls had gone.

It had gnawed at him.

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The first thing I noticed when my poor little cat eyes had adjusted to all the light <i>where there should not be light</i> was that the trees were made of silver. There shouldn't have been trees either, come to it.

I could feel instead of see the door I'd just come from. It was behind me. I was on a path. The path shone and glimmered, like those stones that turn into their own universes when you polish 'em just right. And like I said, there were the silver trees. They grew alongside the path. Beautiful, and clearly metal. Their fruit looked like jewels, and their silver leaves did not rustle because there was no wind. Not a single breeze ruffled my fur.

This place was not alive.

I didn't like it. My fur stood on end, to emphasize the point. I stalked back and forth in front of the door. Did I get the stupid kid? He might be stupid, but he was big and he could carry a weapon and right now I wasn't enjoying being a small cat in a big world that was not previously part of the geography.

I remembered the girls before. They'd come back. More than once, before they never came back again. They'd been exhausted and their shoes had been destroyed, but they'd came back.

I wasn't trapped. I could explore. Might as well find the twelve debutantes before they never came back again.

I wondered if their rooms would have destroyed shoes hidden in corners, if anyone had known to look.

The scents of the girls led along the path, so I followed. The stillness of the air was oppressive, and the unnatural trees were bothersome, but I persevered. After a while, I started to hear music. Dance music, to be precise. Not the normal type of human dance music, this was wilder and played on instruments that were unquestionably not made by man. But it was catchy. I found myself drawn to it, striding along to the beat of the drums.

All of a sudden, I was in the middle of a well-lit dance floor, surrounded by the very girls I was looking for, and their very not mortal partners. It was hard for me to gather many details, because I was spinning and leaping and dancing like some kind of thing that frolicked.

It was the most humiliating thing. Not at all catly, let me assure you, but I couldn't stop until the music did. Neither could any of the girls, judging how we all collapsed when the song finally ended. The fae, our hosts, passed between us offering water. I knew I shouldn't drink it, but I was so thirsty, and the water just smelled like water, not like any kind of magic. So, like a chump, I gulped it down, and I wasn't the only one.

Then the music started, and so did we. The girls were graceful as falling leaves in the arms of their partners, and I whirled and stomped by myself. I danced for hours, falling still and inhaling the water given to me at the breaks.

And finally, tragedy struck. My boots, the boots the old man had gotten made for me, that I'd worn proudly for years, burst apart. I yowled my displeasure, and the music cut off as though sliced by a knife. Then I and the girls were somehow on the path and tumbling back in through the hidden door. I didn't even stop to check on them, I just ran, as though I could get away from the whole experience if only I could move fast enough.

I didn't come down from my highest cushion for days.

On the third day, the stupid kid stuffed me in a basket. I was understandably upset. At length. At full volume.

"Shh, Puss," said the extremely stupid kid who I will never have a good word to say about again, "just enjoy the free ride."

I tried to shove my paw through the side of the basket to claw him. Eventually, realizing this was a fool's game, I curled up in the basket and made a low growling noise. At least the kid had the courtesy to cover the basket. I didn't want anyone to see me without my boots. They'd been left behind in that fairy hell and I was missing them dearly.

I might even have been sulking and ignoring the case.

I wondered if the kid had actually been working on it.

The girls were probably doomed.

The scents winding their way into the basket were beginning to smell tantalizingly familiar. They reminded me of being a small kitten, four paws uncovered and chasing a thimble across a wooden floor while the Old Man talked. My heart ached, despite my foul mood.

The basket was set down.

"We're here, Puss," said the stupid kid who both bravely and typically stupidly reached in to pick me up. But I was trapped so deeply in memory lane I could only spare him one bite.

It was Jack's shop. I hadn't been here since my first pair of boots.

It looked the same as it had then, even if the fashions had changed. And there was Jack. I'm not an old cat, I'm only four, so he looked about the same as when I'd last seen him. A tall wiry man, a blond ponytail shot with grey, and dressed like his closet was from fifty years ago. He even had the measuring tape around his neck I'd shamed myself by leaping at as a kitten and going flying into a basket of scraps.

"Hello, Puss," said Jack.

"What's it to you?" I mewed back.

"What happened to your gifts?" said Jack, unruffled. "I made those boots to last."

I didn't want these questions. I wanted to be anywhere else. But the stupid kid had a grip on me, like iron bars clothed in cotton. I made my excuses. I didn't want to talk about it. I'd lost control and lost my most treasured possessions in the process.

The old man had commissioned them for me, when I was just a kitten. I'd taken to walking around on my hind legs to imitate him, and he thought his little Puss needed some footwear. Jack had made me new ones as I grew, but after the old man had died, I hadn't heard from Jack again.

Didn't even know the stupid kid knew Jack. I was so used to him just being there, but it hadn't felt like he was part of me and the old man's life.

"Sulking, hm? Just like a cat," said Jack and he gently grabbed my back leg. I hissed and tried to yank it away, but his grip was firm.

"I'm measuring you for a new pair," he said and gave me a little pinch. "Bill here went to a lot of trouble to find me."

"I only had a receipt my father had left to go by," admitted Bill. "But I managed to work out where you were."

The kid had done actual detective work? My ears pricked. I was so flummoxed by this unexpected discovery I didn't even try to claw Jack when he moved to my next leg.

"They're more stockings with little soles," Jack was saying to Bill. "He hasn't got the right feet for real boots."

Bill set me back down in the basket and I peeked above to watch Jack work.

Jack had deft hands. He'd struck me as more cat than human in our meetings. And he'd seen things. I realized that right now I had what was known as an opportunity.

"Hey. Hey, Jack," I said. I stood on my hind legs, front paws bracing me on the rim of the basket.

Jack looked up from his scissors where my new boots were taking form in a sheet of soft kid leather. "Oh, now you want to talk?"

"Cut the joshing," I meowed. "I want to know about the world in the clouds."

"You're a little old for stories about an old tailor's glory days," said Jack. "And you asked for the story so much as a kitten, you must have memorized it."

"Look. Let's just say that I may have encountered a place where a place can't exist. You understand me? I need to know more."

Stupid kid was rubbing me between my ears. I spared him a glance. He actually looked worried. I narrowed my eyes. Puss can take care of himself, all right? All right. I didn't need his concern. I just needed his food.

"Well," said Jack as he measured and cut, "I'd have to say that it's completely possible. When the world of fairies is concerned, physics can go take a hike. Giants, pixies, trolls, fae, it's all the same. They play dice with the fabric of reality and it comes up snake-eyes more often than not for humans. And cats."

"What are the rules?" I was vibrating. I was also worried. I'd drank that water. I'd drank the water.

"Don't eat the food and don't stay," said Jack.

None of us had eaten the food, unless the girls had before I’d arrived. And we hadn’t stayed. Still… “What about the water?”

“I thought you had some sort of magic-sniffing nose,” said Jack, sewing up the first boot. “Don’t drink magic water.”

“Regular water?”

Jack looked thoughtful. Bill looked confused. Nothing new there. “I didn’t think the fae dealt with regular water. Be careful, Puss. Come back before they see you.”

Fat chance of that, after the fool I’d made of myself on the dance floor. I curled up in the basket and napped until Jack was done. The new boots were somehow even nicer than the old ones, and I felt more like myself than I had since the ball. “Thanks,” I mewed, grudgingly, looking at Jack but also meaning the stupid kid, too. If he couldn’t figure it out, not my problem.

“Don’t break these ones,” Jack cautioned, and I flicked my tail at him. Then I walked with dignity restored back home, the kid trailing after carrying the basket. Mrs. Kid looked happy to see me and fed me most of an entire fish.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, Puss,” she said, and scratched right at the base of my spine where I needed it most. Her, I still liked. I gave her a purr while I ate my fish, and let her pet me in her lap while I took my post-dinner nap.

That night the call came, startling me out of a sound sleep. I'd drank the water and that was my ticket back to fairyland, whether I wanted it or not. And if I was getting it, those girls didn't stand a chance. I followed the pull, like a fish follows a lure.

There it was. The way in. I wouldn't have to sneak through this time, the way in was a door in a wall that only led to thin air. But this door wouldn't take me to a long fall. It'd take me to a place no cat should go, and no cat should stay.

The door glowed in the wall, clear as day. What else could I do? I entered.

Back on the creepy path with the unnatural trees and the too still air. Somehow, I was right on the heels of the last girl, and I used the frothy fall of her skirt to hide myself as we made our way to the floor. I could hear the music again, but I was still full of fish and bitterness, and I didn’t feel like dancing.

The girls were claimed by their partners and started dancing, while I prowled around, trying to find a way to get them, and myself, free from the fae water. Then I just about tripped over a girl cleaning the hem of some great fae lady’s skirt, and whisked myself back into the shadows.

The girl, though! One of the girls my old man lost and couldn’t find. I remembered her, I remembered the way her eyes had this sort of soppy look to them. The Old Man had said that was part of why she was such a beauty. It was her. A wearier her, but her!

I took a quick slink around, and sure enough, there was her sister, rushing up to the lady with some kind of frippery. “That’s my good little Daisy,” said the lady, and swept off toward the viewing area around the dance floor, missing twins in her wake.

I found a good, dark, quiet corner, and sat down to consider my situation. One, I was back in Fairyland, and I had to stay away from the food. Two, I had fourteen girls to break the fae spell over, and get back to their worried parents. Three, twelve of those girls were at this very moment wearing out new pairs of shoes and sucking down water like they would die without it.

Four, all I had to fight the fae was my teeth, my claws, my cunning, and my swank new boots.

For a moment, I would have even been grateful for that stupid Kid of mine.

It was a short moment. Me, myself, and I was more than enough to deal with a bunch of fairies.

I sized up the enemy. They weren't your garden variety fairy. These were the real deal. Wild and unearthly. The girls looked like they were caught between breathless at the beauty and horror.

I thought nostalgically of the… edibility of the other fairies I'd met. But no time to wish for smaller opponents, I had ladies to rescue. There could be fish in it for me.

At the head of the dance floor was a throne made of shining crystals, which I'm sure was was meant to impress. Unfortunately for them, it just made me want to pounce the reflections.

A cat may look at a king, but in this case the cat was looking at what had to be the queen. She put me in mind of a bird of prey made of gossamer. I sauntered up.

"Hey!" I meowed. "Hey! Hey!" It worked for most cats.

The music stopped. The dancers stopped their movements, and the two girls darning the dresses were finally given a break. The queen was looking at me like she wasn't sure what she was dealing with. Good, I had to keep her on her toes.

"Seems you like to collect," I said as I stretched out, butt in the air. "Lotta humans here. Don't think they belong."

"They must follow the rules. They drank of our water, and now they belong to our land," said the queen. She tapped a clawed finger on one arm. "And… they are exceptionally beautiful. They belong with us."

So queenie liked beauty, huh? Well, nothing can top a cat. Except one thing: Magical creatures and their love of a good wager.

"Well," I purred and came closer, giving her the pleasure of my almost touch. "Want to make a bet?"

"A bet?" She learned forward.

"I'll sing for you. If you like what you hear, the girls come back with me." I felt pretty confident. My song had hooked more than a few ladycats.

The queen smiled. "Fine," she said. "Sing for me, little cat."

I sat on my haunches and sang her the song of my people. I yowled like no cat had ever yowled before. And I think the girls got the wrong idea, 'cause they joined in making a real horrible noise. Limericks and screams and the halls were almost shaking from them. What the heck were they trying to pull? This was <i>my</i> musical moment!

"STOP," yelled the fairy queen, her unearthly beautiful face gone terrifying. "Cat, we will grant you a bounty if you <i>shut up</i>."

I held up a paw and my chorus stopped. I was ready to wheel and deal with miss creepyface kidnapper. It wasn't how I'd planned, but what use is a plan in crazy circumstances like these?

"If you can lead them out, without looking back, their freedom is yours and we will seek them no more." Her smile was cold. I wondered what the catch was. I wasn't going to show my uneasiness, though. A cat is always in control, oui?

"You got a deal, lady," I purred.

I strode off towards the steps. I wanted <i>out</i> of here.

It wasn't until I was out the door that I realized I hadn't bothered to check if the girls were following. Oh well. I'm a cat, what cat looks back?

The first one to fall out nearly stepped on my tail. How's that for grateful?

Girl after girl came out of the door, until the room, my favourite sunny room to nap in, had filled up with the twelve debutantes and the original two girls. There wasn't a lot of room for me, and even less room for them. Fortunately, that's when the household woke up and came storming down.

Well, after all was said and done, specialists called to seal away the servant-hungry fairies, and I was told I was a good kitty, a very good kitty. the girls were bustled off home and I'd been fed not one, but TWO fish, I settled down at the foot of the Kid's bed to catch some sorely missed Zs.

The Kid stroked my ears. I let him, because I'm a nice guy.

"You did good today, Puss," said the Kid.

"How come he only talks to you?" said Mrs. Kid. She was pouting! Actually pouting! "Doesn't he like me?"

"What do you want me to say, toots?" I meowed, eyes baleful. I was trying to <i>sleep</i> here.

She squeaked in surprise. I considered that my answer and went off to dreamland, another case closed.