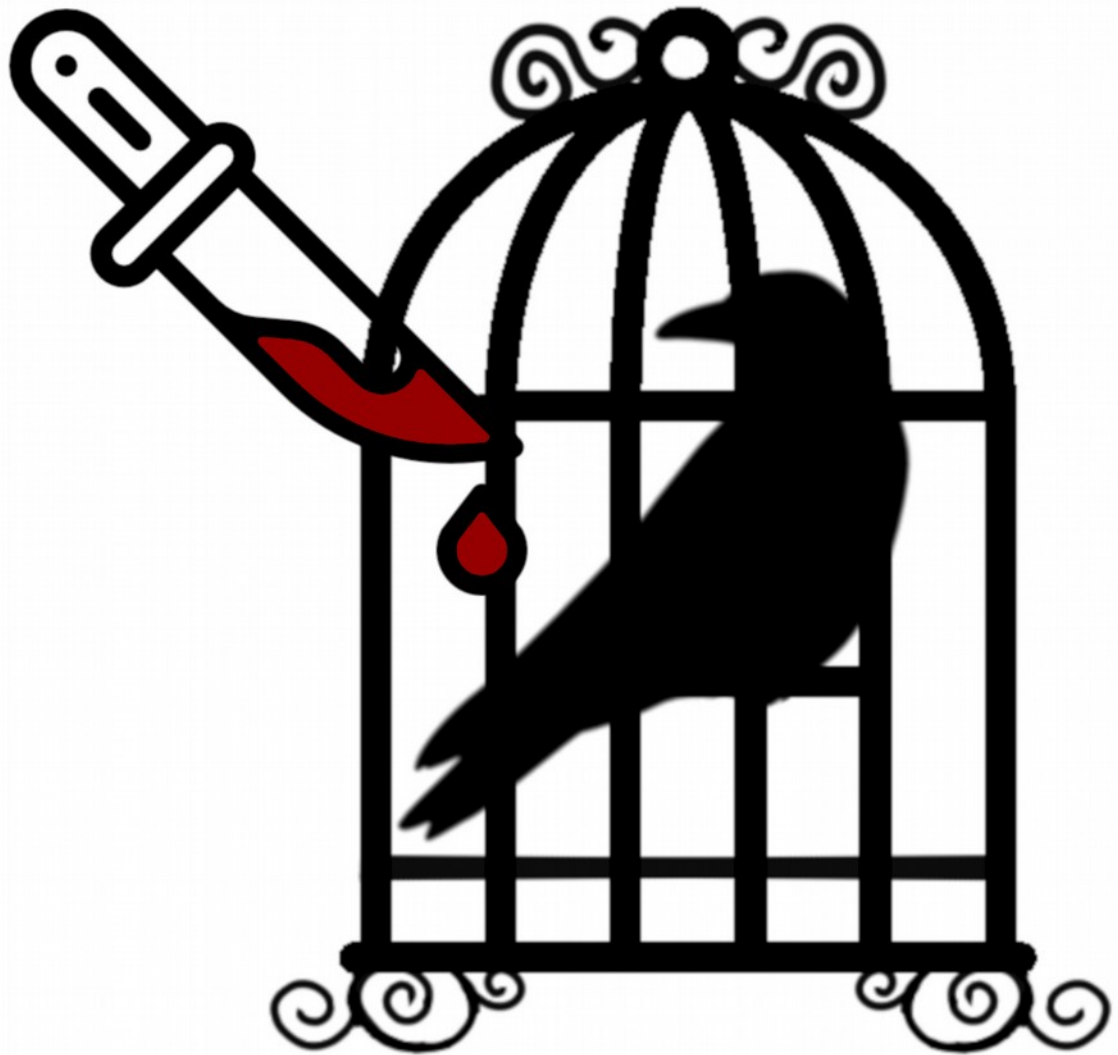


The Case of The Caged Bird



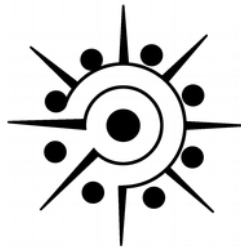
The Adventures of Cat
& Mr. Bassett No. 1

kenzie kelly

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The Adventures of Cat and Mr. Bassett
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AN EMPYREAN STORY

THE CASE OF THE CAGED BIRD – THE ADVENTURES OF CAT & MR. BASSETT

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ONE

"PSSSST."

Thomas Bassett tried very hard to ignore the bird trying to get his attention.

It hopped closer. "I know you can hear me. You can't ignore me forever."

"I can certainly try." Thomas Bassett was currently visiting the Tower of London as the first stop on his tour of the world. He had left his home to get away from all things magical and supernatural. Apparently, fate had other plans.

The bird sighed. "Look, I need help and you're the only person from Empyrean I've seen. Get me out of here and we can both pretend this never happened."

"Why don't you just fly away?"

She made a sound of disgust and shook glossy black feathers. "He clipped my wings."

That got his attention. "Who clipped your wings?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Isn't that a fairly invasive process?"

She bobbed up and down vigorously. "It's assault is what it is. Unfortunately, I was knocked out at the time and thus didn't see his face."

"How do you know it was a 'he'?"

"I saw him beforehand, which is why he knocked me out and clipped my wings in the first place."

"How could you have seen him, and not seen him?"

She made a noise of irritation. "I'm not speaking in riddles. I saw him from far away and he wore a hat. He spotted me and grabbed me before I had time to react. Then I woke up here, with my wings clipped."

"Why would he do that?"

"I'm a talking raven, not a psychic. Although I suspect it had something to do with the murder I saw."

"I don't see how a group of your friends would warrant such rough treatment of you."

"Not that kind of murder," she rolled her eyes, "the kind with the stabbing and the screaming and the running away."

Having left his home not only to get away from the supernatural but also from any and all types of drama, Thomas gave the bird a brisk nod. "Well then, good luck with that. I'm not interested in any further association with you. Have a good day madam." He'd barely taken half a step before the raven erupted in screeches.

She hopped along behind him, drawing every eye to the pair as he quickened his pace and tried to outrun her without actually running. Even hobbled she easily kept up with him. When one of the guards took note and threatened to intercept, Thomas ducked behind a wall and turned on her.

"For God's sake bird!"

"I told you, get me out of here and I'll leave you alone."

"There are two problems with that plan." He ticked them off on his fingers. "First, how am I supposed to smuggle a two-foot tall bird past guards, some of whom are stationed precisely to keep ravens inside the castle? And second, what will you do once you're outside? Your wings are clipped. It's not like you can fly to safety."

She cocked her head as if in thought. "You have a point. Of course, I'm no safer here. I suspect whoever stranded me will be back to kill me off."

"I don't see why. He will assume you are an average bird incapable of pointing the finger at him even if you did get a good look at his features."

She whistled. "That's not entirely correct." Rooting around in her feathers she tugged at a chain and soon produced a pocket watch.

"Where in the world did you have that..." Thomas began but soon stopped with a shake of his head. "I don't want to know. Give it here."

Flipping open the case he saw where she had reason for concern. The initials CF were etched inside. "Who is CF?"

Thomas got the distinct impression that had she a palm, she would have smacked her face with it. "Have you not even been listening?"

"Of course I haven't. I've been trying to extract myself from this entire business." He snapped the pocket watch closed and finally gave the raven his full attention. "Fine. We've established I can't smuggle you out unless you relish the idea of being tossed over the wall--"

"Not particularly."

"Didn't think so. That leaves only one option. Figure out who this CF is and get him arrested."

"That sounds like a fine plan. How do we do that?"

"Tell me what you saw in as great detail as you remember."

"I was hanging out with the other ravens here, big parties all of them, when the keeper came around and rounded them up for the night. Some time later I was enjoying a light snack of forgotten fish when I heard two men arguing around the corner. Hopping closer to get a better look, I saw it was a guard named George Gill. He was a good sort who'd sneak me food every now and again. He was angrily shouting at this other fella, tall and medium built in a hat pulled low and a nondescript coat."

"Did you hear what they were arguing about?" Thomas leaned a shoulder against the wall, correctly assessing this story was going to take a while to tell.

"I'm getting to that." Her head ticked back and forth as she surveyed the yard. "Mystery man was blaming George for every misfortune in his life. George said something about how all of the trouble was mystery man's own fault. As you can imagine that didn't go over so well. This CF got angrier and I saw the flash of what must have been a knife's blade. George shouted 'No!' and 'She'll never forgive you!' and then that man thrust at his stomach three, maybe four times before running off. George grunted and fell down. I started making as loud a racket as possible and scurried closer but before I could take flight I was yanked back and smothered. As he was putting the cloth around my beak I reached back with a foot and grabbed at him. I woke up with the pocket watch and half my flight feathers gone."

"I heard nothing about a guard being murdered. Are you sure he's dead and not just in the hospital?"

"Positive. The next morning the keeper and guards were all abuzz. Cops swarming all over the place."

"When was this?"

"Day before yesterday."

"Right. So the first thing we need to do is talk to the raven keeper."

"His name is Joseph Parsons and this time of day can usually be found in the local betting tavern. Have fun with that. Real piece of work, that one."

"You're coming with me."

Her beak literally dropped open, then shut with a snap. She snapped twice more for good measure. "No, I don't believe I will."

Thomas grabbed her around the middle and tucked her under one arm as best he could. "If you want my help, you are."

She croaked in resignation. "How am I supposed to do that, stuck in here as we've established I am?"

"Actually, I've a plan for that... pet."

"Pet?" Her head reared back as far as her present position would allow. "Pet! I am not and will never be anyone's pet! I am wild and free and I will peck your eyes from your head if you refer to me as your pet!"

"Fine. Stay here and rot."

The feathers around her neck stood up in a ruff and she made a rather loud knocking noise that continued for several seconds. "Fine." Her response was barely audible.

He thought about teasing her, but realized how hard this seemingly simple thing was for her. It was at that moment his mindset shifted. She was no longer an annoying bird ruining his vacation. She was vulnerable and trapped and she'd asked for his help. He became not only determined to free her, but to see what he could do to ensure she stayed that way.

She shook herself back to rights. "You can let go of me now. I'd prefer to ride on your arm."

Thomas shifted her so she could settle on his forearm. He thought she'd face in, like most falcons used for hunting, but she chose to face out. He was able to bring his arm closer to his body, and realized he wouldn't get tired with her weight as quickly. Clever bird.

"My name, by the way, is Thomas Bassett. Since we'll be working together we may as well properly introduce ourselves."

"I'm called Cat."

"Unusual name for a bird to choose."

She let out a soft, staccato caw. Her version of a laugh he presumed.

"It amused me, and seemed to stick."

"Fair enough." He began to walk toward the gate.

"And now we are a bird named Cat and her escort the hound." She let out a louder caw and bobbed her head in laughter.

"So we are." Thomas found he was grinning and for the first time since leaving Emphyrean, his spirit was light. He was having fun.



TWO

THEY HAD LITTLE TROUBLE LEAVING THE TOWER. A guard asked about Cat, but when Thomas explained she was his pet he accepted it and waved them through.

"That was far easier than I expected," Thomas said when they'd gotten clear. "You probably could have simply hopped through the gate."

"I tried that. I was shooed back inside every time I got close."

His understanding of how frustrating it must have been not to have autonomy over your actions deepened. She was strong and intelligent. Captivity would chafe like sandpaper on wet skin.

"What brings you topside?"

"I'm telekinetic." He answered knowing that would tell her a lot of what she needed to know.

"How strong?"

"I'm not entirely sure yet. I've never been tested."

She nodded and turned her attention back to the street, clearly not wanting to press him. She was also Empyrean. She knew that telekinetics went crazy over time, the weaker they were, the faster the onset of dementia. She changed the subject. "I've heard Joseph speak about a tavern called The Salty Arse, so I suggest we start there."

Thomas stopped walking. "The Salty--"

"Arse, yes. I've never understood human naming conventions. Why would you want to salt an arse? And even if you did, why would you want to frequent an establishment that advertised it so openly?"

"I don't think it's quite that literal, but I see your point."

They passed the newly opened Tower Beach. Currently packed due to the heatwave, children and adults alike frolicked in the Thames. Thomas had foregone his fedora, coat, and tie and opted for short sleeves and a straw boater, but sweat still ran under his suspenders. It was the kind of heat that made people lazy, drunk, and/or mean.

Sketchy directions from three people and helpful ones from two made the trip over an hour and a half. Eventually, they arrived at The Salty Arse. It was aptly named. Located just off the Greenland Dock and ill-maintained, the years of brackish water and unwashed sailors had taken their toll.

Thomas and Cat spoke in unison.

"What a lovely place."

"My kind of joint."

Thomas gave Cat side eye. "How many pubs have you been in to know this is your kind of place?"

She shook her wings in excitement. "A few. Order me a whiskey when we get in, will you?"

"Of course the raven drinks whiskey," he muttered.

The door stuck a bit (swollen with age or stuck with he dare not think what) so Thomas gave it a kick. It flew open, causing every eye to swing in his direction.

A man and a raven weren't enough to hold the attention away from the alcohol very long. Cat scanned the crowd as they made their way to the bar. A portly bartender with surprisingly kind eyes poured the drink. As he moved off, Thomas pretended to take a sip, which covered him asking Cat if she'd

seen who they were after. She shook her head no and stuck her beak into the glass. She did not play act her swallows.

When the bartender made his way over for a refill, Thomas seized the opportunity to question him. "I'm looking for a gentleman named Joseph Parsons. My understanding is he's a regular. Do you know him?"

The bartender nodded. "Never heard him called a gentleman, but I know him."

"Has he been here recently?"

"Comes in near every day. I'm surprised I haven't seen him."

"Would you know where he lives by chance?"

"One block down, two streets over. Many a time I've carted him home when he's got lit up. White stone, brown door. Got a wood bird outside so you won't miss it."

"Thank you." He and Cat turned to leave before he thought to turn back. "What's his favorite drink?"

"That'd be gin."

"I'll take a small bottle."

He wrapped it up and Thomas gave him a generous tip and once again they made for the door. He was stopped by a man in the corner, who told him to give Joe a message. The takeaway was Joseph needed to pay a gambling debt, and the message included threatening looks from a bruiser of a man. Thomas assured him he would deliver it if they managed to track him down.

She complained a bit about not getting a second drink and then Cat mused aloud over what they'd learned. "Never pegged Joe for a gambler. I guess it's true you never can tell about people."

"It gives him a motive. If George found out Joseph was in deep with a bookmaker, he may have killed him to cover it up." They arrived at the door and saw that there wasn't just one wooden raven adornment, but several. "Obviously his position is important to him, and he'd be fired if it came out."

"Actually," Cat cocked her head, "I think there's an even better motive. Rumor going around has it someone was stealing raven eggs and selling them. I wouldn't put it past him to do it to pay off his debts."

"Why would anyone buy a raven's egg when you could probably find one for free?"

"Because they're saying the royal raven's eggs are magic. Bring luck and prosperity if you can get it to hatch."

The unemployment rate in London was astronomical. Any straw to grasp for hope of improving your lot would be very attractive. He knew people who would do a lot more than buy a stolen egg for such a thing. Cat was right. If George had found out Joseph was stealing and selling the eggs to pay off his gambling debt, it was a very good motive for murder.

"Not to mention George had strict morals and was known for throwing around bible verses about clean living." Cat continued as Thomas knocked on the door.

With bloodshot eyes, a split lip and a noticeable limp Thomas assumed the man who opened the door was Joseph Parsons. Having changed her perch to his shoulder, Cat's whisper of confirmation tickled his ear.

Joseph squinted at him and swayed dangerously close, wafting the smell of sour alcohol over him. He leaned back involuntarily.

"Whaddy want?"

"I'd like to ask a few questions about the murder at The Tower which occurred earlier this week."

"Not shhuposhed to talk 'bout that. No shhur."

Thomas peeked the gin bottle from the bag and Joe's eyes lit up. He quickly scanned the street and ushered them inside. Waving at a pair of small chairs he didn't bother with a glass but pulled the cap off the gin and took three great swigs. More falling than sitting in one of the chairs he leaned so far to one side Thomas thought he wouldn't recover. After a tense moment where he stuck the opposite leg out as counterweight, he managed to come mostly upright.

Joe waved the gin bottle in a small circle and Thomas took that as invitation to begin his questioning. "Did you know George well?"

"Well enough, I shhuppose. Wanted to be a lilly law but ended up a guard. Made him a bit of a shhtick. No fun 'tall."

"When did he find out you were selling stolen eggs as magical talismans?"

Joseph squinted at him again. "Whoddy shhay ye were?"

"Not the police."

That seemed good enough for him as he continued after a swaying nod. "Night he died. Was taking a basket of 'em out the side gate and 'e caught me. Tried to buy him off or cut him in, but like I shhaid, no fun 'tall."

"So you stabbed him when he threatened to tell the captain."

The violent head shake almost unseated him, sending him tilting dangerously before a counterweight leg maneuver saved him again. "Didn't like the shhaap, but I didn't give him the kiss off. I heard tell he was giving the old slithery to shhum wife. Maybe it'shh the husband did him in."

"What's the woman's name?"

Audible gulps counted the swallows of gin. "Never heard a name."

"Useless" Cat hissed in his ear.

Thomas didn't think so, but they had learned all he could tell them. "May I see your pocket watch?"

Joseph scrunched his face in confusion, but produced the clock all the same.

"One last thing Mr. Parsons."

"Mmmm?" He craned his neck to look up at Thomas.

"A rather unsavory man at the pub sent a message you should pay your debts. He seemed quite serious."

"That'd be Gino'shh man. Paid Jimmy in the ring." Sloshing a bit of gin during the wave to indicate his face distressed Joe to the point he forgot all about his guests.

When free of the residence soured by drink and sweat Thomas breathed deeply. "That was fruitful."

Cat was aghast. "How in this world and ours can you call that helpful?"

"We can cross him off our suspect list."

"He was actually a suspect? His initials aren't CF."

"The inscription in the watch isn't necessarily the owner's initials. It could stand for something completely different. He also provided us with our next lead. If we can find the unfaithful wife and her angry husband, that is."

"That part shouldn't be hard. The guards run in a fairly tight pack. One of them surely knows."

"Good. It's late so we'll begin again in the morning. Now we should probably figure out who it is that's been following us since we left The Tower."



THREE

"SOMEONE'S FOLLOWING US?" Cat's beak raked across his cheek as she craned her head to look.

"Ow. Watch where you're swinging that." Thomas rubbed at the scrape, but she hadn't drawn blood.

"Can you go faster? Maybe duck into an alley or a crowded store? Throw me on top of a wall somewhere?"

He had to lean his head out of danger as she swiveled her head, presumably in search of a hiding place. Instead of ducking out of sight, he stopped dead in his tracks and narrowed his eyes at her. "I'd rather confront him head-on."

"I'd much rather you didn't."

A glance at the street revealed the man gaining ground. Cat was practically shaking in fear. Thomas finally relented and stepped into an alley's shadows. A strong shrug knocked the bird off his shoulder and onto a trash bin. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

She had the good grace to drop her beak. "I'd really rather not."

"I insist. Unless you'd like to remain here without me?"

She made her quork sound like a growl and a sigh of resignation at the same time. "His name is William Sharp, and he's my owner."

Thomas was confused. "You have an owner? How is that even possible?"

"It's called slavery Tom. Because I'm considered a lesser being, it's not technically illegal to own me. Frowned upon and discouraged, yes, but not technically illegal."

"How did he acquire you? I've never heard of anything like this happening in Empyrean."

"There's a black market for creatures like me. Lesser demons, sentient animals, nonverbal Mer." She cocked her head. "I suppose even the Kraken could technically be bought and sold."

Thomas fell back against the wall. Even humans had laws against slavery. How could Empyreans be less enlightened? Caught in her explanation, Cat didn't notice.

"I was stolen or bred in captivity, I don't know which. William bought me as a fledgling and I've been under his control ever since." She snapped her beak twice. "Until I managed to slip away when he was distracted enough to leave my cage unlatched. I flew as fast as the winds could carry me to a dimple and escaped topside. I'd only been free a week when the murder happened. I knew he'd find me but I thought I'd have more time."

Thomas straightened. "I'll buy you."

"What?"

"I'll buy you from him and set you free."

For a moment he could see the excitement light up her eyes. Then it dimmed until it disappeared entirely. "He'll never let me go. He's a witch, but barely. Without the help of my freshly plucked, bloody feathers the most he'd be capable of is lighting a candle. He won't give up the power he gains from me."

"Your feathers grow back, correct? Why not offer him a bunch of them along with payment in return for your freedom?"

"Yes, they go grow back. It hurts like hell and takes a long time, but they grow back. Don't you think I've tried that? I've begged him to strip me bare several times in the past 20 years and every time he scoffs and says it wouldn't be enough."

"You don't think he killed George, do you? Maybe the guard was protecting what he saw as one of The Tower's ravens?"

"No. If he had he would have just taken me. He certainly wouldn't have clipped my wings and left. My feathers are useless to him cut." She stiffened and her eyes fixed on the street.

Turning, Thomas watched as William Sharp passed the mouth of the alley. He'd never met or even seen the man before but he was overcome with rage. Cat must have sensed him about to step out. She silently stretched a wing in front of his chest. He looked back at her and she shook her head.

She was right. They needed a plan.



THE NEXT MORNING, THEY STILL DIDN'T HAVE A PLAN.

"If not money or feathers, what currency would he take?" Thomas ran a tired hand through still damp hair. The shower had cooled him off a bit, but the heat outside still felt oppressive. Or maybe it was the dreary form of his companion.

She was laying on the bed, flat on her back, damaged wings spread to their full span. Every so often she sighed dramatically and twitched one foot as though she was dying. "Fear and power are the only things he recognizes as having worth."

"Well, we're getting nowhere sitting here. Let's go back to the tower and see if any of the guards can tell us the name of George's liaison." Once again he eschewed a jacket and popped on a straw bowler to tame his dark locks. Short sleeves left a good deal of his tawny beige skin exposed, which always made him

uncomfortable. He certainly didn't have a problem looking like his Spanish ancestors, but while in a country of Europeans he stood out. He'd been told his handsome dark looks were behind the female attention he received, but he had a sneaking suspicion it was more the allure of what's seen as "foreign" or "other."

In any case, it's why he'd come to London first on his tour. He liked female attention as much as any other man, but eventually the appeal wore off.

It was a 20-minute walk back to The Tower and both Thomas and the passenger on his shoulder were quiet until Cat's voice hissed in his ear. "I'll be glad when my feathers grow back."

"Why? You don't like being carried?" Teasing her with a quick shrug made her scramble for balance.

"No," she snapped angrily. "I do not. I feel like some kind of dandy's pirate parrot."

"Why do I have to be a dandy pirate? Why not a swashbuckling rogue so handsome your feathers fall out on their own?"

"Because you're in short sleeves, suspenders, and a straw hat." She cocked her head and studied him for half a minute. "Put on some leather and a brace of pistols and you'd look the part. Women would swoon at your feet as you relieved them of their jewels."

He snorted. "Maybe from here I'll try my hand at pirating."

The Tower came into sight and Cat directed Thomas around the side. There he found a tucked away servants entrance now used for employees and guards. Several were milling about, no doubt waiting for their shift to start. Her whispers pointed out the likeliest source of information.

She was spot on. After introducing himself and explaining what he was after, the young man opened like a faucet and poured out all he knew about George. He knew the rumor of George's affair was just that, rumor. Totally made up and scattered about by someone wanting to bring the self-righteous man down a peg or two. George was in fact quite in love with his wife, doting on her at every opportunity.

Even going so far as to recommend his ne'er-do-well brother-in-law for a job.

Said brother-in-law got in deep with the local bookie and tried, unsuccessfully, to steal a jewel to pay him off. Here the young guard stopped to laugh until he lost his breath. When he was able to continue

he pointed out how stupid the man must have been--or how desperate. In any case, he was fired and aside from some nasty words thrown in George's direction as he was escorted off the property, hadn't been seen since.

Thomas' interest was peaked. The young man hadn't interacted with George's brother-in-law enough to remember his name, and revealed everyone who might be inside on duty. Cat was against going back inside the castle, so they settled for the name of the bookie.

The guard took a lean back to look inside the doorway and called for someone named Lenny. Lenny turned out to be a rather unfortunate looking young guard. Tall and skinny, pockmarks in his face did nothing to mitigate his overlarge nose and unruly hair. "What's the name of that bookie George's brother got deep with?"

Cat's head bobbed back and forth as though she watched a tennis match but Thomas knew she was focused on Lenny's nose as he shook his head. He was sure of it, because he also couldn't look away.

"Don't remember exactly which one, but it was one of Gino's boys."

Thomas scrunched his eyes in confusion. "Gino?"

Lenny nodded. "He's the boss what works this whole area. Real name's John Wilkerson but everyone calls him Gino."

"Where can I find Mr. Wilkerson?"

"It's Tuesday? He'd be at Gennaro's then. Over in Soho, about two miles away."

"Thank you for your help gentlemen." Thomas reached into a pocket and gave each of them a crown for their trouble.



CAT WHISTLED. "AWFUL LOT OF MONEY for such a small amount of information."

"I don't see it that way." Thomas stopped to gauge the likelihood of rain from the darkening skies. "I have no need of money in Empyrean, and my father has done well bartering with vampires so our resources topside are impressive. Those young men now have a chance to spend their day without the worry of money. To me, that's well worth it."

"You are a good man Mr. Bassett."

"You are a pretty bird, Miss Cat."

"You're trying to get me riled enough to repeat that and sound like a parrot, aren't you?"

"I confess." He dissolved into laughter.

She accidentally on purpose stretched a wing in his face, and then joined him with her strange, staccato caw.

It wasn't long before they arrived at Gennaro's, an Italian restaurant where apparently the local gangster John "Gino" Wilkerson liked to spend his Tuesdays. As it happened the lunch hour was fast approaching and several people were already seated. It wasn't hard to find the man even with the patrons and dim lighting. Holding court in a back corner booth, several bruisers looking like carbon copies of the one who sent the warning to raven keeper Joe Parsons surrounded him. An elegant lady sat on his right, while to his left sat a rather nervous looking gentleman.

Thomas noted that several other similar gentlemen stood off to one side. He suspected they each waited their turn with the gangster. As if his thoughts summoned him, the bruiser from The Salty Arse emerged from the kitchen. Thomas was able to catch his eye and give him the nod which universally signaled he'd like a word.

Ambling over, a grin split his face. "You gave Joe the message."

"I did."

"You wanting to place a bet yourself then?" The giant picked at his teeth.

"Actually, I was hoping to speak to your boss." Thomas ticked his chin in Gino's direction.

"What business you got wit him?"

"I'm looking for someone and I've been told he can give me a name. This person might be in great debt to Mr. Wilkerson, and would benefit from him being found."

Thomas waited for the bruiser's beady little eyes to settle their bouncing from him to his boss. "Wait here."

He and Cat waited patiently as the bodyguard stood by until the previous nervous gentleman vacated the table. Thomas expected a hushed conversation but both men spoke in a normal tone.

"What is it, Chuck?" Gino had a lyrical baritone, perfectly suited for a man of the underground.

"The man I told you about--the one with the bird who delivered the message to Joe--says he wants to talk to you."

Both of them turned and stared. Eventually, Gino nodded and Chuck gave them a totally unnecessary wave over. Thomas stuck out a hand in greeting, and then lowered it as it became obvious Gino wouldn't be offering his own. "Mr. Wilkerson--"

"Gino."

Thomas nodded and began again. "Gino, I was hoping you could tell me the name of George Gill's brother-in-law. My understanding is that he owes you quite a bit of money."

"What do you want him for?"

"Murder." That got Gino's attention. "I believe he killed George in revenge for getting him fired."

"If he's locked up he can't pay me."

"True, but I think I have a way for both of us to get what we want. How does a good sized ruby sound?"



HAVING LAID THE GROUNDWORK THAT AFTERNOON, the plan went into motion after nightfall. At close to 10 p.m. the only shadows remaining were those from the gas street lamps. Thomas and Cat surveyed the street through a window in The Salty Arse's upstairs room. They had a good view of the dock and the bench where Chuck sat, trying to look inconspicuous. He wasn't anywhere near pulling it off, but since he was a regular fixture around the pub he wouldn't attract undue notice.

It wasn't long before the first of their quarry approached. Cat snorted. "Typical."

Thomas didn't have to ask. Walking with as much authority as he could muster (not much) and attempting an air of mystery, William Sharp arrived on the scene.

In contrast, George's brother-in-law, whom they'd learned was named Charles Fowler, slunk his way down the riverfront, his head on a swivel as he searched for anything suspicious.

Thomas noted the irony that the suspicious thing was himself.

It seemed as though the night itself held its breath until the silence was broken with William Sharp's angry voice. You could hear his sneer as he said, "You are Charles Fowler?"

"Keep it down man!" Charles resembled a hunted rabbit. "Yes, I'm Fowler."

"Where's my bird?"

"Bird? Where's my knife?"

"Knife?"

"Look here man, the note I got said you'd meet me here with my knife."

"The note I received said you'd meet me with my bird." His tone clipped, William was figuring out they'd been set up. He began to back away, but Charles was having none of it.

Grabbing William by the neck, Charles hissed, "you're going nowhere until I get my knife!"

"I don't have your bloody knife, you idiot!" Hands scrabbling at Charles' arms, William wasn't able to budge him.

Charles gave him a good shake. "The note said it still had George's blood on it. How'd you know that if you don't have it?"

"I didn't write the note!" William's voice was sounding strangled. "We've been set up!"

It took Charles a bit longer to register what William was saying. By that point, Thomas and Cat had joined Chuck and Gino on the street, along with several police officers Gino had secured for the evening.

As they took the self-confessed murderer into custody, Thomas stepped in front of a retreating William. "The bird is with me."

William's eyes narrowed on him. "She belongs to me. You'll produce her immediately unless you want to follow that man to jail."

"I don't think so." Before the other man could explode in indignation, Thomas continued. "You see, I can produce evidence the former Tower guard currently being put in the paddy wagon stole a jewel of the crown, and you blackmailed him to give it to you."

A quick, disgusted snort gave Thomas all he needed to know William thought himself far superior. After a subtle wave of his hand, Thomas instructed the repellent man to reach into his pocket.

His hand emerged with a beautiful, palm-sized ruby. His lips pursed tight he bit out, "so you're a bigger thief than I assumed."

"No," Thomas calmly explained. "Cat asked for my help, and I find myself enjoying her company. She can stay with me as long as she likes." His grin was genuine. "As for the gem, I'm a fellow resident of Empyrean. Telekinetic by ability."

Thomas paused to let that sink in before continuing. "As I see it, you have two choices. You can try to get me arrested, which will end with you in handcuffs instead, or you can never bother me or Cat again and walk away a free man."

William seemed to consider it before turning to walk away. Thomas called after him.

"Mr. Sharp?"

He stopped and turned only his head.

"Should you decide to not honor our agreement, you should know my name is Thomas Bassett. You'll know my family." Thomas hated using his family name, but his parents' prominence would add a layer of protection for both he and Cat. It was worth a bit of foolish pride.

Even 15 feet away, he saw the blood drain from William's face. He was fairly certain he was no longer a threat.

With Charles Fowler under lock and key and the William Sharp situation sorted, he and Cat breathed a sigh of relief.

"We make a good team," Cat whispered from his shoulder as Gino made his way to them.

"I've found I rather like thwarting the bad guys."

Gino assumed Thomas spoke to him. "Going copper, are you?"

"Actually, I thought private investigator. The idea of being limited by law isn't appealing."

Gino nodded. "Being the other side of the law myself, I can't argue that."

Thomas produced the ruby and gave it to Gino. "A large ruby for your help, as promised."

Gino's eyes grew wide. He covered his shock and slipped the jewel into his pocket. "I know a guy who's real good at reading people. Handy skill to know for a P.I. I can put you in touch... for a small introduction fee."

"I'll have to check with my partner." Thomas looked at Cat.

She executed a perfect imitation of a parrot's whistle. "Pretty bird."

He grinned and shook Gino's hand. "It's a deal."

Here the tale ends, but the adventures of Cat & Mr. Bassett have just begun...

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A Note to Readers

While The Case of the Caged Bird is set in 1930's London, and I have done research on the time period, I can in no way claim to be an expert. Nor will I claim to any measure of historical accuracy. My hope is simply that I have provided enough details to allow the setting and narrative to shine, and allow the reader to enjoy the story.

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Want to read more about Emphyrean? Brimstone Born is available on Amazon for pre-order starting Oct. 15, 2018. Visit <http://kenzie-kelly.com> for more!