



# *The Princess and the Pea*

## *Picker*

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Fable

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The Princess and the Pea Picker

By

Tom Calarco

In the deeper regions of the heart when time has no limits and only that which we seek has meaning, there lived a beautiful princess named Elise, and a pea picker named Tomaso. She was slender and comely-shaped, and he was rather short and while sturdy and strong, a lowly peasant who was not exactly the image of a Knight of the Roundtable.

You couldn't find two people with lives more different. She lived in a castle, slept in a soft canopy bed, wore lavish clothes and jewelry, used perfumed oils, and was pristine and proper in a most exquisite way. He lived in a hovel, slept on a bed of straw, was in the habit of openly expelling gas, and spoke in a crude manner.

"Blast, these blooming pricklers," Tomaso exclaimed one summer day as he picked pea pods.

"Tomi," he heard someone call.

It was his friend, Jonathan, a tall young man whose well-formed image and thick blonde hair tickled the hearts of the local peasant girls, passing through with a wagon loaded with wood.

"My good fellow, Tomi," Jonathan said, "I saw the Princess yesterday when I was at the manor hearth."

"Damn the devil!"

"You shouldst have seen her, Tomi, in black velvet, her thick black hair in little ringlets. I actually got to see her

up close. She has the bluest eyes, like the sky on a perfect day. She smiled at me, Tomi. Can you believe that?"

"Come now, Jon, you thinkst she was smiling at thee, or maybe those ridiculous purple leggings you wear."

"Ha ... You wish thee could afford such finery. You will see, my friend, for someday if the Lord deems it, I shall marry her," Jonathan said. "Yes, I will."

"Poof," Tomaso said. "I will shit on my grandfather's grave the day that happens."

Jonathan laughed. He knew that Tomaso was only half serious, as was he. They were good friends, though he was a free man and Tomaso, a serf. They had struck a friendship at the local public house over some passionate rounds of ale, for which Jonathan graciously paid.

"Happily, you wouldst prefer that thee shouldst marry her, eh Tomi? Why she would never give thee a second look."

"I have no such pretenses, Jon. My station prevents such a dream."

"Yes, 'tis good that you accepteth thy lot, my friend. I am sorry that it is not otherwise."

"Best not even harbor such a dream," said Tomaso. "Some pretty peasant wench will please me fine, if only I could find one who would take me."

Jonathan laughed.

"I'm sure you will find a good wife someday, Tomi."

"Perchance," said Tomaso, whose smooth, cherubic face belied his 21 years. "Sometimes I wonder. I wonder if even I will ever be with a woman."

"In time, my friend, in time."

Coincidentally, Princess Elise was having her own problems finding her Prince.

"Hath the King consented to allow me to go to the Games?" the Princess asked her lady in waiting, Juliana.

"No, I regret to say, my Lady, he has not given his word."

"He thinkest me too young, but I am now 20 years old. I may become an old maid if he alloweth me not to meet young men from outside the manor. Perchance I could meet a knight or even a Prince at the Games."

"Yes, my lady, but I have heard that it may be dangerous for you to take to the highway."

"But I would be protected by the King's guard," the Princess said. "If only mother had lived. She would not have allowed me confined to the manor and seeing so little of the world."

"Yes, my Lady, but I'm sure the King has your best interests at heart. He is waiting for a special Prince to come to Rottingham. Then surely he will give thee up."

"I am much in doubt. He does not seem to give a fig for me but only for the meals I can prepare. He never visits

me except to learn what meal I am preparing next or to bring me a new recipe. And when he does, he never asks about my well-being. I am no more than a slave to him.”

Such was everyday reality for the Princess. Locked away from the world, relegated to cooking for her father, in part because she was such a prodigy at cooking.

Sometimes, though, when the heavenly bodies of the universe correspond at the precise angle, intersecting for a split second with degrees of immeasurability and possibility, bisecting the infinitesimal particle of creation, things happen that no one, even God, if He or She existed, can explain, and that we simply must credit to coincidence.

It was a day the heat of the sun blistered down and dogs shunned the light for shady trees. The serfs in the field were dripping with sweat, and the Princess was preparing to ride around the perimeter of the manor with the King's Guard for the first time. She had pleaded with her father continually to allow her to go horseback riding and finally he had relented.

“Now be prudent, my lady,” said Sir Cedric, the oldest member of the King's guard. “You treat Genevieve gently and she will do likewise. The Golden Rule applies to horses as well as people.”

The Princess gently rubbed the neck of the rust-brown horse, which had a thick, golden mane.

“Good girl, Genevieve,” she said softly, then was helped into the saddle by the two other members of the King's Guard escorting her.

Once she was fully in the saddle, Sir Cedric led the Princess who was in the middle between him and two young knights behind her. Out the gate they trotted to the road that circled the manor. It passed by the fields where the serfs were working. They were busy harvesting vegetables, and Tomaso was among them. Sir Cedric had picked up the pace a bit and there was some space between him and the Princess. Gradually, the trotting of the hoofs became even more rapid. The Princess exhilarated in the movement through the countryside and the swoosh of country air rushing against her.

“How fare you, my lady,” Sir Cedric said, glancing back at her as they galloped over an open straightaway.

The princess laughed.

“To be sure it has been long since that day I had so much fun, Sir Cedric. Can we go a little faster?”

“A little,” he said. “But let us not take chances.”

Their pace quickened. And it was by some chance of fortune that a serf had stirred up a nearby beehive. A swirl of bees had crossed their path. Suddenly, Genevieve reared up. The princess held on tight, as the mare came down and then sprinted as fast as she could. The princess was bouncing up and down in the saddle when an

even more fortuitous accident came in the wake of poor Genevieve. A stone in the roadway caused her to trip and lose control of her feet.

As the mare went flying, the princess lost her grip on the reins and was sent into the air in a different direction, into the middle of the pea fields where of all people, Tomaso was harvesting. Hearing the neigh of the mare, Tomaso turned and saw coming straight for him, a heavenly body he had never expected. Prince Elise with open arms and open legs, colliding into him as if she were mounting him. She knocked him backwards, causing him to lose consciousness.

The princess, none worse for the ride, was revolted by the noxious odor that seemed to pervade the air. And never had she been so close to a man before, or in such a provocative position, much less with a peasant. It was for her rather unpleasant but she was grateful, grateful that this young man had been in the right place at the right time.

“My lady, are you alright!” called Sir Cedric, who was hurrying to her side. He helped untangle her, while the others attended to Tomaso. Some of the serfs working in the field gathered around.

One of them had a bucket of water and they splashed it on Tomaso’s face. Tomaso’s eyes opened. Standing around him were his fellow workers, the King’s guardsmen, and lo and behold, the very Princess of Rottingham, Elise.

Tomaso had never seen the Princess up close. She looked not quite as he had imagined. Her blue eyes seemed to penetrate his, almost drill into them. Was he imagining it all? He felt a chill run down his spine. He thought he had never seen one so beautiful, at least in his mind. And while it could be debated whether she was the most beautiful— in Tomaso’s eyes, there was no doubt.

“The princess oweth her life to thee, kind sir,” the princess said.

“Ay, the King will be pleased,” Sir Cedric said, scrunching up his nose and gazing at his knights. “What might thy name be?”

“Tomaso. Tomaso, the Pea Picker. Everyone knows me by that title.”

“Ah,” said the Princess in jest. “Thou hast a title.”

Tomaso smiled.

“ ‘Tis what they call me, my lady.”

“I will be sure to tell my father of thy deed, and to be sure he will favor thee with a reward.”

“Let us take leave, my lady,” Sir Cedric said. “The stench here is unbearable.”

Everyone laughed, and Tomaso and the other serfs went back to work as the Princess and the King’s Guard returned to the manor. Fortunately, the mare, Genevieve, was not badly injured and was able to walk back to

her stable, but the Princess rode with Sir Cedric on his horse along with the other guardsmen.

Fate had certainly smiled that day on Tomaso. The King was appreciative and appointed him assistant to the King's gardener which provided him a more commodious abode with feather pillows and a feather mattress. His cat, Heldrid, especially loved the pillows. And Tomaso, he was in a suspended state of rapture. He couldn't stop thinking about the Princess. Everything he did or said, or imagined, was with the thought of the Princess. Several times, he caught a distant glimpse of her when she came out from the castle, and his heart would race like a wild, stampeding stallion. Of course, she was always closely escorted by the King's Guard, and there was no chance that he could speak to her, as if he even would dare.

Shortly after, Jonathan came to visit Tomaso in the garden following a delivery of wood to the manor hearth. He was excited about Tomaso's appointment because now he had an excuse to visit the garden and possibly have another encounter with the Princess.

"Hast thou seen the Princess yet?" Jonathan asked.

"Oh, yes," he said, "but only from afar."

"Does she come out at regular intervals?"

"When she does, mostly mid-afternoon. She has continued to take up riding her horse."

Jonathan laughed.

"A spunky lass. I like that. So, is it about this time, when she appeareth?"

"Well, by marry, yes," said Tomaso. "Just by coincidence, you're in luck, this is about the time."

"Then I must bide mine, for she may come at any instant," said Jonathan.

"It could well be so."

"To get even a glimpse of her," said Jonathan, "would make my heart sing."

"Pooh," said Tomaso. "You thinkest because you are free born that you will be so lucky as to marry a princess. You are dreaming, my friend."

"Better than any chance you might have."

"Which is no chance at all, my good friend."

"Oh, my Lord. Look, Tomi, look. Look who's coming toward us!"

Princess Elise approached on foot with Juliana, both of them carrying baskets. She was wearing a flowing sky blue silk gown with long gold brocaded sleeves and a decorative gold waist band. Her thick, dark, wavy hair framed her face and descended upon her shoulders. She was smiling. Tomaso and Jonathan stood with their mouths agape.

“Good day, Tomaso,” she said then turned to Jonathan, “and fine sir, have I seen thee before, perchance?”

Tomaso dropped his hoe.

“Yes, my lady,” he bowed his head. “I am Jonathan, Jonathan Smithson, a freeborn man of Laurel Manor. It is my greatest pleasure to meet you.”

“Your pleasure is well appreciated, Jonathan. Is it thee who supplies our logs for the hearth?”

“Ay, my lady.”

“That is also much appreciated.”

The Princess turned to Tomaso and approached him closer. A disgusting odor exhaled.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Oh, beg thee me pardon, my lady,” Tomaso said, “I just dumped a load of fresh manure into the fields. It must be still exuding.”

The Princess made a face, then softened.

“Dost thou like thy new job, Tomaso?”

“T-t-tis a joy to work in the King’s garden, m-my lady,” he stammered. “‘Tis a blessing.”

“I am glad,” she said, “because today I would like thee to assist me in gathering herbs for the King’s pantry.”

“M-my pleasure, my lady,” Tomaso said.

Tomaso led the Princess to the herb garden while Juliana engaged in conversation with Jonathan.

“Is thy new abode suitable, Tomaso.”

“Oh, my lady, ‘tis surely a delight, I have never slept on such a bed with feathers in the pillows.”

“I hope thee makest good use of the bathtub that was provided.”

“Ah, yes, my lady, I should use it more often,” said Tamaso, who changed the subject. “Alas, didst you know tonight is the full moon.”

“Yes, I did. Juliana keeps track of such things for me.”

“‘Tis when I come down with an uncontrollable fit of the hiccups,” Tomaso said.

The Princess laughed.

“Thou must be in jest, Tomaso.”

“Oh, my lady, it always happens.”

“Tomaso, I cannot believe thee. Did someone tell thee that I am beset with the same affliction?”

“No, my lady, on my honor. I tell the truth. It has happened to me since I was a child.”

“Quite interesting, Tomaso, that we could be so coincidentally linked, but then it is just a coincidence, I’m sure.”

“Yes, I’m sure, my lady. Surely a coincidence.”

Tomaso helped the Princess gather her herbs, then returned to Jonathan who was waiting for him.

“So, Tomaso, did you ask for her hand in marriage,” Jonathan said.

“Go find a hole to dig, my filthy friend. You are just jealous of this lowly serf. Actually, the Princess and I have something quite unusual in common, something deep and abiding, that goes back to our childhood.”

“And what might that be?”

“We experience the same affliction during the full moon.”

“It’s just a coincidence,” said Jonathan. “You really believe in such things?”

“You will see,” Tomaso said. “She and I are going to become good friends.”

“A peasant like you? I will lay odds against that.”

That night as he battled the hiccups, Tomaso kept thinking about the Princess. Water helped a little, but it actually seemed to go easier that night because of the thought that he was sharing them with the Princess.

Could such a one lowly as he, an average sort of young man, someday marry a princess?

Of course, the Princess was having no such dream. She did think Tomaso amusing and laughed to herself at the thought of the peasant hiccupping along with her.

Some weeks passed and the Princess and Tomaso met occasionally and shared small talk. Always, when she met him, there was the same hideous odor, and always he attributed it to dumping manure, and in her heart she forgave him, especially after he confessed that it was his most important duty because the King's gardener refused to have anything to do with that. He also revealed his love for peas, to pick them, to taste them, to eat them, and his favorite treat, split pea soup with ham. Peas, peas and more peas, he ate them every day though it did have its consequences.

He also began to let slip out bits of his ribald humor. Much had to do with his first-hand experiences with excrement. In an odd sort of way, the Princess found this funny. He was actually an engaging fellow, if a bit stinky. He just didn't understand etiquette very well, so she excused his lack of decorum. He was after all, a peasant. Nevertheless, there were moments of warmth and genuineness that he displayed that made her trust in him implicitly. His great affection for her was apparent. It touched her heart, and much in the manner of how she felt towards her cat, Heiko, she had become fond of him—this little boy-man with unkempt hair and scraggly bangs. One night she even sent a servant to his abode with a large pot of split pea soup with ham. She made certain to avoid him for the next few days after that.

Sadly, there transpire events in one's life that come unexpectedly and tear asunder the former conception of one's happiness. This was no coincidence but a shocking and heart-rending experience, for the Princess. Such things are never talked about in fairy tales; nevertheless such depraved incidents do occur, and in this fairy tale we do not hide the truth.

Verily it was so one evening that the King entered her drawing room and requested the lady-in-waiting to leave. He was a large man with a neatly trimmed beard and moustache. He was carrying a small, ornate box.

"Elise," he said. "I have a gift."

"A gift, father," she said.

"Yes," he said, handing her the box, "a gift to the most precious daughter a king may have."

She opened the box and took out the biggest, bluest sapphire medallion she or anyone, even this author, had ever seen. It sparkled in her blue eyes, and seemed to reflect back from them when she looked up at the King. "I am most pleased you like it, my dear," he said, then drew his arm around her and hugged her close to him, bringing her face up to his. In a quick moment he pressed his lips upon hers and put his hand on her bottom, squeezing ferociously.

The Princess recoiled and screamed. Heiko squealed and jumped off the window ledge. Juliana rushed in and saw the Princess in tears and red-faced, and the King looking aghast.

“My Lord, what happened?”

The Princess could only whimper as the King tried to explain.

“Twas a trifle,” the King said. “She’s just happy about the medallion I gave her.”

“Oh, my lady,” Juliana said and approached her.

The Princess showed it to her.

“It is magnificent, my lady.”

“Tis,” she said, then faced the King. “It is wonderful, father. But if thou wouldst, father, I pray thee take thy leave, for I have some affairs to discuss with Juliana.”

The King nodded.

“Gramercy, father, for the beautiful medallion,” she said as he went out the door.

That night the Princess cried herself to sleep. Juliana, who slept in a room next to her, could hear her crying.

The next day the Princess went into the garden in search of Tomaso, and asked her lady in waiting to remain at the edge because she wanted to talk to him in private. The Princess was desperate and reasoned that Tomaso was probably the only one who could help. No one would suspect him, a lowly serf of doing anything in opposition to the King. Any other man she might talk to would likely reveal her intentions to the King.

“Tomaso,” she said. “I am so glad to see thee.”

Tomaso looked up at her in astonishment. He had never seen the Princess like this. He could tell she was in distress.

“My lady, what might thy trouble be? Should we summon the King’s Guard.”

“Nay, nay, Tomaso. I need thy help. But thee must not tell a soul.”

“Me help? What can I do?”

“Thou must help me escape the manor?”

“Escape? Why? And how my lady?”

“Thou must find a way, Tomaso. Thou must. I must leave my father. I cannot explain. ‘Tis private. Thou must trust me and thou must pledge never to reveal what I have said. It could put thy life in danger.”

“In danger?”

“Please, Tomaso, please help.”

The Princess’s sad blue eyes penetrated his even more deeply than the time he first saw her up close that day when fate propelled them together. It mesmerized him and he realized now how serious she was. Being so in love with her, he would do anything to save her.

After his day's work was done, he borrowed a horse from one of his friends at the manor and raced to Jonathan's homestead. Jonathan heard the hoofs of the horse and came outside.

"What bringest you hither?"

" 'Tis the princess."

Tomaso explained everything. After some reflection, it was decided to seek the help of a minstrel who had recently come to the kingdom and been the talk of the countryside because she was a woman. According to the gossip, she was accompanied by a very old woman said to have great powers. She was performing at the King's Games just a few days hither.

It was an early fall day when the leaves of the trees had begun to flicker down and thousands had flocked to the King's Games, one of the grandest events of the year. Of course, the Princess was not allowed to go. But she had spoken to Tomaso who had told her of his plan to seek help from the minstrel and she was in agreement. It was thought that the minstrel would have no allegiance to the King.

On the great stage facing the jousting arena, the minstrel addressed the crowd, dressed in a red blouse and red tights, her untamed reddish-blond hair capped by a cone-shaped red hat.

"Ladies and Gentleman," she shouted, "permit me to introduce myself, Mary, the Queen of Tarts, the greatest and only minstrel of the fair sex in all the lands above and beyond this kingdom."

Her body was animated and her hands moved like a whirling-dervish. A boy who was assisting her lit a wand wrapped in fleece and gave it to her, and then another. She spun them around like a baton twirler to the amusement of the crowd, then spun her body around as she did so.

The crowd clapped.

"I will now sing a bawdy song for thee," she said and everyone laughed.

A tall conga-like drum was brought out by her assistant. She began to beat out a rhythm.

So many men I have loved in my life

Many of them cuckolded their dear wife

I quenched their lust as we played on my bed

Then kicked them out after giving them head

Most men be just a passing fancy  
A whim, a moment of dallian-cee  
Ladies, I tell thee, find a man who be true  
They are the gems who are, a precious few.

Her tone was mocking and her voice clear, as she added more stanzas followed by the refrain. It was shocking to some but to all a delight. After more banter and tricks, she capped off her performance by introducing her great grandmother.

The white-haired woman, dressed in a plain white robe, was using a cane and walking very slowly, being helped along by the boy assistant. She looked out with a vacant stare and a beatific smile like that of the Mona Lisa.

“I present you, Madame Margarita,” Mary said.

Everyone clapped.

“For more than 100 years, since a very small child, Madame has been blessed with the gift of prophecy and the power to perform magic.”

“Ay,” the old lady said. “All who wish to make use of my magical talents, come to my tent, and, for a reasonable fee, I will astonish thee.”

Tomaso had nothing to pay but Jonathan had ample means, so after the jousting and archery tournaments, they went to see the old soothsayer. A long line had already formed to seek her wisdom. When it was their turn, they were ushered in by Mary. It was dark and the old woman sat behind a round table with a candle in the center. Tomaso and Jonathan sat on a bench facing her. Before they could speak, she put up her hand.

“Do not speak,” she said, in a firm voice that belied her feeble appearance. “I know the reason thee have come, and I know why the Princess Elise wants to leave her father’s kingdom.”

Tomaso and Jonathan looked at each other wide-eyed.

“But hush,” she said.

There was silence and the candlelight revealed the deep lines in her weathered face.

“This must be done in secret and done quickly, before the King gets wind of it.”

Tomaso filled with fear.

“The way into and out of the King’s castle can only be accomplished by assuming a non-human form,” she said.

“The perfect hosts exist in thy cats.”

“How do you know this?” asked Tomaso.

“Tis not for thee to know, only to believe,” she said.

“And how will he accomplish this?” asked Jonathan.

“Tis not difficult, I will bestow the power upon Tomaso,” she said and pointed her finger at him. “Thou must inform the Princess that thee will come to the castle in the form of thy cat and instruct her as to how to assume the same of her cat, as I now will instruct thee. Then as cats, thee will board the trading vessel, The Twitterlight. It crosses the channel daily. After crossing, thee will alight to our home to the south and await us. We are well known among cats, for our homestead is the realm of hundreds of feral cats. Any cat you encounter will know how to get there. When we return, I will bring thee back to thy selves.”

“It will not be long,” added Mary, “for we will repair there after the Games.”

“Now,” said the old lady. “Do exactly as I say, Tomaso, and instruct the Princess likewise. Understand?”

“Ay, Madame, I fully understand.”

“If thou dost not do precisely as I say, thou wilt not be able to work the magic.”

Tomaso nodded.

“Listen carefully,” she said, and reached out to hold his hands in hers. She closed her eyes and her voice seemed to deepen, as if she had entered a trance.

“Gather and dry the sprigs of bay, the sweet peppermint, the fragrant rosemary, and the refreshing spearmint; crumble them in thy hands; spread them on thy pet; then recite the magic words, three times, imagining thee taking form within thy cat: ‘The aperture to faith is the magical exception to the naturalistic rule.’ ”

There was a pause and Tomaso felt something take hold of his being. The old lady opened her eyes and smiled, and her voice returned to normal.

“This can only be done on the night and in sight of the full moon, Tomaso. That will occur one week from today. The Princess cannot do this herself, but only in thy presence, for I have conferred this power only to thee. ‘Tis imperative that thou rescue the Princess that night, for the King is already suspicious that something may be afoot.”

Before they left, the old lady gave Tomaso a small, pink quartz crystal. She told him to give this to The Princess because she would need to rub it while reciting the magic words.

The next day the Princess hastened into the garden; Tomaso gave her the instructions and the crystal. They gathered the required herbs and all that was left was to await the coming of the full moon. Then a thought occurred. What if their hiccups prevented them from properly reciting the incantation?

The week seemed to pass slowly. Tomaso prepared for it by taking to his bed earlier than usual. He had been

told by the soothsayer that the metamorphosis would drain his energy and that he would need all his strength to be successful.

On the evening of the full moon, twitterlight was awash with pink and creamy purple-blues that streamed beauteous symmetries of unwritten pleasure, such that can be known only when beheld. It in itself was enough to evoke awe in Tomaso and seemed fitting for such a night as this.

Tomaso spread the herbs in a dish on a small table he had brought outside his abode, as the moon's ghostly image began to appear and he felt the first rush of hiccups. He looked at the moon whose image was ripening before him. Would he really be able to become one with Heldrid? He called to Heldrid, who looked at him with disinterest.

"Come, my Heldrid, tonight, thee and me are going to be as one."

He picked up Heldrid and put him on the table, and looked out at the full moon again. Now it had become so clear the he could almost see the face it appeared to form. He took a deep breath. He was afraid and began to shake, then expelled an extremely noxious twaddle of effluvium. He scooped up the herbs into his hands and spread them on Heldrid.

"The aperture," he hiccupped. "The aperture to ..." again he was thwarted. "The aperture to faith ..."

It was no use. He could not complete the task without interruption. He needed to find a remedy. He took a drink of water and he hiccuped again. He told himself that somehow he had to summon up the resolve to get through it, if he were to save the Princess. He took another deep breath and a gulp of water. He looked up at the moon and begged its assistance, and fixed his stare on it, wrinkling his brow in concentration, straining his mind, as he recited the incantation.

"The aperture to faith is the magical exception to the naturalistic rule. The aperture to faith is the magical exception to the naturalistic rule. The aperture to faith is the magical exception to the naturalistic rule."

Suddenly, Tomaso vanished into a dark space. He could see out of the eyes of Heldrid and he found that he actually could communicate with his cat as if he were another person.

"So, thou thinkest thee will win the Princess's hand, Tomaso," Heldrid said.

"Tis a dream, I must confess, but more important is that we save her."

"Verily, but I would temper thy dream."

"Be that as it may, Heldrid. It is time to advance to the castle and bring her to safety."

"And what dost thou know of this cat whose form she will take?"

"She speaks warmly of her cat, who is a female. It suggests she is as comely as the Princess herself."

Heldrid purred.

They slipped through the fields and through the narrow openings in the castle walls, leaped onto a window sill and into the castle. Such a big castle, it also housed the many servants of the King, as well as the knights who composed his guard and their families. The Princess had given Tomaso directions to her room. She would be expecting them. Up the circular staircase, down the hall, a left, then a right, and there it be, her doorway.

Heldrid meowed, louder and louder until the door opened. The Princess looked down at Heldrid and hiccupped, and smelled that familiar odor always present with Tomaso.

“Couldst thou be the cat I have been awaiting,” she said, between hiccups. “Come in Heldrid. I suspect you have brought Tomaso with you.”

Heldrid meowed and purred as he fixed his gaze on Heiko.’

The Princess continued to hiccup.

“Oh, dear Lord, how will I be able to recite the words properly,” she said to Heldrid, then called her cat.

“Heiko, come my dear.”

Heiko jumped on the table where the Princess had already spread her herbs. Like Tomaso, she was afraid and her hands shook as she rubbed the crystal and began to recite the incantation, “The aperture to faith,” only to be stopped by a hiccup. She was flustered and a series of hiccups followed, and Heiko jumped off the table.

Heldrid then jumped up on the window sill where it opened to a view of the full moon. He meowed and purred, and motioned his head up towards it. The Princess took notice and her intuition picked up that it might be a signal from Tomaso. She put Heiko back on the table and stared at the full moon, feeling its power. Something told her that now she would be able to perform the incantation if she resolved to put her faith in the sway of the moon. She spread the herbs again on Heiko and began to recite the incantation as she rubbed the crystal and stared into the moon’s silvery, glowing sheen.

“The aperture to faith is the magical exception to the naturalistic rule. The aperture to faith is the magical exception to the naturalistic rule. The aperture to faith is the magical exception to the naturalistic rule.”

Like Tomaso she vanished into the being of her cat.

“My lady,” Heiko said to her, thee and me are now as one.”

The Princess laughed in disbelief. The cats looked at each other.

“Hello, Heiko,” Heldrid said. “’Tis my utmost pleasure to meet thee. Now thee must leadeth us out of the castle.”

“To be sure, my friend, Heldrid.

Both the Princess and Tomaso had no idea what the cats were saying to each other, so Heiko and Heldrid had

to relay their conversations to them. Swiftly, they scooted and scurried out of the castle labyrinth to safety and followed the woodland paths to the coastal area. It was a night filled with more hoots and howls and chattering and clattering and whistling and squealing than usual. The night of the full moon is more magical than any other because love is so pungent in the air. They reached the shore at daybreak and looked for the Twitterlight. Tomaso had been told that he couldn't miss it because it was the only vessel docked at the long black ness of stones that projected into the sea. There were many boats there and the cats worried that they would not be able to find it. But as they were told they came to the ness of black stones where a vessel was docked at its end. On the boat, they found other cats who knew the minstrel's homestead and gave them directions. It wasn't far, and they entered the house through the cat door. The minstrel's cats were expecting them because the minstrel had sent word ahead with Gawain, the boy who was her assistant but really a cat turned into a boy for her shows. Heldrid and Heiko were fed well and provided with a nice cushion on which to sleep.

Two days later, the minstrel and her great grandmother arrived.

"Oh, my Tomika, Frederika, Roderika, and Gawain," Mary said. "I see thee have some new friends."

Madame Margarita laughed. She sat down at her dining table.

"Come, Heldrid, Heiko, come to me."

Both cats jumped onto the table. Mary went to the cupboard to get the appropriate spices. She placed them in front of Madame Margarita, who sprinkled equal parts of cinnamon, ginger, and lavender into a dish. She emptied it into her hands and rubbed the herbal mixture into their fur.

"To thine own true self, thee forever will be . . . . To thine own true self, thee forever will be . . . . To thine own true self, thee forever will be. Alight, Tomaso, Elise! You are now free to inhabit your lives."

At once they became Tomaso and Princess Elise again. They looked at each other and hugged tight, and a long-winded eddy of air passed into the room. The Princess winced.

It was an occasion of celebration. The Princess cooked up prodigies of delicious dishes, and Mary opened up a special vintage of wine she had been saving for such an occasion. Tomaso was star struck. Could it be now that the dream of his to marry the Princess would come true and that they would live together happily ever after? He could barely sleep that night as his thoughts dwelled on the prospect.

The next day they set out with a good friend of Mary, a soldier of fortune, who would escort them to a distant kingdom where they could start a new life. They bid their good-byes and promises to visit then set off. When they arrived, they were given the choice of manors to which they would be welcomed. The soldier of fortune assumed that Tomaso was a serf in service of the Princess. But the Princess corrected him and said that

Tomaso had no obligations towards her, that he was free to go to the place of his choice. She then turned to Tomaso. Looking him straight in the eye, she smiled softly.

“Thou hast saved my life twice and I never can reward thee enough, my friend,” she said. “But thou feelest that sort of affection for me that I cannot return. Thou art a serf and thy habits of life so different from mine. I am one for whom hygiene and sweet smelling is the norm. I cannot abide with such habits as thine. It is not thy fault; thou art a wonderful friend. We will always be twin souls whose hearts will mingle together.”

And thus it was for a time they went their separate ways, for as love is the understanding of everything, it is the most perfect intelligence. The Princess eventually found her prince and a new kingdom. Tomaso took employment with a merchant and sailed to the East, from whence he brought back riches and became a noble. Their cats? Well, they had a much more happy ending. Heldrid and Heiko remained with the Princess and produced several litters. Their progeny is said to still inhabit the ruins of the castle where the Princess lived out the rest of her life.

Coincidentally, or probably not so coincidentally, after returning with his riches, Tomaso was awarded a fiefdom by the Princess. Fortunately, he had learned how to cure his problem with gas while in the East and he found himself a wife. Having become much more refined after his worldly experiences, Tomaso and his family often were invited to visit by the Princess and her husband, the eventual King of the principality. Tomaso's children mingled with hers on the many occasions, and with the many cats that roamed the estate.

Thus, perhaps it was no coincidence, when the bee stung the Princess's horse that day and thrust her upon the man who would free them together. Life is like that, a series of coincidences that lead us to our destiny. If you listen to your heart, you will know where to find it.

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