

## Isle of Wight Story Festival: Whiskers and Tales

### ***Read-along extract taken from Nekromancer's Cage by Kathryn Rossati***

The alley smelled horrendous. Rubbish bins overflowed with rotten food, empty wrappers, and filthy rags. Some of the bins had been knocked over, their contents spilling out onto the snow like an outbreak of black mould.

Winkit wrinkled her nose as she trotted past, making her way to the carcass of a rusted motor carriage long stripped of its essential parts by thieves and ne'er-do-wells. Leaping up on what remained of its bonnet, she sat erect and let out a long high-pitched yowl. It echoed along the alley, making the rubbish bins resonate. She repeated it three more times, took a pause, and then started the call again.

Within minutes another cat appeared, a shorthaired tabby with a chunk missing from his tail. He sat in front of her and joined in her call. Another cat appeared, this time a fluffy white house cat, and did the same.

More and more cats arrived, each taking up the call with her until, at last, over a hundred familiars were present, filling the alley completely. 'My fellow familiars,' Winkit addressed them, raising her voice. 'I called you here tonight because there are a group of humans who need our help.'

An ancient Nodnol shorthair sniggered. 'When are there *not* humans who need our help?' she asked snidely. A few familiars sitting around her laughed.

Winkit cleared her throat, making them hush once more. 'I know it is unusual for a familiar whose Wytch has passed on to ask for help, but I'm sure you have all noticed that something in Nodnol is not right. The humans I wish to help are on the verge of discovering

what this something is but, without our aid, they will be imprisoned indefinitely and by the time they are released, I fear it will be too late. My brothers and sisters, will you help me?’

There was a long pause, but then a white tortoiseshell broke the silence. ‘You were once Irene Aqua’s familiar, were you not?’ she queried, noting Winkit’s dual-coloured fur.

‘That is correct,’ Winkit replied, a small note of pride in her voice.

‘Then I shall follow you,’ the tortoiseshell declared. ‘My mistress owed Irene a great debt, as I’m sure the Wytches of nearly every familiar here do. By helping you, I will in part be honouring that debt.’

There was a wave of agreement from around her and as she let out the call of acceptance, a single yowl that lasted for half a minute, the others joined her. Winkit was overwhelmed by their response and for a moment she felt the urge to mewl like a lost kitten having been reunited with its parents.

Blinking the tears away, she cleared her throat. ‘Thank you, my friends. Now, the humans I wish to rescue are being held on the upper floors of the Board of Alkemists’ research facility. There are no windows that we can sneak through, aside from the single one in the reception room, and the door leading into the facility proper is covered with a series of locks and won’t open unless all of them are unlocked in sequence, going from bottom to top. The keys are being held by a man known as Mr Murston, who I believe is still at the facility. As you all should know, the Board of Alkemists makes every effort to make sure all locks in the buildings they own are Wytch-proof, so it will be no use to simply ask one of your mistresses to stroll in there and undo them for us. If a Wytch were even to try using her powers on those locks, then their Alkemical traps would activate and solidify her feet to the floor – or worse, if the rumours I’ve heard are anywhere near true. There are no air vents leading from the

reception room to the other side of the door either, so there truly is only a single way through.'

'This is a tricky one to be sure,' the tortoiseshell commented. 'Does this Mr Murston carry the keys on his person, or does he leave them somewhere?'

'I believe he carries them on him,' Winkit replied, knowing how impossible the rescue was beginning to sound.

'He has a spare set, I think.'

Winkit stared as a grey kitten walked forwards, barely old enough to be allowed to respond to the call. 'My mistress saw them hanging up in a safe once in Mr Murston's home study. She works there as a maid. I'm sure she could figure out the combination to the lock,' the kitten continued, his voice barely a squeak.

'But your mistress can only be a child, if your age is anything to go by,' the tabby who'd first appeared said. 'Is she even in control of her powers yet?'

'Of course she is,' the kitten said defensively, flicking his tail.

'Calm yourself, young one,' the tortoiseshell chided him. 'Now is not the time for arguments. Tell us what you have seen your mistress do so far, and we shall access her ability.'

'She can make plants grow from seeds in a few seconds, create a flame in her palm, levitate things, *and* she can even fly on her broom ... only on nights when it's foggy though,' he added hastily at the number of concerned looks he received.

'Be that as it may, those skills are very different to the one needed to detect the right combination for a safe. What are her puzzle-solving skills like? Is she good at riddles and strategy games?' Winkit pressed.

‘Yes, she beats all her friends at chess every time, and has worked through every riddle posed to her by her aunt, the Wytch Clarice,’ the kitten answered.

Winkit scratched behind her ear. ‘Is Wytch Clarice’s familiar here?’ she called, searching the sea of fur and whiskers before her for a response.

A black cat with white socks stepped forwards and sat beside the kitten. ‘I am Wytch Clarice’s familiar. I can attest to what young Poppets here claims. His mistress, the young Wytch Frances, is indeed talented for her age. She should have no problem getting into the safe and taking the keys, even without using her magic if need be, though I suspect this Mr Murston wouldn’t have bothered to make his own locks Wytch-proof. He has no idea the one dusting his shelves and helping to prepare supper every day is a Wytch,’ he said proudly, giving Poppets a fond lick.

Poppets pulled a face, but couldn’t help straightening up importantly, forgetting that he was several inches shorter than every other familiar there.

Winkit’s whiskers twitched in amusement. ‘Very well, then,’ she said. ‘Our first plan of action is to enlist the young Wytch Frances to our cause. Let the rescue begin!’

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‘Come on, Poppets, you know I can’t do any magic while I’m working. Even if I had the time, what if someone were to see me?’ Frances asked, dusting the windowsill where Poppets was perched on the outside.

It was nearly five and preparations for dinner were being made. Cook would be calling her soon to help prepare the sweet dish, and then the table had to be laid.

‘This is more important,’ Poppets insisted. ‘I’ve got every Wytch’s familiar counting on me to convince you. I already had to argue to make them believe you’re strong enough to do it.’

‘Well, that’s your problem, not mine,’ Frances said harshly and turned away to carry on with her other chores.

There was a creaking of hinges and a soft thud as four paws landed on the ground. Frances sighed. ‘What have I told you about coming in the house while it’s still daytime, Poppets?’ she began, turning back around. But instead of Poppets, who was still outside looking through the window, there was another cat looking at her. She stared at it, taking in its dual-coloured fur: half black, half ginger.

By the way it seemed to be assessing her, from the frizzy strands of brown hair hanging down from her maid’s bonnet to the stains around her knees where she’d recently been scrubbing the floor, it was clearly more than just a pet cat. *Another Wytch’s familiar, then.* It even twitched its whiskers the same way Poppets did when he gave an approximation of a smile.

‘Forgive me for imposing on you, Frances,’ Winkit said, keeping her voice hushed as another servant rushed past the door, oblivious to what was going on in the room. ‘But Poppets is telling the truth. We really do need your help to rescue a group of humans.’

Frances frowned. ‘Even if that’s true, why should I risk losing my one source of income to help you? Just whose familiar are you?’

‘The very fact that you’ve asked that question proves to me that you are no fool. Indeed, you remind me very much of my mistress when she was young. Her name was Irene ... perhaps you’ve heard of her?’

‘Irene? I’m sure I don’t know any Wytches with that name. None that are still alive, any – wait, did you say “was”? Your mistress *isn’t* alive anymore, is she? Then ...’ Frances’ eyes grew wide. ‘Are you really the familiar of *Irene Aqua*?’

Winkit purred.

‘But she’s, well, pretty much the stuff of legend among my generation. The things she did ... she was so brave, and so powerful.’

‘Yes, the things she did were brave, even revolutionary in some ways, if you consider that Wytches all used to work independently without trusting one another. But she was an ordinary woman doing what she believed in,’ Winkit chuckled. ‘She hated the idea of anyone putting her on a pedestal. Besides, her curiosity was the very reason the Alkemists set to developing Wytch-proof locks. Not that they *knew* it was her sneaking into the safes of all the rich households. In fact, if people hadn’t started to realise that there were less homeless on Nodnol’s streets, I doubt those families would even have noticed what she took from them.’

She curled her tail around herself, licking the fur on her chest nonchalantly. ‘You know, the humans we need to help have a similar mindset to hers. They rescue orphaned children off the streets and take care of them. I’d hate to think what would happen to those children if their guardians never return home.’

Frances bit her lip. ‘I suppose if there’s no chance of them escaping otherwise, and if Mr Murston doesn’t find out about me ... alright, I’ll help you. What do you need me to do, exactly?’

‘The only way to free them is by taking the keys that Mr Murston has in his safe. Poppets has told us you have the ability to open such a safe. Is he telling the truth?’

‘Yes, I ... I think so. One of the key tactics for working out the combination to a safe is to know the person who it belongs to, and have an understanding of how they think. I’ve worked for Mr Murston since I was eight; he’s a strict man but a fair one, and unless he’s stressed, quite logical. As long as I can figure out the first digit, I can easily use my powers to encourage the rest of the mechanism into turning to the right code. I know his ones aren’t Wytch-proof; those things feel like I’ve stepped into a cold shower when I’m near them.’ She paused momentarily, putting her hands on her hips. ‘Still, this whole idea is ludicrous. I can’t just sneak in there and fiddle about with his things. It won’t be long until he comes home anyway, maybe an hour at the most, and Wytch-lore help us if dinner’s not ready by then.’

‘I don’t believe you have to worry about Mr Murston arriving home at his usual time. I have it on the best authority that he’ll be somewhat delayed tonight. Something happened at the research facility that he ... did not expect,’ Winkit said mysteriously.

Frances eyed her doubtfully. ‘These people you want to rescue, they didn’t do anything *illegal*, did they? It’s all just a misunderstanding; they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, right?’

‘Sometimes the line between legal and illegal must be stretched when searching for information that could help prevent others from a terrible fate, wouldn’t you agree?’ Winkit replied, deliberately vague.

‘I suppose so,’ Frances said. ‘So ... how can we keep Cook and everyone else from wondering where I am? I’m never late helping with dinner preparations; it’ll be awfully suspicious if I’m not there.’

Winkit swished her tail knowingly. ‘Tell me, Frances, have you ever had any rats in the kitchen? Or mice?’

‘Once or twice, but Cook’s always managed to chase them out with a broom.’

‘Are you sure there aren’t a few left, hiding in the pantry, or under the workbench?’ she pressed. ‘I have a few friends with me this evening, and we could all use some exercise to warm our paws from this dreadful snow.’

Frances grinned, catching on. ‘It’s not *impossible* that we’ve overlooked a few.’

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Screams from the kitchen as a hundred cats leapt through the windows and into the pantry, bombarding Cook and servants alike, carried up to Mr Murston’s study where Frances, Winkit and Poppets quietly slipped through the door.

It wasn’t locked. Why should it be? Mr Murston never suspected that he had a Wytch for a maid, or that any of his servants would be bold enough to try tackling the combination lock on his safe.