



MR. KROLL

by

Debbie Kuhn

I believe I was once a man.

That would explain the strange memories that live in my dreams. My special awareness, my ability to understand humans, comes from the demon spirit that resides in me now, though I am not certain if I was reincarnated for this purpose or changed into a feline – and a familiar – through witchcraft.

Only black cats like me have nine lives. It's a mystical ability. Truthfully, it would be more accurate to call them nine chances – but there is only one way for us to cheat death.

Oh, yes, I am far older than I should be.

My beloved mistress, Marantha, died too soon. She was born a witch, and if that made her evil, it was not by choice. She studied spells and curses, but also healed the sick.

What happened to her was my fault.

We were living a peaceful existence in a cottage just outside of Devington. In the summer of 1701, that English village was still growing, and it bustled with great activity on the weekends.

One Saturday afternoon, as I lay on a sunny windowsill sniffing the lilac-scented air, my mistress entered the tidy kitchen and addressed me with her musical voice.

“I need to sell some herbs and tonics today, Mr. Kroll.” She stroked the sleek fur along my back and smiled into my knowing green eyes. “Would you like to be my company?”

Always.

We could read each other’s thoughts whenever necessary.

The two of us started off on the mile long walk and took the dusty dirt road that led to Devington. My mistress swung her large, round basket to and fro, and sang a lilting tune in a language I did not understand. Her lustrous, long hair – as black as a moonless midnight – fanned out behind her in the warm breeze.

Marantha’s perfect features always attracted attention in the village. Men of all ages would pause in their daily activities to watch the young healer’s graceful, shapely figure as she carried out her errands. They openly admired her wavy tresses, her heavenly blue eyes, and the creamy fairness of her skin.

All the women stared at her with jealousy in their hearts.

Soon, I would give them a reason to be rid of her forever.

“Meet me here before sunset, Mr. Kroll,” my mistress said, as we reached the edge of town.

I went my own way, exploring the underbelly of the noisy village, scrounging for interesting food scraps and hunting rats that were almost tame. The mongrels running loose did not concern me. My presence terrified them.

It was the shiny crystals that caused my carelessness. They hung in a shop’s open window across the way, swinging gently in the wind, glinting in the sun. They mesmerized me.

I sprinted into the road and was caught up under a carriage wheel. It threw me clear, leaving me in agony. An ordinary cat would have died outright.

I forced myself to lie quietly for several minutes, gathering my strength and gaining control over the pain. No bones had been broken, but the injury to my organs was considerable. Finally, I struggled to a standing position and limped down a cluttered alley, using my powerful sense of smell to find what I needed.

I slowly climbed a stack of broken wooden crates to reach the ledge of an open window. Inside the stuffy room, an infant slept unattended on a cot, surrounded by rolled up blankets. I crept over to the bed and pulled myself up.

His damp gown smelled of sweat and harsh soap. I settled onto his wee little chest, but he did not awake. I sniffed his face. The crustiness on his lips was dried mother's milk. When I began licking it off, the baby opened his mouth, and I covered it with my own.

I sucked my breath in and pulled his life force out. The invisible hot stream flowed into me and I could feel my injuries begin to heal.

Then I heard the mother scream. She knocked me off her baby with a broom handle and chased me out the window.

I was well enough to flee – and I headed for home. It was after sundown. If I had not been interrupted the internal healing would have been complete. Eventually I would have to seek out another life force.

I entered the cottage through the kitchen window and found my mistress in the front room, reading a thick, leather-bound book by candlelight.

She looked up in relief when I sauntered in. “Mr. Kroll, I knew you'd be all right. Naughty, careless feline.”

I curled up in her lap and allowed myself to purr.

Less than an hour later they came, surrounding the cottage, holding their fiery torches high.

“Show yourself, witch! You AND your familiar!”

That was Hester the nosy seamstress. I recognized her deep, croaking voice.

Marantha opened the heavy wooden door and faced the angry mob. Most of them were women, with a few harried husbands standing in back.

“Friends, why are you here?”

“Oh, ain't we the innocent one now,” Hester sneered. “Your demon cat was caught stealing a babe's soul this very night.”

The women surrounded Marantha and held her prisoner while the men searched the cottage. They found the evidence they were looking for – a book of witchcraft.

Hester took the tome from her husband and held it high before the crowd. “The witch must burn! She must pay for her sins in hell!”

I slipped past the mob and climbed an oak, watching helplessly as they bound Marantha’s hands and feet and carried her into the cottage.

They set the house ablaze and then stayed to watch the spectacle. The women’s hard faces were lit with malicious glee.

I heard Marantha’s agonized, heartrending screams, felt her blinding fear, and I couldn’t bear to linger.

There was someplace I needed to go, something I needed to do.

Hester had a baby daughter.

THE END