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THE GOLDEN CHALICE



A Pilgrim's Chronicle



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PART ONE

EXODUS

*"Who'll be my light?
You'll be my light.
You'll be my Day and Night
You'll be mine tonight."*

CAT STEVENS



ON THE MORNING she discovered the basket floating in the reeds, Lucinda de Mewcat was foraging for duck eggs along the lakeshore, as was her habit in the months of spring. Its presence immediately aroused her feline curiosity. Not because it was unusual for flotsam to be washed ashore – it wasn't – it was unusual because the basket was so finely crafted that it surely belonged to a rich merchant, or even, dare she think it, royalty. She had rarely seen such exquisiteness.

Lucinda purred and twitched her whiskers, then said to herself, "I wonder what's inside."

As she edged toward the water to get a closer look, she heard a faint noise, like a cry, soft and frightened. At first she thought it was a duckling or gosling calling from a hidden nest, but when she heard it again she realized her mistake. The noise was coming from inside the basket.

Like most cats that had grown up on the shores of Lako di Katta, she was not averse to getting her paws wet, and within a swish of her bushy tail she was wading into the lake and dragging the basket onto dry land. It was much heavier than she'd anticipated and she struggled with the weight, though in her eagerness she soon had the mystifying object resting on the bank. Without resting, she peered inside.

"A *kattino*," she gasped.

Wrapped in a silky purple shawl, the tiny occupant stared back, shivering and mewling with fright, his eyes wide open and his ears pricked alert.

Unwrapping his damp shawl, Lucinda leaned forward and licked the boy's face to comfort him. His fur was a lighter shade of black than hers and his eyes were as blue as the lake on a hot summer day. He also had white paws, as if he was born to walk on clouds. Even a blind cat could see he was not from around these parts.

When he quieted, she scanned the lake and surrounding terrain for clues as to where he'd come from. To her right was the sleepy hamlet of Purr Meowni, the walled village dominated

by “The Claw”, a fortified tower thrusting skyward above the turrets and ramparts higher than the mightiest tree in the forest. But for an unknown reason, she was drawn westward beyond the lake and pine-covered hills to the distant mountains. A glint of sunlight off the snow-capped peaks caught her attention, causing the pelt over her entire body to spring erect. The mountains were cursed, everybody knew that; if she stared at them for too long, she would lose her mind.

“If you’ve come from Katatonia,” she whispered to the *kattino* in the basket, still staring at the jagged horizon, “it’s better that you’re here with us now.”

The scent of fresh fish released her from the Katatonic spell. A flotilla of twin-hulled *katamarans* bobbed on the choppy waters in the middle of the lake. Over the sides, fishercats were hauling in nets brimming with Lako di Katta’s exclusive delicacy, catfish, soon to be snapped up like hot mice from the fishmongers at the village market. Lucinda absently licked her lips and purred, when the kitten mewed again.

“Are you pining for your mama, little *kattino*?” she said, and caressed his cheek. “She must be worried about you too.”

She should really tell someone about him, she mused, but if word got out that he might be from Katatonia, even if it remained an unproven fact, she and her family would be forced to flee, along with the child. But she couldn’t just leave him, could she?

Not knowing what to do, she looked for inspiration across the fields toward the only village she had known, the one in which she fully expected to live out her nine lives. Built on the tip of a slim promontory, Purr Meowni was a virtual island (a moat had been dug from shore to shore across the promontory, linking the waters of the lake and completely severing the village from the land), which severely limited accessibility beyond its protective stonewalls. The only route of entry (if you didn’t happen to be a fishercat with access to a boat, which she certainly wasn’t) was over the drawbridge and through the main gates. Furthermore, guarding the gates were six sentries, tails erect, ears alert, whiskers vigilant. Others watched from the battlements atop the wall.

But who could she turn to? Who in all the crooked houses of Purr Meowni could she trust to keep this *kattino*’s presence a secret while she uncovered the truth about his origins? Father

Miasma? She shook her head: he was too unapproachable; and besides, even though he was the village pastor, she didn't exactly have the greatest faith in him. Then who else? The Mayor? Definitely not: of anyone in the village, he was the most suspicious of strangers.

Lucinda let loose a despairing sigh. "I'll just have to see what I can do myself," she said.

She took the loose fold of skin on the back of the *kattino's* neck between her teeth and lifted him out, then began rummaging inside the basket for anything that might tell her who he was. It was lined with luxurious fabric, the same colour and texture as his shawl; and as she'd hoped, tucked beneath the pillow was a scroll. It was just the kind of thing she was hoping to find. The emblem on the seal was not one she was familiar with, not even in the slightest, some kind of goblet or chalice, and for a brief instant she considered breaking it. Though what was the point when she couldn't even scribe her own name?

As she stared at the strange emblem, it occurred to her that she actually did know someone who could be trusted to keep her secret. That someone also understood the mysteries of written sounds, Papa Katto. He was the grandfather figure of the village, a sage, and magus, whose wisdom was renowned throughout the catdom, whose depth of compassion was like the waters of Lako di Katta, the bottom of which had not been ventured by any living cat. It was believed, and she had no cause to doubt it whatsoever, that he had direct communication with the Great Cat, the Creator of the universe.

He'll know how to read this scroll, she thought, taking the kitten in her mouth. *He'll know what to do with our kattino*.

As she hastened toward the main gates, something dropped from the shawl and rolled into the lake, submerging beneath the water and sinking into the mud. She ignored it, too intent on catching Papa Katto before he went on his regular morning stroll to the markets, and hurried on.



AS THE OLD tomcat scanned across the undulating field, he took pleasure in the soft, cool grass massaging the aches and pains

out of his arthritic paws. It was almost... what? Divine. That was the best word he could come up with. Had a dream ever made him feel so good, so totally at peace? Probably not, but he wasn't here to salve his tired old limbs or ease his troubled mind. He was waiting for someone, someone important.

Then she came. He watched her emerge from the mist, her long white fur swaying in the breeze that blew across the field, momentarily forgetting where he was. She was more radiant than the femme-cats of Purrsia whose beauty was renowned throughout the world; and her angelic smile reminded him of those long-ago days when he was virile with youth and every femme-cat he saw seemed as beautiful and desirable. He felt like a groom awaiting his bride-to-be at the altar, nervous and unsure. Approaching in an effortless glide, she handed him a gift wrapped in purple silk.

Curious, he smiled in return and said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said, her voice like a lute, delicate and melodious, unblemished by even the slightest trace of an accent. He flicked his ears, and she noticed his uneasiness. "Are you surprised that I can speak Catalan?" she asked.

Papa Katto shook his head. "It's not that. I know you can speak the language of mortal cats, but I wasn't prepared for just how beautiful your voice would sound." He kept marvelling at her perfect features, trying to figure the reason for her presence. "I know who you are," he said, finally. "I am dreaming and you are an angel. But, you are no ordinary angel, are you?"

She said nothing while he looked into her crystal blue eyes, knowing that he was falling in love with her, knowing that it was the most dangerous thing on earth he could do.

"Your name is Death and you have come to guide me into the afterlife," he said, with no fear at the thought of it. The mist began to roll in from behind.

"Death I am," she said, "but I have come only with a message."

His gaze fell to the purple gift. She told him to unwrap it, and beneath the layers of silk was a golden chalice as beautiful as the herald herself. "And what is it you've come to say," he asked, just as a gust of wind ruffled the angel's long fur.

"Something few have heard, and only the insane ask for," she whispered.

He understood at once: his day of death.

She rubbed her cheeks with his and told him the day that would be his last, then turned and floated into the mist.

“Goodbye, my angel,” he whispered.

For some while he stood in silence, humbled by her visit, wishing that he were allowed to go with her into the Beyond. He looked at the chalice, golden and radiant as a halo, wondering what it could mean. Then he too was shrouded in mist.

He woke to the morning clasping the collared bell nestling in the fur of his neck. Sunlight was shining through the bedroom window, surprising him. “You’ve slept late again,” he muttered, scratching an itch behind his tatty ear. “It’s becoming a bad habit.”

As he struggled out of bed and stretched the stiffness from his limbs, he reflected on the dream. He had felt young again, positively alive and energetic. A cruel joke to play on an old cat whose fur was patchy and frosted in the winter of his years, whose rickety frame was now in the habit of cramping during the cooler months, a cruel joke indeed. Just at that moment, he heard the slamming of the front door and a familiar voice calling out to him from the hallway. He yelled back, “I’m coming, Lucinda!” and shuffled downstairs to see what the problem was. The little collared bell jingled with every step.

“What is it, my dear?” he asked, and greeted her, rubbing her cheeks with his own. When she showed him the cause of her troubles, he drew a sharp breath and clasped the bell – the kitten was wrapped in the same purple silk as the chalice in his dream. “Or should I say,” he said, his mind whirring at the portentous omen, “why have you brought a *kattino* to my house?”

Lucinda was out of breath. She quickly told him how she found him floating in a basket amongst the reeds. “I didn’t know what else to do, so I brought him straight here,” she said.

Realising the immediacy of the situation, Papa Katto led her into the adjacent living room. In his youth, he had travelled to the four known catdoms outside Lako di Katta – Katarrh in the south, Purrsia in the east, Katafalque in the north, and, unbeknown to any in the village, Katatonia, the forbidden land, the land of perpetual sunset – a pilgrimage of which he seldom spoke, an epic tale that would take a cat-year and a day to narrate in its entirety. The living room was a testament to those

years, a chamber of nostalgia where each item detailed the chronology of that long ago journey. It had been his intention to recapture the timeless era before the Wisdom was lost, an era when the Creator of Things was held in higher esteem than the things of the Creator. Wooden and clay mementos, large and small, some brightly coloured, others faded with age, hung along the walls; and in the corner his smoking pipe, or *blookah*, made of ornamental glass and metal, blue and red and silver, sat like a cat in meditation, still and motionless.

Lucinda made herself comfortable on one of the cushions while he drew the drapes and then settled next to her, all the while keeping one eye on the *kattino*. It now occurred to him, catching the lingering aroma from the *blookah*, that as much as he had travelled, his favourite destination was right here, sitting on the Purrsian rugs and cushions with friends and reminiscing about the past, even discussing the future and the mysteries it still held, like this *kattino* that had appeared out of nowhere.

“Tell me from the beginning how you happened upon our little pilgrim,” he said. “Leave nothing amiss. Every detail is important.”

Lucinda retold her experience at the lake, and when she came to the part where she discovered the scroll beneath the pillow, she handed it to him. “What to you make of the markings on the seal? It looks like a chalice, the symbol of royalty.”

For the second time Papa Katto was reminded of his dream, struck once again by the omen. “You have the intuition of a magus,” he said, caressing the waxy markings. “It is indeed a chalice, and it is indeed the seal of a royal house.” He kept staring at it, sparks of recognition from a time long ago flickering in his mind. Could it really be true? Could this child have survived such a journey alone? If it were so, no less than a miracle had occurred.

“So I was right,” Lucinda said, “he *is* a prince.”

Papa Katto nodded. “Mi-o,” he said. “It’s also the markings of something far, far more powerful, of which I dare not speak aloud.”

He made a secret sign to protect the infant from evil and broke the seal, waiting awhile before he related what he’d read to Lucinda. The scroll’s author, the nursemaid who had assisted with the delivery, confirmed the *kattino*’s royal heritage, but

also revealed a tragedy. His mother, a young, love-struck princess, had died giving birth. It was a forbidden pregnancy and the child was born in secrecy. As to the whereabouts of the father, he wasn't even mentioned. The orphaned kitten was illegitimate and nameless, that was all the information the nursemaid thought necessary to divulge.

Upon hearing this, Lucinda met Papa Katto's gaze. No words needed to be exchanged; both knew that if this baby had died he would have wandered in Purgatory for eternity, lost and frightened with every nameless soul that had ever existed.

"We must name him," Lucinda said, matter-of-factly. "And we must do it now."

"Your concerns are justified," Papa Katto said, "but naming a child is the duty of its parents, not for strangers to take upon themselves. But if it is to be, then it is not to be done in haste, no matter how dire the situation. Let us consider what else the scroll has to say. It may give us a clue as how to proceed."

Papa Katto read the rest of the scroll to Lucinda, the severity of the nursemaid's grief evident in the carefully scribed and emotive sentences: "*And before I sip of the poison I have mixed with my own paws, a lethal concoction that will deliver me to throne of the Great Cat where I will surely be held in judgment, and before I set alight this shelter, and with it, in accordance to the rites of royal interment, cremate this lifeless body of my princess who I have failed, I render unto you, my worthy friend, this child of royal and noble house, which must forever remain secret, and with him his...*"

Papa Katto stopped reading. "The rest is blurred, stained by her tears. I cannot make out the words," he said, and flicked his ears. "Was there anything inside the basket besides the *kattino* and this scroll? The nursemaid seems to indicate that there was something else, something important. It might verify his royal heritage."

Lucinda shook her head. "Ne, I searched the basket well. There was nothing else, I swear."

Papa Katto stood and said, "Come, let's return to the lake. I'd like to see with my own eyes where you found him."

Besides, he mused, his cat intuition was telling him there was no time to lose. The boy was in danger.



THE SUN WAS nearing its zenith when Papa Katto and Lucinda stepped out of the village and over the drawbridge that spanned the moat. The guards paid them scanty heed, as did the black rat that scuttled into the shadows of the fortress walls. The nameless *kattino*, wrapped in his royal silks and carried in Lucinda's mouth, slept peacefully, the focus of many quizzical glances and frowns from those returning from the forest and the fields for their midday catnap.

"Another child so soon Lucinda?" a farmer-cat asked.

Papa Katto could not help but notice his accusatory stare, for it was common knowledge that her fourth child had been born several months ago, just after the unfortunate death of her husband.

"He has your whiskers," another farmer-cat said in the fields, a cynical jibe at the *kattino*'s obvious differences, his white paws and crystal blue eyes.

"Do not be tempted to answer and speak of what you know," Papa Katto mumbled out of the corner of his mouth as the farmer-cat passed. "Not until we have solved this mystery and we are sure his safety is guaranteed."

Soon thereafter, they arrived at the basket, unmoved since Lucinda had dragged it onto the bank from the water. Papa Katto immediately set to examining every inch of it, inside and out.

"It is as you say," he said, after several minutes. "There is naught else to find in here, just fine craftsmanship and purple silk."

He flicked his ears and scanned the banks in search of clues. At the water's edge he stopped, peering in amongst the reeds and inquiring as to where Lucinda had first spied the basket. Lucinda joined the old cat and laid the baby at her feet, pointing to a spot just ahead.

"Over there. Near the broken reeds," she said.

Several reeds were bent in half, their heads now submerged beneath the water, as if searching for something that had sunk

to the muddy bottom. Alas, like the basket, there was no sign of anything else. At that moment, a terrifying howl echoed across the lake from the far shore, a long and menacing warning that made his heart miss a beat.

"A... a wolf," Lucinda whispered, absently drawing nearer to Papa Katto.

Papa Katto nodded, staring across the lake at the low lying hills and the distant mountains. "Mi-o, a *lumo*. And it howls in the middle of the day. It is another omen."

They waited for what seemed an eternity to hear if it would howl again. "It's gone," Lucinda said, sighing with relief, "but I'd feel safer behind the walls of The Claw. I feel too vulnerable out here."

"I agree," Papa Katto said, and nodded to the *kattino*. "But there's something we must do first."

He instructed Lucinda to tuck the baby inside the basket, just as she had found him this morning. They then sat, gently placing a paw on his tiny brow. Papa Katto told Lucinda to close her eyes and tell him the first image that she saw.

She answered almost immediately: "A chalice."

The omens were extraordinarily powerful today, Papa Katto thought, for it was also the first impression he had seen with his inner eye, a golden goblet that radiated with the Light of Life, as beautiful as the Angel of Death.

"Mi-o, it is a royal emblem," he said, after a moment, "an emblem of one born of royal blood. It has led us to his name – Giacomo – a name in the old language, the language of the ancient Masters before the Wisdom was lost. It means: He who would be king."

He paused, sensing Lucinda peeking across the lake beneath half-open eyelids.

"But he is lost and in need of shelter," he continued. "He is without family, an orphan that has been gifted to our hamlet for reasons we do not yet understand. He has journeyed far from his native soil, a traveller for whom there will be no rest until he has returned to his homeland and reunited with his kin, a pilgrim for whom life shall be incomplete until he has searched and found his Golden Chalice. I now give you his name."

They opened their eyes and gazed at the baby.

"Giacomo Pellegrino. The Pilgrim King."



WITH THE WOLF still firmly on their minds, they hastened back to Papa Katto's house to consider the options of what to do next. Inside, Papa Katto made his wish known: Lucinda should raise the child with her family. She, after all, had experience as a parent; and he, being a bachelor, had none. "It's only logical," he said.

Lucinda, having made herself comfortable on a cushion in the living room, thought otherwise. She already had four children, and without a husband she simply couldn't afford another mouth to feed. "I wish I could," she told Papa Katto, "Giacomo already feels like one of my own. But it just isn't possible. I'm sorry."

Curled on a cushion next to her, the little one swished his tail and smiled at Papa Katto.

"Is that not a favourable sign?" Lucinda said. "Perhaps it's the will of the Great Cat that you should be his father."

"You are clever to use logic for which you know I cannot refute," Papa Katto said, recalling the golden chalice in his dream. "And if it really is the will of the Great One, who am I to refuse?"

Finally, and a little reluctantly, Papa Katto agreed that there was no other option than to adopt the boy himself, though he thought it foolish somebody his age should bring up a child. The news spread like rumours of free fish at the market, and at first the cats of the village were incredulous. Gossip was rife.

"How is it possible that Papa Katto is now a father?" they asked one another in the taverns and markets and fields. "He has no wife, and he is surely too old to have a mistress."

Even the fishercats, never ones to take much stock in the business of others, were heard to gossip as they mended their nets and sails in the afternoon heat. The new child was a mystery nobody could ignore. "I heard Lucinda de Mewcat sold her son to Papa Katto for one hundred Crowns," said a fishercat to his mate on the wharf. "It's business more fishy than our own, I tell you."

Papa Katto wasn't deaf to what was being said behind his back. Most allegations bordered on the ludicrous, to say the least. He was accused of many things, though never to his face, of buying children on the black market, of fathering a bastard son with Lucinda de Mewcat, of covering up the murder of the child's parents, and, most bizarrely of all, of cat-nabbing an apprentice to train him in the secret ways of an ancient cult.

Despite the slander, he behaved as if a cat had hooked its claws into his tongue and wouldn't let go. To defend himself against these baseless allegations would only give his accusers a degree of credibility they didn't deserve. To his disappointment, Lucinda didn't escape the gossipmongers either. She was called unfaithful harlot and immoral adulteress, sometimes in front of her own children; and when her dignity wasn't under attack, she was blatantly ignored, most often at the market.

"It's getting so bad even the fishmonger won't serve me," she said to Papa Katto one evening as they wandered along the cobblestone streets toward the village centre. They had just turned off the main thoroughfare, *Mia Milko*, ("The Milky Way," in Catalan) and onto a side lane. "I can hear them talking about me when I walk past. They whisper like they were at a funeral, and they avoid me like a rat with the plague. They're saying terrible things about you, too."

"And they will so long as Giacomo remains a mystery to them and they have nothing else to talk about," Papa Katto said. They now exited onto a street lined with crooked three- and four-story wooden houses that led to the market square, *Mialla d'Angelo*. Two elderly femme-cats saw them coming, glared, then hurried across to the other side, whispering in each other's ears. Papa Katto just smiled. "Give them time. They will soon run out of things to say, or they'll seek out someone else to gossip about."

His words proved prophetic. Within a cat-month, the villagers' curiosity began to get the better of their initial animosity, especially the femme-cats. Many arrived with knitted booties and tail warmers for the new toddler. Usually they came in groups of three or four, or with their husbands, as if lacking the courage to visit by themselves, though they always had an excuse to stay and chat.

"He's so cute," they would say, huddling around his crib. (Several guards, whose tongues had been paid to remain silent, had brought the basket from the lake in the middle of the night and set it on a stand in the living room). They would even go so far as to say to Papa Katto, "He has your ears, don't you know?" At which they would look over their tails at the elderly cat, waiting for his reply.

Papa Katto would nod, wise to their pretence, and give his standard reply: "That's because he's my great-great-nephew, my brother's eldest son's grandson."

"So he's a relative, is he?" they would then say, and stare at one another in turn as if to say, *I told you so*.

Papa Katto would hold back his smile, careful not to give the game away. He knew the pandemonium this tiny piece of falsehood would stir. There would be much discussion and counter discussion later at the market, or over a bowl of hot milk in the local milkhouse. Questions would be raised, questions they'd never dare to pose to him directly, questions to which they'd find no answers. What happened to the child's parents? From which part of the catdom did he stem? The discussion would rage for weeks and weeks, of that he was sure.

Nevertheless, and for this small mercy he was infinitely grateful, the roots of Giacomo's acceptance into the community had begun to take hold.



– End Of Sample Chapters –

A quick word from the author:

The Golden Chalice is the second book in The Pilgrim Chronicles. If all goes according to plan, I envisage it being available toward the end of 2007. I hope that's not too long to wait to find out what happens to Giacomo (let's just say, the Angel of Death returns and circumstances force him to travel to the mountains of Katatonia – a journey fraught with peril). Until then, I recommend reading *Samantha Honeycomb*, if you haven't already.

Take care and best wishes.
Scott Zarcinas