

The Gate of the Kittens

by Wilanne Schneider Belden

Feathers was the only kitten of Silk's last litter who did not yet have a permanent home when the man came to obtain a mouser.

"Isn't she small?" he inquired:

"She's a fearsome huntress," Anja informed him. "We don't -think she'll ever be large. But are you interested in size or in effectiveness?"

The man smiled. "I need a mouser-and a ratter." "Rats don't come full-grown," Anja responded.

The man nodded.

"You couldn't want a better," Anja said. She padded a carrying cage with another blanket. "Just don't make her an outdoor cat the foxes'll get her. A safe way indoors, her rug by the fireside in winter, a cool place in summer, water, and care if she needs it."

"Well, I'll take her if she'll come."

Time I had a home of my own, Feathers thought. But she was far too small to become a cat who lived alone. She'd refused other homes where they wanted a baby-sitter, lap cat, and dependent animal. But this man wanted a working cat, and Feathers accepted.

"Think to me every morning," Silk advised her daughter. "Or I shall worry." Feathers knew her small size concerned her mother. She agreed.

Feathers set about eliminating the small rodent population of the long-untenanted holding her humans were putting back into some sort of order. The man who had come for her saw that she was well cared for-although she understood clearly that she was not *his* cat. All in and on the property belonged (human term) to a man called the Master. Feathers was not entirely sure he knew of her existence. She would have taught him the Proper Order of Things with her teeth and claws-had he not been one who made her ears lie back when he entered a room. Cats know about Power, its creatures and its uses. Even young and inexperienced cats are instinctively aware of Good and Evil. Feathers knew that what went on in the part of the establishment set aside for his exclusive use was Bad, Wrong, Evil. She felt things that made her long fur stand on end and her mouth open in a silent hiss. Her solution was to avoid all contact with him.

When her first breeding season occurred, she should have been closed indoors, to take no chances that she would conceive so young. But no one thought another cat was within miles, and few paid sufficient attention even to know of her condition.

Stranger and stranger were the behaviors of the Master. Lights of distorted colors accompanied even more disgusting odors and quite indescribably hideous sounds. The servants became silent, frightened of their own shadows, and drank more than too much. They went on long journeys carrying peculiar bundles. People of dubious aspect and, Feathers suspected, even more doubtful character came to the holding in the darkest hours and left well before dawn. The Master would be gone for days, even weeks, then return, usually furious, and cause upset and perturbation. Awaiting kittens, Feathers welcomed his presence even less than usual.

She knew him and his behaviors to be Evil, but she could not contain her raging curiosity. When she thought to Silk, her mother was horrified. Disturbed both by this reaction and her own uncharacteristic mania, Feathers agreed that she would seek to discover what the Master did only if she could locate a way to see without being seen, to find out without being found out. Conscientious searching located no way into his private workroom. Every mousehole and ratway was blocked with material that made her ill when she smelled it. Still, she watched.

While she observed the only door one night, her dark fur with its shadow stripes and spots making her utterly unnoticeable, a man who came and went (always at night, always surreptitiously, always on a horse with muffled hooves) brought three other men with him to the steading. He led them to the door of the workroom. When they entered, so did Feathers., They did not notice.

"You have no doubts that you have located the Gate," the tallest man said.

The Master nodded. "And established the requirements to bring to it that we seek. It has but to be tested."

The three men stared at one another.

"Tested? How can you test that-something-will come through it?"

"By sending something the other way."

The men moved uneasily. The tall one rested his hand on his sword hilt.

"When?" the fattest one asked:

"Tomorrow is the night of the Cat," the master replied.

"Why the cat?"

"What do we seek to have enter through the Gate?" the Master asked-as if only the abysmally stupid would have to be reminded.

"The Puma," the little man said. Softly.

The men nodded.

"And the fee to pass the Gate?"

"The Puma will bring with him one we do not need."

"You're sure it will be he who . . . pays?"

The Master's brows almost met. "You doubt me?"

The men assured him they did not doubt.

Feathers wanted to yowl, to hiss and scratch. She sat glued to the floor instead, filled with a combination of terror and disgust. She had never heard of Gates, knew nothing of what the men spoke, and had no idea what a Puma was. But paying the fee she understood. They planned to kill.

Why should it matter? She cared little for people.

Because to kill to eat or to protect was in the natural order of life. To kill to do a wrong was not.

A hand came down, grabbed her by the back of the neck, and dropped her into a lidded basket. A voice chuckled. "A good choice, I think, to test the Gate. A small cat in exchange for a Puma."

"Mother!" Feathers screamed. She was, after all, not quite nine months old, and she was terribly frightened.

They all laughed, and if Feathers had not been a cat, she would have fainted from dread.

The next night she saw nothing, heard things that, had she not been a cat, would have driven her mad, and, at the last, was grabbed by those bloodless, bony, cruel fingers and pushed *through* something. She fell into an icy rain puddle. Inside her, one of her babies died.

Librarians, in general, are pretty nice people. What faults and failings they have as individuals rarely cause them to run down old ladies in crosswalks or kick puppies. Consequently, when Judith Justin, MLS, in charge of the Bookmobile, made out the form of a cat half-crawling across the rainy road, she applied the brakes with caution-and prayer. As she had been driving twenty miles caution-and hour for over twenty miles, crouching forward on the seat and peering anxiously through the rain-drenched windows, the opportunity to rest was sufficient inducement to overcome her dread of attempting to bring the heavy vehicle to a safe stop.

Several members of the staff accused her of minor witchcraft if sorcery could have any effect on machinery or other examples of cold iron. They insisted that the Bookmobile liked her. It did what she asked it to, started when she turned the key, rocked out of sandtraps with alacrity, and steered between obstacles , without even scratching the top coat of paint. It invariably had its flat tires, broken fuel lines, and burned out light bulbs for other Bookmobile drivers. Never for Judith. So the brakes, wet as they were, took hold smoothly and effectively, the rear half of the bus followed the front half instead of skidding into the middle of the street, and the Bookmobile sat waiting patiently for the cat to cross.

Judith turned on the interior lights and opened the front door. An oblong of light wavered into the rainy afternoon-dark, almost, as night.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," Judith called. She never insulted her own cats with the phrase, but cats somehow knew that people who called, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," offered food and shelter.

The most woebegone wail ever to issue from feline throat responded. Judith's heart turned over. She shielded her face against the cold windshield and squinted out. Yes, the cat had turned and scrunched under the bus.

Judith stood at the top of the steps and called again. The cat answered, but it did not enter.

Maybe it can't get up the first step, she thought. Not a big step for a healthy cat, but this one looked almost as if a car had hit it.

Judith pulled on her poncho, scrunched it around her legs as she stooped, and squatted on the bottom step.

"Kitty?"

"Mrow." The cat was right below the steps.

"C'mon," Judith said encouragingly. "I'll help you. I promise I don't kick cats."

A scraggly head on a long, scrawny neck, both sapping and dripping, poked out from beneath the step.

"Farther," Judith encouraged. "I don't want to pick you up like a kitten. You're too big a cat for that to be good for you."

The cat peered up, blinking. It inched out until Judith could get her hands around its body behind the front legs. She reached down, "This could hurt," she warned the cat, not knowing whether the drenched animal was really injured or not. "I'm only trying to help. Don't scratch."

She might have been picking up a fur stole that had been soaking in ice water for a week. Judith hissed. "Poor thing," she murmured. As she slid a hand down to support the back half of the cat's body, she realized that, hurt or not, the cat was certainly pregnant. Very pregnant.

"This is no weather to have kittens," Judith protested. "Let's see if I can at least get you warm and dry."

She carried odd things in the librarian's closet: her sleeping bag and knapsack, for example, because on two of her routes she stayed overnight. The county paid twenty dollars toward lodging, but Judith could use that twenty dollars. She didn't remember removing her swimming suit and towels, either. Those, she carried all summer. Camps had pools, and several camps were regular Bookmobile stops. *Yup.*

Judith was worried about the cat. She didn't seem to be damaged, but the woman was no veterinarian, and she couldn't be sure. By the time the animal was as dry as Judith could rub her and curled up on the beach towel next to the heater vent, she was making a sound Judith interpreted as a rusty purr.

Better, anyway, she thought. She ducked out from under the dash and sat back. *Odd.* That marvelous, dark feathery fur somehow masked the animalness of the cat-turned it into a blob of nothing in the semidarkness. Pretty fur, really, black and a dozen shades of gray, with no distinct pattern. She petted the cat's head. It purred again.

Caring for the cat had restored the blood supply to several places Judith had tensed it out of, relaxed her amazingly, and made her feel a little less inadequate to the task of getting the Bookmobile down the mountain in the dark. Only eight more winding, precipitous miles to the intersection with the state route, another twenty-five across the

flat, then the last long drive on the freeway into town. She'd called to say she was going to try to beat the snow so the Bookmobile wouldn't get stuck on the mountaintop for who knew how long. The dispatcher was appreciative, but she'd insisted that Judith call from the filling station at the intersection, then again from the motel at the freeway. According to the weather report, the valley floor should be clear. But if all did not go well, she wasn't to try to come into town tonight.

All did not go well. The rain became sleet. The temperature outside dropped too rapidly-the snowline might be as far down the mountain as the motel. The roadway, not the best at any time, became actively dangerous. If she hadn't been more scared to try to stop-this stretch hadn't a single pullout big enough for the bus-than she was to drive, Judith would have given up. But damned fools acted as if they had nine lives and none of them could be lost to the conditions tonight. She was passed by three vehicles-one coming, two going-a four-wheel drive affair, a sports car, and a light truck. The latter two went swishing around the bus at twice the speed Judith considered safe. The driver of the RV seemed to believe himself late for his own wake, but he was also, obviously a professional driver. Moves Judith considered suicidal proved to be only highly dangerous. She shook her head. "Well," she told the cat, "I guess if they can, I can." The filling station was already closed, and Judith didn't blame the high school kid who pumped gas on weekends for going home a little early. She knew where the attendant hid the restroom keys, thank heavens, but the public phone was almost unprotected. Judith was wet to the waist by the time she could return to the warm Bookmobile. The cat indicated it wanted to go out, so Judith put it under her poncho and took it to the least windy side of the building. "Hurry up," she said, shivering. The cat hurried.

"Part of my funk is hunger," she told the cat. "I'll bet you're hungry, too." The cat meowed.

"Well, there should be something."

She changed into her camping clothes and dug into the emergency drawer. In addition to flashlights and adhesive bandages and similar other assistances for the minor emergencies a Bookmobile librarian might be expected to meet, she'd seen, well, she thought she'd seen ... *Hmm. Yes. Candy bar. Old, but not too old.* Unfortunately, cats didn't eat chocolate. What else? *Ah-ha!* Trust Cal's hollow leg. A tightly-lidded tin box of English biscuits that rattled loudly. Probably canned meat, as Cal was a diabetic and couldn't eat sweets. So it was. The good kind, without too much salt. Judith pulled the top off and let the cat lick its dinner off her fingers.

She didn't want to go on, but she'd waited as long as she dared.

"We're stopping at the motel," she told the cat. *Positive thinking,* she added to herself. The likelihood that they'd get as far as the motel seemed less and less probable every

second. But experience in these mountains warned Judith that the snowline would be well below the elevation of the station. No one manned the place on Sunday night, and the amount of food in Cal's can wouldn't keep them for another couple of days. She probably wouldn't starve before somebody showed up, but she wasn't sure the cat could make it. Only later would someone point out to her the oddity of failing to call the sheriff for help and, even odder, of placing the importance of feeding the stray cat before that of quite possibly losing her own life.

Unwillingness to commit herself and the bus to the dubious mercies of the weather kept her from starting. She wondered if she should get out in the rain again and check to be sure the chains were there, just in case she needed them. But where in the world *would* they be if they weren't in their stow space? Putting on chains would be no easy task, but she'd had to master it to get the job, so she could, if she had to.

She examined what she could see of the roadway, peering into the darkness intently. Incredulous, she watched headlights become attached to a bus even larger than hers, rather like a transcontinental Greyhound. It rumbled past at a speed that made her wonder why it was not flying. Certainly it had worked up adequate speed to take off.

Well, if they can, I guess I can, she informed herself. *On we go.* She shoved her hands into her fur-lined gloves and turned the key.

The bus purred into life. They inched onto the road.

This part of the trip really is the easiest, she tried to reassure herself. *Straight, and the wind isn't strong enough to be a problem.* Often, high winds whipped across the flatlands, winds so strong that the county office canceled the Bookmobile visits. But the state road was well maintained, most of it was three lanes wide and some of it four, and at this end of the valley one could make out the lights of isolated homes. To Judith's considerable surprise, the radio condescended to work, due, doubtless, to an unusual inversion layer that reflected the signal into the valley. Judith grinned, demanded Bach-and got it. She snorted. Things seemed to be going better.

Then the snow began.

In five minutes she knew it was chains now or give up. She got them all on in less than, an hour, and by that time almost was unable to drive out of the hollow the presence of the bus had made in the swiftly piled snowbank. But the chains were new and sharp, and they dug in. She drove down a whirling white tunnel beyond which was only darkness, solid, like ebony or granite. She dared not go on. She dared not stop. She shifted into a lower gear and continued. For as long as the bus would move, she'd drive. Every quarter mile brought them closer to the freeway, to the motel and people and

safety. Every turn of the wheels made one step she need not take in the cold and snow when the storm was over, and she had to move or die.

The man had a name, and most people knew what it was, but he was never referred or spoken to as anything but General. He deserved it. He made the essential breakthrough in the scientific aspect himself, and he convinced men who could take that information and turn it into a completed system that they could and must do so. Whatever they needed he earned or developed or bought or stole-ahead of time.

When it was done, he named it the Puma. The name seemed particularly appropriate. The puma was the big cat of the American west, the most deadly carnivore that hunted alone. It moved with stealth, erupted into powerful movement, and destroyed with strength and speed. Yet a sleeping puma was harmless and could rarely be found, so camouflaging was its color, so clever were its habits of concealment. All of these traits were to be found in the Puma. It was deadly, and it was powerful, but it was nowhere near the size of previous-objects-of its kind. It and its transport and launching systems were approximately the size of a large bus which, as a sensible precaution, the exterior was designed to resemble. Just as the puma slept upwind of possible pursuers and could not be located by scent, the Puma disseminated no telltale radiation. And after it had done its work, its target area would be free of animal life, but clean. Troops could go in at once. That was the General's personal contribution.

"Tests start tomorrow," the General said.

Someone commented that the weather was not ideal.

The General indicated that if a puma was hungry, the weather didn't matter a damn. If the Puma couldn't be transported and launched in a hurricane, it had better be redesigned. Did anyone need to do his job over again, and if so, why hadn't he spoken up before this?

Nobody mentioned blizzard because nobody thought of blizzard.

"It pounces on Sunday," the General said. "I've arranged for the test grounds to be empty. Except for us. Any indications that we've been breached?"

There hadn't better be, so there weren't.

Nobody asked if it wouldn't be better to use a dummy warhead. Half the point of the test was to see what the real one would do.

The bus started Friday morning. On orders, the driver took it easy, crossing the desert at fifty-five, climbing the mountains at forty, slowing down in the tricky spots. They were to spend tonight at the summit in the lodge, then start down tomorrow to the flats. Two-thirds of the way to the highway the land conformation made radio or other wave-born communication erratic and chancy at best. A roughly circular area some ten miles in diameter held not a single human habitation. Unusual autumn rains had filled an arm of the sometimes-lake so they could park the bus on the shoreline and take no chances of setting a major fire and getting caught when they unleashed the Puma. Then only a few more miles to the freeway and on to the coast.

Except that the obvious is always the enemy. They got a flat tire and the driver became stubborn. No way was he going to drive that bus without a good spare. Unhitch the four-wheel RV off the back, take the tire to the station and get it patched, return and stow it. The schedule would have to be put back one day. The General was not pleased but, to everyone's relief, he was not unduly upset.

And that's what they did.

Then the rain began, and it started to look and smell like snow. They had to get the bus out of the mountains, down to the flat, and they might not be able to for a week or so if that snow...

They started about four. Driving conditions were very, very bad. Snow hit them halfway across the flats. In the whiteout, the driver became totally disoriented. By the time they found themselves trying to go back up into the mountains, it was too late to do anything but wait it out.

The General was not pleased.

He should have been.

Each morning, Silk became more concerned for Feather's safety. The little one became more and more determined to solve the mystery of the man she would never call Master. Silk could not shake her feeling of impending doom and began acting strangely. Someone suggested that a Wise Woman or a veterinary Healer might find out what troubled their usually self-possessed mother cat. Not until she leaped into wakefulness one night yowling like a scalded ice-demon and stalked about the house growling, her tail switching, her eyes blazing, did anyone take the suggestion seriously. Then Anja requested the presence of a member of the race of sentient beings who coexisted in their land (although separately, for the most part), and who could speak with both animals and humans.

The word passed. A woman of those people appeared at the steading. Silk met her. What she told Anja sent the fastest rider on the best horse to another place-and the word flew.

A man who knew of Gates, and what might come through them, and the horror caused by Alizon while their Gate was open, took horse and rode day and night. Others joined him.

They were too late. The Gate was open, the Call sent, and death was the payment for passage. They established a defense perimeter outside that of the entities who had opened the Gate, and waited.

Silk stalked and growled. She continued yowling. Her fur sparked blue stars when she swished her tail.

Beyond the standing stones-or beyond the opening framed by the three stones-was a sunlit day.

Judith was no longer young, and she had never been pretty. She was far too bright and independent for a girl of her generation. Loneliness was a curse she did not suffer as a child-not with eleven others in the family, and she in the middle. As a young woman, getting out, away, earning college money, then working her way through in the company of her best friends, those in books, had taken every moment. When the time to be lonely arrived, she had learned how to handle it.

Fantasy was so much more satisfactory a place to live than reality that Judith spent much of her life there. Doing so was both reasoned and intentional. She had a clear, biting sense of what was and what was not. She simply preferred what was not. Life in books and beyond them, in places where only her imagination created worlds-sufficed. Satisfy, it did not, but reality offered so much less that Judith had long since relegated living in it to such times as she was with others. She wished she could reject it completely.

As she tried, unsuccessfully, to reject the sunlit world beyond the stones.

The cat would not let her. She crawled from under the dashboard screaming in demand to be allowed out of the door. Shocked, Judith watched the contractions of labor begin in her sides. The cat clawed the door and screamed again.

"No, no," Judith exclaimed. She reached for the animal, to be met with teeth and claws and infuriated noises. The cat ripped and tore at the rubber edges of the doors, squirming to get her head between the flanges. She would kill herself-or her babies.

"All right, all right," Judith yelled at her. "I'll take you out. Wait a minute."

She shoved her arms first into her down jacket, then into the knapsack straps. The cat continued to scream. Judith picked up the beach towel, threw it over the cat, and stuffed cat and towel into the backpack. The cat became suddenly silent.

Judith almost stopped. "No, I said I would," she whispered. *This time I have really flipped, she thought. Keeping a promise to a cat, yet?*

She could not take her eyes off the brilliant rectangle of sunshine, the green, grassy hills, the hint of a stream, the likelihood of wildflowers, the ... She grabbed the lever and opened the door. The balky back door chose this time to open, too. Before she could stop herself, she jumped down into the snow and stamped to the front of the bus. She could smell spring! She could feel warm wind on her face!

Almost, she waded forward to pass through the open ... gate? Space?

"No," she said aloud. To do that was foolish. She had no way of knowing what really was ... *there*. If anything. The Bookmobile had brought them this far; it could take them through. Remaining inside it was the only protection she had.

She knew the lintel stone to be more than a foot above the top of the bus, the side stones of the ... entryway ... just far enough apart to let it through-if she folded the rearview mirror back.

As she got ready, she could feel the cat inside the knapsack. The kittens must be coming. A pained wowl made her wonder if the first one was here. She could not stop.

When she climbed back into the driver's seat, she did not close the door, she just gripped the wheel until her knuckles went white, then pried her right hand free so she could turn the ignition key. The bus responded. It was perfectly lined up, as if things were planned-as things were in fantasy. Forward in the lowest gear.

The front bumper contacted something invisible. It gave slowly, as if it was heavy but movable. The bus dug its chains in and shoved. Judith held her breath. The cat squalled again.

They rolled almost through, suddenly, as if the bus was a cork coming out of a bottle ... and stopped.

The back doors had never fit properly. They always stuck out farther than the front ones. The bus was wedged by the strong, steel doors.

Judith shifted into neutral. She stepped down onto grass. Everything was fuzzy, half-there. She could see and not see that the bus must have pushed aside a great block of stone. On the other side of the stone was something concealed by a putrid red-orange flare. She looked away quickly. Even half-seen, it made her ill. She blinked and looked up, beyond. Whatever was there, and she could but dimly perceive this, also, was cloaked in living blue-green light. It confused her completely.

She felt fury from the evil red entity. She was not the one they expected. She had taken that one's place, and all their time and effort had gone for naught. They were determined to clear the Gate and try again. She must move the bus immediately. Why this sensible demand seemed evil she did not know, but she had no doubt whatever.

From the beneficent beings lapped in their cool loveliness, she felt . . . rejection? No, they did not reject her, they warned her. She must not remove the blockage in the gate. What the red entities sought to replace it with was Wrong. She must return or die, but she must not return!

The cat squirmed and cried. Judith swung the knapsack off and set it on the sunny earth in front of the bus. She opened it and turned back the towel. The cat lay on her side panting. Two small dark lumps lay where she had pushed them. Judith touched each gently. Dead kittens. Poor little things. She hoped this next one would live. Maybe it would if she blew into its nostrils or massaged it to get its heart beating. Her whole world became too small to hold the impossibilities outside the knapsack. There, in the cat giving birth, was reality.

The kitten slid out smoothly. The cat panted a moment, then sat up and checked the small, damp baby . She opened her mouth and made an almost inaudible sound. Judith found herself crying. This one was dead, too. There could be more. She'd better take the dead ones away now, before the new mother could worry about them.

She reached in. The cat had chewed off the cords, licked away the cawls, and the lifeless infants were still warm and soft. Judith continued to cry. She wasn't sure why, because she knew it was better for em to die at birth than to have to be put to sleep or to go homeless. But they were so perfect and so innocent. She held them in her cupped palms and cried.

She didn't want to set them on the bare, scraped dirt while she went back in for something with which to dig. So, without thinking, she put them on the great block of stone.

The sound, the sensation of being drowned in bloodred flame, the incredible shock of the reaction to that simple move took her senses. When she regained consciousness, she was lying on soft grass and the cat was meowing in her ear. Judith sat up. The surface

of the stone had been burned black-except for three smallkitten shaped white spots. The entity concealed by the red-orange light was gone. No longer fuzzy, whatever she looked at seemed too sharp-edged, too real.

The cat meowed.

"Oh, the knapsack tipped over." Judith righted it. The cat leaped in and pawed at the towel. Judith removed it carefully, supporting it as fully as she could. She set it down and parted the folds. Two small black and gray kittens mewled and wriggled. The cat pushed between Judith's hands and settled herself by her babies. She purred.

Someone chuckled softly.

Judith, her mouth open in shock, turned her head to look up so quickly that she became dizzy again. She decided she was hearing things and lay down.

Someone said something her ears heard as gibberish but her mind understood as, "It's too soon. Give her more time. Come away for now."

Nothing was real, and she was absolutely sure she was dead. This was neither heaven nor hell, though it seemed to have attributes of both, but it was outside the world of what was and what was not. Judith knew no other ways of going outside, beyond, than those of conscious fantasy, madness, or death. She had not made up any of this, if she was mad she could do nothing about it, but if she was dead, she found she didn't mind. She sat up very slowly this time. The dizziness seemed to have passed.

Even more slowly, she got to her feet. The lovely spring world she had seen through the opening was all around her. Holding onto the Bookmobile, she began circling it to the right. The vehicle just stopped-ceased to exist-not as if cut, she could not see into the interior-at the rear edge of the blocked opening from there to here. She continued on around the stones and along the side of the bus to the open door. She entered and walked to the rear seat under the window. Snow whirled around the back of the bus; cold penetrated through the windows.

Shaking her head, Judith returned to the driver's seat and stared through the windshield. A blob of black was racing toward them across the sunny grass. It yowled, and the cat, her cat, Judith almost thought, responded. Judith was quite beyond astonishment, so when the blob became a large black cat she merely continued to watch. The two cats greeted each other with an enthusiastic abandon that culminated in the big one giving the small one a thorough bath. New mama or not, her mama wanted to show how glad she was to see her offspring. Judith cupped her chin in her palms and launed forward on her elbows to watch. She felt wonderful; relieved and happy and wanted and safe and loved.

She felt even better ten minutes later. The big black cat bounded over the rectangular stone as if she would not have used it for a litter box. Turning, she made a second leap that landed her at Judith's side. Purring so loudly that the windows rattled, the cat butted the top of her head into Judith's middle.

That's love, Judith thought, stunned. Not rub-the-side-of-the-jaw-along what you're claiming, but the highest compliment a cat can pay. She had wondered if she should be a little afraid. The older cat wasn't quite the size of an ocelot, more long-tailed bobcat size, and gave the general impression of being a domesticated animal. But it was no tame tabby. Moving slowly, she brought her hands over and rubbed the top of the cat's head. It purred even louder.

"Silk!" Judith exclaimed. The cat's fur was so exquisite to the touch that she could think of no other comparison.

The cat pulled back, looked at her, and nodded.

"Your *name* is Silk?" Judith ventured. The cat nodded again.

"Judith Justin," she murmured. Silk licked her hand once.

If she was going to have a conversation with a cat, she must find a topic of interest to both of them.

"Have you seen the babies?"

Silk was out of the Bookmobile so rapidly one might have thought her to disappear. Together, Judith and Silk admired Feather's babies.

This time when somebody chuckled, Judith looked up, smiling. The man was big and bearded and about her age, and he was dressed as nobody dressed where she came from, nor had for several hundred years, and he smelled distinctly of horse and sweat, but he reached out to help her to her feet, shook her hand in a perfectly normal manner, and greeted her in English.

"The name's Tregarth," he said. "Call me Symon. It's a well-known name here, though I'm by no means the first to wear it."

"Judith Justin," Judy replied.

"Librarian," Simon added. "That is a Bookmobile, isn't it?"

Judith nodded, nonplussed.

The man shook his head slowly. "What a surprise that must have been," he said softly, "when they were expecting the Puma."

"The Puma?" Judith asked.

"Suppose you turn off the engine and join us over there." The man waved toward a low hill that seemed to have sprouted several people. "We wanted to wait until you'd sorted yourself out. But food and drink are in order now, aren't they?" He grinned. "And explanations-at least as many as we can give."

Judith nodded, swallowed, and got out, "Very much so. Do you have anything a cat can eat?"

He chuckled again. "Several things," he said.

After all the explanations that could be made had been made, and Silk and the people had returned to their domiciles, after the blizzard had blown itself out, and Judith had removed the screws and hinges from the rear door of the bus so that it could be moved, Judith sat on the bus steps with Feathers and the kittens on her lap. Either the grass or the seats in the Bookmobile would have been more comfortable, but she felt in transition, neither here nor there, neither real nor not-real. She grinned. "Halfway down the stairs is a stair where I sit," she quoted Milne to the uninterested cat. "There isn't any other stair quite like it."

No, there wasn't. Never would be. Shouldn't have been. Shouldn't be. The poor bus was taking an enormous strain. If she didn't move it one way or the other-if she could bring it into this world-it would disintegrate, possibly lethally. She had to make a decision now. Back to books and not-real as the only worth? Or forward to maybe?

Judith was no child. She knew that the maybe was ninety-five percent likely to be identical to the other world's reality. Was five percent chance worth hoping for when one might have toothache and sinus trouble and infections that, back there, were solvable?

Feathers stood up on her lap, looked at Judith as if she had suddenly become a week-old dead fish, and picked up a kitten in her mouth. As well as possible, considering the circumstances, she climbed down and stalked into the tall grass growling in a tone that clearly indicated her complete contempt.

Judith felt bereft, lost, dismayed, deserted. She cuddled the other kitten to her cheek and stood up. How could she possibly feel as if she were losing her only friend? She had several close friends back there through the snow. All she needed to do was to go back.

But she followed the cat.

"Wait a minute," she called. "I want to get a lot of things from the bus. Don't go. I'm coming. I'm going to stay."

You idiot! she condemned herself. *Talking to a cat as if it understood!*

It did, and she knew it would. It came back and waited while she got her backpack and her sleeping bag, her towels and her swimming suit, her harmonica and her guitar, her twenty-seven favorite books (for which she wrote a note indicating they could use her uncollected salary to pay) and any number of other things of possible usefulness in her new situation.

The cat sat behind the big stone and purred.

"Okay. Wait for me. I'll be right back."

For the last time, Judy turned the key in the Bookmobile's ignition. The motor had great difficulty starting. "Come on, old friend." Judith patted the dash. "Don't fail me now."

She shook her head. Now *I'm talking to machines*, she thought. But that was nothing new. She always had.

Encouraged, the motor caught and, coughing in protest, came to life. Judy shifted into reverse and backed the vehicle carefully. When the front bumper was just inside the edge of the marking stones, she turned off the ignition, but she did not set the brakes.

She climbed up onto the roof, lay flat, and slid forward feet first. Her body barely fit under the top stone. She wiggled her legs free and down, slithered over, and dropped off. Then she got up, set her back against the front of the bus, and pushed.

When it moved back, she ran as hard as she could run and threw herself flat behind the stone block. The Gate closed.

Things were most unusual for a considerable period of time. Judy lay curled around the cat and the kittens until things settled back to normal-if this was what was to be normal for them from now on.

She stood up. Feathers left the kittens for a moment and leaped onto the stone to sit beside her.

They saw three stones, not four. Two stood upright, one flay here to shelter them. What had happened to the lintel-stone would never be explained, Judy felt sure, but she wasn't interested. What did interest her was that between the two upright stones she could see grass and sunshine and wildflowers and hear birdsong and smell water. The anomaly had been removed, and the Gate ...

"`Gate of the Puma,' faff!" she stated, remembering Simon's explanation. "The Puma had nothing to do with it." She stroked the feathery fur on the cat's head and neck. Feathers purred so loudly that Judith wondered what people on the other side of the Gate would believe the rumble to be.

The cat looked up at her, then jumped down and sat by her kittens.

Judith's gaze shifted from the living kittens to the three white shapes on the stone. A *signature*, she thought: Deliberately, she refused to think what had caused the slick black soot that rain wouldn't wash off.

"The Gate of the Kittens," she said softly.

She put everything she didn't plan to carry on the stone, covered it with her poncho and tucked the ends in securely. Then she put the living kittens on her towel in the top of the backpack and held it open for their mother. She sat.

"Hmm," Judith murmured. "You'd rather see where you're going than where you've been?"

Feathers nodded.

"Let's see what I can do."

Judy slung on the pack, then covered her left shoulder with the folded beach towel and leaned down. The cat jumped up and crouched beside her ear. "Good girl." Judy rubbed her head against the cat's feathery side. "On we go," she said. They started off in the direction of the blue-green light, Judith laying out a path that would allow them safely to avoid the areas where the red-orange and sick yellow-green flared. She supposed it should bother her that she'd been told few other ... inhabitants ... of this reality could see the lights, but it didn't. Aside from having one-sided conversations with cats-and Bookmobiles-she had to have some reason for being the one they said was "called." Somewhere on the route between here and the light, she'd been told, would be food and

shelter and whatever else she was going to earn or be granted by this world. She hoped that the five percent maybe would be worth it.

She sighed, a long, anticipatory sigh. *It really doesn't matter*, she thought. She'd made existing in reality but living in fantasy enough back in her old world. She could make herself believe it to be enough here, if she had to.

Feathers spat.

Judy smiled. "Nope, it's already better," she agreed, leaning her head into the black-and-gray fur. It has to be, she thought. Her mind brought back the sight of the three little bodies whose deaths had paid her way, and their mother's, safe, into their world. *Not for me. For them.*

The cat purred loudly against her left ear.