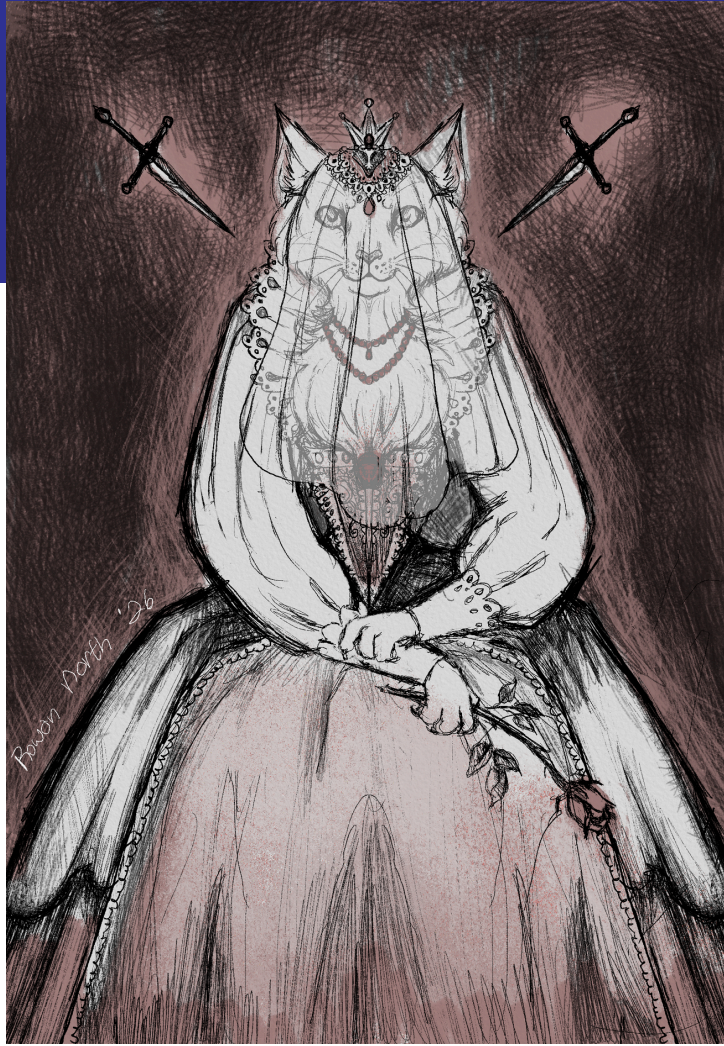


The White Cat (La Chatte Blanche)

France
Madame d'Aulnoy
Europe



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Long ago there was a king who, feeling the weight of years upon him, resolved to choose among his three sons the one who should inherit his crown. As he loved them equally and wished to avoid injustice, he devised a test. He summoned them and said that each must travel the world for a year, and whoever returned with the smallest and most beautiful little dog would be declared his heir. The princes departed at once, each taking a different road. The youngest rode farther than the others and soon found himself deep within a vast and tangled forest. Night began to fall, and just as he feared he would be forced to sleep beneath the trees, he perceived in the distance a magnificent castle shining with countless lights. Music, soft and harmonious, drifted toward him through the air.

When he approached the gates, they opened of their own accord. Servants came forward to receive him—but to his astonishment, they were cats. They walked upright, dressed in rich garments, carrying torches and speaking politely as they led him through splendid halls adorned with gold and crystal. At last he entered a grand chamber where, upon embroidered cushions, sat a beautiful White Cat wearing a tiny crown and a long veil fastened with jewels. Though amazed, the prince bowed low. The White Cat addressed him with grace and intelligence, welcoming him kindly and inviting him to remain as her honored guest. Days passed in delightful entertainments—hunts in enchanted woods, concerts of rare sweetness, and feasts of every delicacy. The prince found himself forgetting his quest in the pleasure of her company.

As the year drew to its end, he confessed the purpose of his journey. The White Cat smiled gently and presented him with a small acorn, bidding him not to open it until he stood before his father. Though puzzled, he obeyed and took his leave with sincere regret. When the three brothers returned to court, the eldest produced a charming little spaniel, and the second a tiny lapdog of delicate breed. The youngest placed the acorn before the king and cracked it open. From within emerged the smallest dog ever seen, perfect in shape and beauty, so minute that it could rest in the palm of a hand. The court cried out in wonder. Yet the king, still unwilling to decide, declared that a second trial must determine the matter. Each prince was to return in one year with a piece of cambric so fine it could pass through the eye of a needle.

The youngest prince again sought the castle in the forest and was received with the same splendor and affection. When he revealed the new task, the White Cat placed in his hand a walnut and instructed him, as before, to wait before opening it. At the year's end, the princes returned. The elder brothers displayed beautiful fabrics of admirable fineness. The youngest cracked open the walnut. Inside were layers upon layers of exquisite cloth, each more delicate than the last. The final piece was so fine it slipped effortlessly through a needle's eye. Once more the king was astonished.

Still hesitant, he announced a third and final challenge: each prince must bring back the most beautiful princess he could find, and she would become queen. For the third time the youngest returned to the White Cat's enchanted castle. Though she received him with warmth, there was a seriousness in her manner. When he spoke of the king's command, she was silent for a moment. At last she said that if he truly trusted her, he must do exactly as she instructed when the time came.

When the year had passed and the moment of departure arrived, the White Cat spoke calmly and told him he must cut off her head and tail. The prince recoiled in horror, believing such an act both cruel and impossible. But she assured him it was the only means by which her true form could be restored. Though trembling with grief, he obeyed her command.

In an instant the enchantment was broken. The castle shimmered and transformed; the cat courtiers became noble ladies and lords in splendid attire. Before him stood a princess of extraordinary beauty. She explained that at her birth malicious fairies had condemned her to live in the form of a cat until a prince, faithful and obedient, would trust her completely and release her without hesitation.

The prince brought the princess to his father's court. When the king beheld her wisdom and grace, he declared the youngest son his heir. The prince and the princess were married with great celebration, and peace and happiness flourished throughout the kingdom for many years to come.

This story is based on a story in the public domain by Madame d'Aulnoy from France in 1698. Let it inspire your imagination and your art.

