

THE CASTLE ARCHIVE

Nine tales from before the gate

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Contents

01 The Castle Book — The hall, a wet autumn

02 The Thistle in the Courtyard
— Between the paving stones, the first cold morning

03 The Window Answers — The windowsill, an ordinary evening

04 The Coin — The courtyard, the first frost

05 The Strap and the Ring — The empty room, winter

06 The Door That Was Not There Yesterday — The stairs, spring

07 The Light in the Fog — The hillside, spring fog

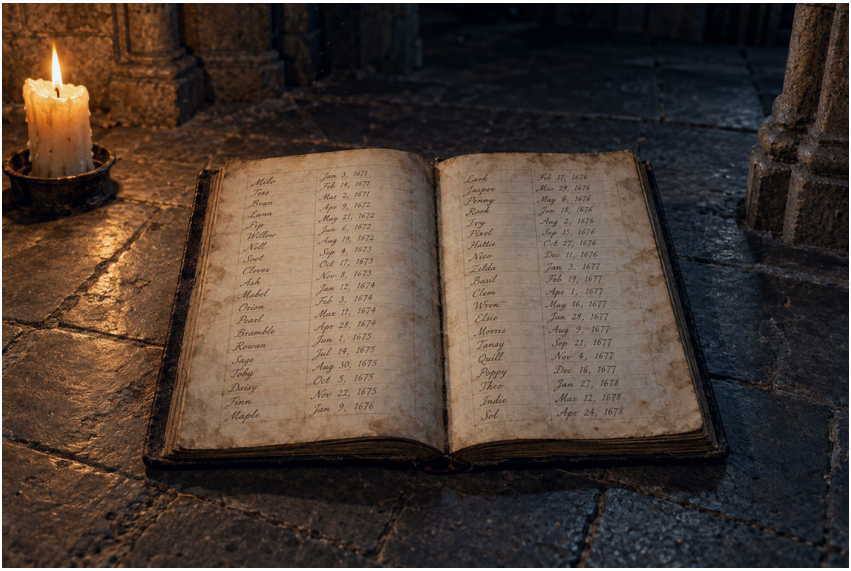
08 The Night the Whole Castle Lit — The east wall, a summer storm

09 Before the First Tale — The door, a year later

The life of a castle, written down as it unfolded. Some of its mysteries remain unanswered.

The Castle Book

The hall, a wet autumn



There is a book in the hall of this castle in which the cats are written down.

It is not a grand book. It is a ledger with a cracked spine, kept by somebody for longer than anyone in the valley can remember. One line to a cat. A name, a date, nothing else. No stories and no explanations.

He found it on a shelf he was not supposed to reach, put it on the floor in the proper way, and read it from the beginning.

The names went back pages and pages. Some were short. One name was written twice, in two different hands: most likely two people entered the same cat without knowing about each other.

The last line on the last written page was his.

He looked at it for a while. Then he jumped down, walked the length of the hall and lay in the doorway facing out, on the same cold draught where every cat in that book had lain before him: from there you can see the road and hear who is coming.

Nobody ever told him what the book was for. He understood it anyway.

The Thistle in the Courtyard

Between the paving stones, the first cold morning



It grew where nothing should grow: in the crack between two flagstones, in the windy corner of the courtyard, where the rain comes in sideways.

He walked past it all summer. Late that autumn a cart clipped the wall, the stones shifted, and the thistle ended up lying across the path with its roots in the air.

He looked at it for most of an afternoon.

Then he went and found a brass pot in a room that had not been opened in years, took it up the tower stairs one step at a time, filled it with earth from the courtyard and moved the thistle into it — roots, purple head, spines and all: he cut nothing off, and the thistle simply went on growing.

He put the pot on the tower windowsill: that window faces west, and the evening light stays on it longer than anywhere else in the castle.

From the valley that evening the castle looked the way it always looks: a dark shape on the slope.

Except for one window.

The Window Answers

The windowsill, an ordinary evening



The light started on a Tuesday.

It came up the stem of the thistle — pale blue, slow, like water going the wrong way. It reached the spines, stopped there, and the window turned the colour of ice.

He sat down. He was a cat, and cats sit down in front of things they intend to understand.

"You are in my light," said a voice from the windowsill.

He moved to the left.

"Thank you."

It was an ordinary voice: calm and quiet, as if somebody were speaking from the next room. It told him the eastern wall was wet. It told him something had been living in the roof since spring. It told him the door at the top of the stairs was unlocked, which he knew, and that it had not always opened onto the same place, which he did not.

He did not ask what she was.

He did not ask her name either. Somehow it simply never occurred to him.

The Coin

The courtyard, the first frost



The coin came up with the first frost. The ground lifted, and what was buried in it rose a little towards the light.

It was lying in the mud at the bottom of the courtyard: brass, with edges worn as thin as paper, a cat's head stamped on one side. Behind the head somebody had cut straight lines like the tracks on a circuit board, and two of them end in small circles — not decoration: for a pattern the lines are cut too even and too deep — this is how you join one thing to another.

He carried it in, which took two attempts: a coin is round and slippery and keeps falling out of a mouth.

"It is old," said the thistle. "Older than the wall it was buried under."

"Whose was it?"

"There is nothing about that in anything I can read."

He put it on the windowsill next to the brass pot, where it catches the candle in the evening and the blue light at night, and for a second the lines turn into something that looks like a face.

He has never told anyone where the coin came from, for the simple reason that he does not know himself.

The Strap and the Ring

The empty room, winter



In a drawer in the empty room there was a short brown strap with a plain brass ring threaded onto it. No clasp shaped like anything. No stone, no name scratched in. A ring you could buy at any market, on a strap somebody had shortened to fit and then shortened again, as if the neck had turned out smaller than they expected.

He put it on. It took a quarter of an hour and some language.

Nothing happened.

It happened three nights later, in the dark at the bottom of the stairs. The ring warmed, and then it lit: pale blue, weak, breathing slowly, like something

asleep.

"Is that you?"

"That is me," said the thistle, four floors up.

"Why now?"

"Because you went where I cannot see you."

Ever since, he puts it on only when he leaves through the gates; at home he takes it off and hangs it on a nail beside the pot. And it is not jewellery: the ring holds nothing up and fastens nothing. It has one job — it tells him whether he is alone.

The Door That Was Not There Yesterday

The stairs, spring



The door at the top of the tower is an ordinary door. Black oak, an iron band, a handle that is cold in every season.

One evening in the first warm week of spring he opened it and found weather on the other side.

Not the stair. Not the roof. Weather: a flat grey sky, a wind that smelled of salt — and the sea is a day away from this valley — and, a long way down, water moving in the dark.

He shut it. He waited. He opened it again and there was the stair, exactly as it had always been, with the same draught coming up it.

"Explain."

"I can open it in other places," said the thistle.

"Since when?"

"Since always. You never asked."

He went down to the hall, lay in the doorway facing out and thought about it for three days.

Then he came back up, put a paw on the handle and did not turn it. He did not go through that door that year: first he wanted to be sure it would bring him back.

The Light in the Fog

The hillside, spring fog



The fog here arrives fast. One moment the roof is there; then there is no roof, no gate and no path, only white, with no up and no down in it, and a cat cannot even hear his own feet properly.

One spring evening he walked out too far. He meant to reach the big stone at the edge of the slope and come straight back, but the stone was not where it should have been, and when he turned round the path behind him was gone too.

He sat down and listened. The water in the valley was making its noise on the wrong side of him. So he had been walking the wrong way for some time.

He did not call out. There was nobody to call: she had no name yet, and he had never thought to ask for one.

Then he saw the light. A small blue window, high up, faint, nowhere near where he expected it to be: the thistle burning on the tower windowsill, which at night can be seen further than anything else in this valley.

He walked towards it, counting his steps, and on the hundred and twentieth step the gate came out of the white in front of his nose.

"Did you light it for me?"

"I never put it out," said the thistle.

The Night the Whole Castle Lit

The east wall, a summer storm



It has happened once.

A storm came off the lake one hot summer evening, and lightning hit the eastern wall. The castle went dark and very quiet all at once: the light in the tower, the ring on its strap. And the stone went cold. It had always been a little warm; the cat had simply never noticed, until the warmth was gone. The cat stood in the middle of the hall and could not tell whether the castle was damaged or not.

Then the whole castle lit.

Not one window. All of it. Thin blue lines ran along the mortar, over the arch of the gate, down the stair, across the floor of the hall and up into the roof. They went everywhere stone holds on to stone, and anyone could see that all of it was in place and nothing was broken. It lasted a few seconds.

"What was that?"

"That was me," said the thistle from the tower. "I was checking whether the castle was still whole. It is."

Then the lines went out and only the one window was left, the way it always is.

Since that night the cat has not been afraid of storms. He knows the castle gets checked from the inside.

Before the First Tale

The door, a year later



That autumn he had got into the habit of counting what the castle had come through: eleven storms, one night with the pantry roof open to the sky, one visitor, and a very great deal of fog.

"You should write it down," said the thistle.

"For whom?"

"For whoever asks later. Somebody always asks later."

He did not like the idea. People write things down when they are afraid of forgetting, and his trouble was the opposite one: he remembered everything.

Late that autumn the door at the top of the stairs began to move on its own. A knock, twice, from the other side. Not loud. Patient.

"Is that you?"

"No," said the thistle.

He sat in front of the door for a long time, in the dark, and the ring on its strap stayed dark and cold: he was home, and the thistle was close. The ring was no help there — behind that door was not “far away”, it was “unknown”.

A week later he opened it.

What was behind that door the archive does not remember. It is being written now, in the channel.



That is the old record.

The new ones are written every week, in the Telegram channel.

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