

## The Prince and the Peasant

Once, in a land untouched by humankind, there lived a large, prosperous kingdom called Ypsilós. This kingdom was situated on the top of a mountain, its snowcapped peak brushing the clouds—always sturdy, never quaking. However, this kingdom was unlike most others in the fact that it was ruled and inhabited entirely by winged, cat-like creatures with great power and strength. Aristocratic as they were, these creatures were respected very highly, above any other creatures in the land.

The kingdom of Ypsilós was ruled by a king and a queen, both benevolent and fair, and their only heir was their son. But this prince was not as compassionate as his parents. He hardly ever gave thought to anyone but himself, and he would not accept anything less than his way. This prince, ever so selfish and cruel, was known by the name of Calix.

However, Calix was the most handsome creature in the kingdom. His pelt resembled the riches of the palace, being the hue of the finest of gold. His eyes were as bright as the light of the rising sun, and they dazzled anyone who looked into them. At the sight of him, many of the young maidens of the kingdom couldn't help but swoon.

As time passed, the king and queen's days became numbered, and they knew they would have to anoint their son as their successor for Ypsilós' rule to continue. Hoping that Calix had turned from his selfish ways, they called for their most experienced advisors to assess his worthiness of the throne.

"I don't need to be assessed," Calix protested as he waited with his parents in the throne room for the advisors to arrive. "Don't you believe that I'm perfectly capable of ruling as I am?"

The king and queen exchanged a worried glance. They hoped so, but they would have to be completely sure before gifting their son with that kind of power.

Once the advisors had entered the throne room, they began asking Calix questions. *Many* questions. Questions about what he would do when he ruled the kingdom, *how* he would rule the kingdom, what he planned to do with his wealth, even how he would oversee trade. Soon, Calix began to get extremely frustrated. Lashing his tail, he snarled, “Just leave me alone, okay? I don’t need any of you to tell me if I’m ready or not! I want to be king *now!*”

The advisors didn’t seem at all fazed. Slowly shaking their heads, it was clear what they thought about Calix’s leadership skills. Without a word, each one turned and padded out of sight, and when Calix whirled around, each of his parents’ faces showed the same look of dismay.

“I’m sorry, Calix,” his father meowed. “You are not fit to be king.”

Calix’s eyes widened with shock and fury. “Yes, I am! You’re just too blind to see my greatness!”

The king’s eyes were filled with nothing but pain as he continued, “For the good of this kingdom, I hereby exile you from Ypsilós to the Lands of Chamilós, where you shall remain until you learn to put another’s needs before your own.”

Before Calix could protest, he could feel a great, unseen force tugging maliciously at his body, dulling his golden fur, draining all of his strength, and causing his large, elegant wings to shrink into nothingness. Before he knew it, Calix was nothing more than a mere housecat. No longer magnificent, and certainly no longer a prince.

Calix was too shocked to say a word as the palace guards came and escorted him out of the kingdom, away from his glory and away from his home. No one glanced in his direction as he passed them; they no longer cared for him, no longer wanted him. No one watched as the guards continued to carry him off the sacred mountain, using their extravagant wings—a pair of which he no longer had for himself—to guide them. No one cared that Calix, the Prince of Ypsilós, had just been abandoned in the forest below to fend for himself.

As soon as the guards lifted off again, Calix trembled, for he had no idea what to do. The forest was strange, empty, and forbidding, possibly hiding all sorts of horrors within. Looking for a place to hide, Calix staggered through the woods. He had to stay out of the open. After a while of aimless wandering, he came upon a small stream, and after quenching his thirst, he continued to follow it to see where it went.

Surprisingly, the stream led to a small pond, with fish flickering about inside. For a moment, Calix wondered if he would be able to catch one, but then a flash of movement on the other side of the water caught his eye.

It was a she-cat, and she seemed to be attempting to tidy up what looked like a bedraggled sort of den, although Calix couldn't imagine any animal wanting to live inside it. It was mangy and damp, the exact opposite of the luxurious chambers of the palace, and it made him wrinkle his nose. However, what stood out the most about the scene was the sight of the she-cat. Her appearance was simpler than most; her fur was white like snow, without a single spot or pattern to decorate it. Her eyes were as green as the summer grass below him, and, mundane as she might have been, Calix couldn't help but think, "She is beautiful."

Seeming to have noticed his presence, the she-cat whipped around and stared at Calix.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Why are you here?”

“My name is Calix,” he replied. Deciding not to mention his embarrassing expulsion from his kingdom and home, he instead said, “I’m a bit lost. Do you—do you think you could perhaps tell me where I am, and allow me to rest here for the night?”

“You’re in the southwest of Chamilós,” she replied, in a matter-of-fact way, “and I guess you can stay, just for tonight.”

Surprised by the kindness this she-cat showed to someone she didn’t even know, Calix blurted out, “Thank you! F-for your hospitality. What can I call you?”

“Adara,” she replied, her eyes shining like the emeralds of Ypsilós’ treasury in the dimming light. “You can stay in here.” She showed Calix to her den, where she made another nest for him from the moss of the forest, and as soon as he curled up in the surprising softness, he fell straight asleep from exhaustion.

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The next day, Adara had caught one of the fish from the pond for Calix to eat before he even woke up, and when he did, he was quite grateful. However, when he finished gulping it down, Adara meowed, to his surprise, “If you’re going to stay, you’re going to have to hunt for yourself.”

Calix was so shocked by her obvious offer that he stay for longer than just a night that he admitted, "I... can't hunt." He'd been provided with everything he needed his entire life, after all. He never *had* to hunt.

Adara was astonished. She'd never heard of a cat that didn't know how to hunt before, which Calix understood. However, after explaining that he'd always had his food supplied for him, she agreed to teach him how to do it.

It took a while, but Calix mastered the skill eventually. Adara was patient with him, calmly correcting his mistakes and telling him how to stalk his prey. Soon, Calix didn't need Adara's help, and could catch his own food easily.

However, after exploring the forest of Chamilós on their hunting trips, Calix noticed that there was a particular part that was distinctly darker than the rest. Wondering why they never went there when they passed by, Calix decided to ask Adara about it.

"Adara, why do we never go into the dark part of the forest?" he inquired.

Her eyes suddenly round with fear, Adara replied quickly, "A great beast lives there; dark, terrible, and vicious, and it destroys all life in its path."

"What beast?" Calix pestered her.

"We mustn't speak its name," she insisted. "Calix, don't ever go there! You might not make it back alive."

However dangerous Adara had made the beast sound, she had piqued Calix's curiosity. He wouldn't be able to think clearly without seeing for himself what was really in the dark forest. So, at night, when Adara was sleeping, Calix crept out and made his way there.

Yet, little did he know, Adara was a light sleeper, and she had noticed Calix leave. Without a sound, she followed him, terrified for his safety and of the vicious beast that he would undoubtedly come across in the dark forest.

Sure enough, Calix had barely taken a few steps into the oppressing darkness when he saw something moving in front of him. A wolf-like figure towered over him, taller than the height of three cats combined, and it was darker than the darkness of night itself; but its eyes were twin flames, burning eternally with the intent to destroy all. Suddenly, Calix knew he had made a dire mistake that could cost him his life.

**"I AM LYKOS, RULER OF THE DARK SIDE OF CHAMILÓS!"** the great beast announced, his deep, hollow voice a bellow of fury. **"HOW DARE YOU TRESPASS ON MY TERRITORY?!"**

Horror had turned Calix's tongue to ice and locked his paws to the ground, and he couldn't do anything except wait for his well-deserved fate to consume him.

**"YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR MISTAKES, PATHETIC FOOL!"** With a swift, crushing motion, Lykos reared up, ready to slam his claws down on the cowering Calix, but, quick as lightning, Adara leaped in front of Calix and pushed him away. Lykos landed on her instead, and Calix was sent flying with a swift lash of the beast's tail. Before he had time to

think, Calix crashed into the trunk of a tree with the force of a gale and collapsed onto the ground, unconscious.

When Calix forced his eyes open, the first thing he noticed was that the sky was tinted with a pale gray light, hinting that dawn had almost come. For a moment, he forgot where he was. Then the pain came back to him, tearing at all of his body at once, and he remembered that he had been thrown from the dark forest by Lykos, and that Adara was still trapped inside.

Sharp claws of guilt seized his heart. "It's my fault that this happened," he thought. "It's my fault that Adara might be dead. It's my fault that I couldn't save her. For goodness' sake, it's my fault I was even thrown out of Ypsilós in the first place!" Suddenly, it was as if everything made sense. Calix was not entitled to the throne. He wasn't entitled to be the most handsome, beloved cat in the land, and he wasn't entitled to know just what resided in the dark forest. He wasn't even entitled to Adara's kindness, although he had received it anyway. She had sacrificed herself for him. "And now, it's time for me to repay my debt."

Without another thought, Calix rose from his spot—having been crumpled up on the ground—and proceeded back into the darkness of where the great beast dwelled. He was willing to fight as hard as he could to grant Adara her freedom, and if that wasn't enough... if he died trying to save her... well, it would be okay. If he died, he would die with honor and dignity. It was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

Lykos found him almost immediately. "YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE COME BACK!" he roared, glaring down at Calix with murderous aspiration in his eyes.

"I've come to save my friend," Calix replied, his voice calm and his posture straight as he stared Lykos in the eye.

"AND YOU WILL DIE TRYING!" Lykos declared.

"So I shall," Calix meowed.

In that moment, when Calix knew, fully, in his heart that he would indeed die to save Adara, he was surprised to feel his strength returning to him, his fur glowing as bright as before, and his wings growing back larger than ever. "I guess I've learned to put another's needs before my own," he thought to himself, grinning. He had fulfilled the task he had been given, without even trying. And maybe, he would now be able to defeat Lykos and save Adara from harm.

As he rose into the air, prepared to bring his claws and his might down upon Lykos, Adara watched from behind, having ducked behind one of the dark-wooded trees. Her heart had been touched by the fact that Calix had come for her just in time and was willing to sacrifice himself for her safety, the way she had for him. She was shocked that Calix wasn't actually a cat at all, though she knew that explained why he had appeared out of nowhere, not knowing how to hunt or protect himself. Smiling, she waited for when Calix would certainly bring the terrible reign of Lykos to an end.

Then Calix struck Lykos one more time, and the great, dark beast fell to the earth, defeated. Without stopping to watch the light fade from the beast's eyes, Calix searched the forest until he found Adara, who was waiting for him with a relieved look on her face.



“You saved me,” she meowed, still surprised and grateful that he had done that great deed.

“Of course. How could I not?” He smiled.

However, before they could celebrate the victory for much longer, a dazzling light shone down from the sky, and Calix watched, amazed, as the king and his advisors descended in front of him.

“Calix,” his father began, “I see you have earned back your wings. Well done.”

“Y-yes, I have,” Calix affirmed, dizzy with delight.

“As a reward for your great courage and humility, you will be welcome in Ypsilós forevermore.” The king then beckoned to his son. “Would you like to come back with us now?”

Calix hesitated. If he went back, what would happen to Adara? “I’m... I’m sorry, father, but I can’t leave her,” he meowed, glancing at Adara woefully.

The king exchanged an inquiring glance with his advisors. When they each gave him a nod of agreement, he turned back to Calix and said, “Why don’t you bring her along, then?”

“Really?” Surely, they wouldn’t let Adara come with them. She wasn’t royal, she was... she was basically a peasant. But when the king gave Calix a kindhearted nod of approval, Calix felt his heart swell with ecstasy once more. “Adara, what do you think?”

Adara grinned. “Sure. I don’t see why not.”

And with that, the creatures lifted off, carrying Adara with them, and made their way back to Ypsilós. Much to his delight, all of the citizens of the kingdom were excited to see Calix back, and many stories were told of his bravery and humility, and how he defeated the Great Beast of Chamilós. In time, they even came to call him Calix the Brave, and when it was time for him to become king, they supported him with undying loyalty. Naturally, Calix made Adara his queen, and the Kingdom of Ypsilós saw many years of happiness and prosperity under their reign.

Above everything else, the one thing that King Calix and Queen Adara told all the other creatures of the land was: "Humility is greater than the most expensive treasure." With this saying in mind, peace was no longer a fantasy, and the future seemed ever so brighter.

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