

The Midnight's Lullaby

Running between the rooftops is a black panther of beautiful visage, her beautiful cloak of a dark burgundy flowing with the wind as she bounces from roof to roof. She flies gracefully between rooftops, her body never missing any of the landings as she continued along her path. The hood of her cloak blew back to reveal her face, a graceful amount of black fur flowing along her body, with the blues that perfectly accented her dark skinned fur. Two scimitars lie in their scabbards at her waist, shaking with every single jump across the rooftops. She gracefully named the swords Layl and Hina, a beautiful pair of blades that are sure to protect her from any trouble. The black panther's name was Midnight, and she was rushing towards the harbor, ready to take on her new life, and ready to leave the old one behind...

Midnight grew up an heir to a kingdom, her parents the beautiful King and Queen of this very town that she ran along the rooftops. She had everything that she could ever want, the young black panther running around the throne room with all of the energy that comes with being a child. Things... were perfect. She has endless buffets of food that she participated in, and loving parents.

It wasn't meant to last. One day, Midnight was running around the castle, being her usual rambunctious self. Her running was brought to a stop as someone burst into the throne room, a fox covered in armor, with a worried look on his face. He immediately ran up to the King and Queen, addressing them promptly, before speaking quickly, "King! Queen! A group of mercenaries are invading the castle! What are your orders?"

Midnight could see the worried look on her parents' faces, distraught by this turn of events. The King immediately jumps to his feet, running toward the door as he starts commanding the fox, who

trails close behind him, "Get all of the troops! We need to defend the castle as best we can. We can't afford to lose anything else..."

And then the King leaves the room, turning around before he leaves, and nodding at his wife. He blows a kiss towards his daughter, a soft look crossing his face as he stares at her. Little did Midnight know... she would never see him again.

She didn't have time to think about her father, as the Queen grasped her arm. Midnight's mom stared down at her daughter, a mixture of love... and pure terror crossing her face, "Cmon Layl. Let's go sweetie. We have to hide."

Midnight is beside herself, the whole turn of events not making any sense, "But... What about Daddy? Is he coming?"

Tears begin to well up in the Queen's eyes, staring down at her daughter, "Daddy... Is doing his own thing. No need to worry about that now. We have to hide!"

Right after she said that, she ran to a corner of the throne room with her daughter in tow. Right once she gets there, she pushes a stone brick, a passage opening up inside the wall. Before Midnight can even say anything, her mother picks her up and places her inside the little passageway. On her knees, the tiny Midnight stares back at her mother, tears now streaming down her mom's face as she looks at her. She caresses her daughter's cheek, before she sadly speaks up, "Listen... my... beautiful Layl. Mommy has to go help Daddy... but stay here... okay?" The Queen stifles back a sob, staring into her daughter's beautiful, blue eyes, "I... don't know what's going to happen, but there's enough food in here to keep you fed for a few days. I need you to stay quiet, and don't come out until the noises are completely gone, okay?"

Midnight shakes her head, staring at her mom as the regalness that she once knew her parents for... the pridefulness... the confidence...

Was replaced by pure, unbridled fear.

"N-No Mommy... I don't want you to go! Stay with me Mommy!"

The Queen has to stifle a sob, staring at her beautiful daughter sitting in the passageway, "It's... gonna be okay, honey. Mommy will be back for you. I promise. It ... may take a while, okay sweetie?"

Before her daughter can answer, a giant slamming can be heard from the door to the throne room. Midnight's mother pressed into the stone brick once again, the wall immediately starting to close up on her daughter. The Queen runs a paw across her cheek once more, the walls closing in slowly around her paw, "I love you... my little Layl. My... Midnight Lullaby. I WILL see you again."

And with that, Midnight sees her mother's black furred paw pull back, and her face disappear from view, as the walls close, and immediately afterward, the door to the throne room is blown open. Midnight covers her mouth with her paw, trying to stifle the scream that wanted to burst free from her throat. She hears faint talking coming from the other side of the wall, desperately listening to the sound of her voice, and the many other voices that had entered the room. Midnight can't help but to feel around the chamber she was in. Where is the button?! How does she get out?!

Her search comes back fruitless, leaving her feeling completely hopeless behind her cage. Midnight sits there for a moment, wallowing in her fear as the talking continues...

And continues...

...and it... suddenly comes to a stop.

But... Midnight was terrified. She couldn't bring herself to look for the opening in the door. So instead, she crawls along the passageway, trying to find the end to this secret alcove. When she finally gets to the end, she finds a small room filled with a wide assortment of foods, a few different things to keep her entertained, and a tiny bed, similar to the one she has in her room. Midnight can

only muster enough strength to lie down on the bed, the stress of everything finally getting to her. What did it all mean? Meet her again...? When will she come back? WILL she come back? Will she ever see their faces again? What... is she going to do... if they don't come back?

Questions of this calibre continued to go throughout her mind, a giant window in the room illuminating her brilliant fur as she drifted off to sleep, her mind wrought with worry... and her body tired from the events of the day...

Midnight spent a few days inside of the chamber, scared of what she will find when she exits her safe alcove. Once the bread started to become stale, she finally built up the courage to go back toward the passageway, her body once again wrought with fear as she approached the secret door. She looks around at the wall again, the light of the candle helping to notice a single brick that was... a bit off from all of the other ones. Before she presses it, she puts her head against the secret door, to hear...

Utter silence. Not a single noise gracing her sensitive ears.

With that reassurance, she presses the switch.

The door to the secret passageway opens up, revealing the throne room that was once completely filled with furs only a few days ago. As soon as the door opens up all the way, she steps out into the throne room, and finds...

Absolutely nothing.

No guards. No sign of a struggle. No signs of a battle. Not even a sign of the weapons that had lined the walls before.

No sign... of her parents...

Midnight works up her courage, before walking through the castle that was once brimming with life... to find it as dead as the cemetery in the small town below her. There were no servants, no soldiers, not even any looters. She went to every corner of the castle, finding the place to be completely empty. All of the resources were gone too. The kitchen was devoid of any food. The vault was completely barren of even a tiny piece of gold.

It was like everything... vanished. With no sign of how, or when.

Midnight continued to make her way around the castle, still not finding any signs of the life that once filled the place. Rooms were empty, food was eaten.

EVERYTHING... was gone.

Midnight can only muster up the courage to go back to her little alcove in the wall, left to wonder... What could she even do? She looked over to the sparse amount of food left, and began to wonder how it all happened. How could everything disappear? Is there a greater work at play here?

Will... She ever see her parents again?

Many thoughts plagued the small black panther throughout the coming days, no obvious answers coming to her, as her food and water supply went completely dry.

It was on her fourth day without food that she finally made her way out of the castle, and into the town that her parents once ruled over all those days ago. She draped herself in garbs to help hide her face, and went out into town, looking for... any source of nourishment to fill her belly again.

She pushes on the giant gates to the castle, the door creaking as her tiny paws could barely push it open enough for her to squeeze herself out. She closed it behind her, the door shutting quietly as she looked toward the streets of the much less fortunate

town... and prepared herself for her new life. However sullen it may be.

From there, Midnight's life completely changed. The first few days were the hardest, scrounging for food whenever she could get it, and drinking from the harbor to quench her thirst. She learned quickly that she was good at stealing from stalls, taking small portions of food to tide herself over, and retreating back into the dark corners, where her fur made her hard to detect. She grew to be VERY good at hiding, her slick body and fast speed helping her to get around, no matter what she stole.

She continued this for many years, resigning herself to stealing in order to live day by day. After stealing items from many stalls around the market, the vendors began to call the black panther 'Midnight Lullaby,' a dark streak who could steal anything with ease, and always leapt off into the night singing a beautiful melody, captivating any who heard it.

Everything was going... as well as possible for Midnight. She stole food and various things she needed, but never went beyond her boundaries. Then when she had everything, she snuck back to the castle to wait out the night, sleeping in her secret chamber. She was outgrowing the tiny room, her body maturing with every single day that she spent in her new life.

One day, things went... a little different.

Midnight was on her usual run through town, stealing various foods in order to keep her fed for the day. Midnight recently found out how to pickpocket various passerbys, taking advantage of this skill to loot through town and steal people's precious money. It wasn't an honest practice... but she was finding herself able to actually pay for a few goods now. Stuff that isn't exactly easy to walk away with.

It wasn't until she tried to steal from a woman in royal garb that things turned on their heels. As soon as Midnight reached out to

grab the overloaded gold purse hanging from the cheetah's hips, the woman's paw immediately struck out and grasped her by the arm! Midnight had no time to react as the much larger lady kept her paw wrapped around the teenage panther's wrist. The cheetah glared back at Midnight, the tiny in comparison black panther trying her best to wrench her wrist free from the older cheetah's grasp, to little avail.

The cheetah woman, instead of scowling down at the young black panther, smiled at the young girl. She was quick, that much was sure. If not for the telltale sign of her clumsy steps, she may not have noticed the girl before her paws were already wrapped around her coin purse. She could of course catch up to her, but that is besides the point. The cheetah stares down at Midnight, a smile crossing her face as she whispers down at the girl, "I see my little temptation actually worked. It's a pleasure to meet you... Midnight? Why, those blue streaks are as lovely as I expected them to be, darling." Midnight looks up at the cheetah, that fear very quickly turning to confusion, "Now then, my darling black streak, shall we be going? I'm sure you are dying for something that isn't stolen from the clueless vendors around here."

Midnight sat there for a moment, thinking about her options as her paw was still grasped on by the cheetah woman. Based on the iron grip that was around her wrist... she figured she had no choice. So for the first time in a while, she spoke up, "Yeah, that would actually be kind of nice."

The cheetah woman smiled, letting go of the little lady's wrist, "Well, come on. The daylight is wasting away."

The cheetah woman took to the rooftop, the younger Midnight slowly following behind her. They are quick to make it to a small alcove in a long abandoned church, a makeshift home built that did not seem to fit the woman's grandiose stature. It is here that the cheetah woman builds a small feast, freshly caught fish and berries to satiate the young woman's flat belly.

After the feast was over, Midnight got to hear the tale of the wonderful, "Hina," as the cheetah preferred to be called. One of love, tragedy... and loss. She was a young woman bequeathed to a young merchant, whom she grew madly in love with. They had an ideal life. He traveled around the world on his merchant ship, and she went along with him, learning the ways of the sea, and enjoying her life. The real thrill came from his night job, the merchant masquerading as a sailing merchant, but truly being a pirate who robbed wealthier ships in his free time. And luckily, Hina was the perfect partner. He would distract the interested buyers late at night, while Hina snuck in and stole whatever they had. It was certainly a profitable relationship, and one that Hina thought would last forever.

The greed got to the merchant, and his demands became loftier and loftier. Until one day... he bit off more than he could chew. He approached a giant ship, Hina in tow... and little did he know, his name had been travelling across the sea. As soon as both Hina and her old lover approached the ship, they were both taken captive. The captain of the boat wasn't one for mercy however, and the first thing he did...

Was throw the merchant overboard. Completely tied up, and with no way to escape.

It took a minute for Hina to get through that part. The pain and disparity of her voice... it immediately brought Midnight to tears. A feeling of sadness that she had blocked out for so long resurfacing as Hina told her tale. Hina was quick to wipe away the tears, continuing with her story, "No time for sadness in this business, Midnight. Never..."

But... Hina didn't have long to be sad, still captured by the captain of the ship. She didn't go into too much detail as to what the captain did, but the look on her face said everything.

That ship was sailing right along the sea, and brought her to the town that was situated quite a bit away from this town. Hina, seeing her chance, quickly broke free of her bonds, and made her grand escape! The captain of the ship watched as the cheetah ran

away, living up to her species as she made her way... as far away as possible. Leaving her old life with the man of her dreams completely behind her.

"No time... to be sad in this business..." Hina whispered under her breath, trying to steel her resolve. The cheetah shakes her head, wiping away the lone tear that began to trail down her face. Midnight stared at her, for a moment... seeing that exact thing that Hina tried to hide. Someone who was... scared. Who is living like she is. Day by day. Constantly on the run, and avoiding people for fear... of feeling that devastating loss that devastates anyone.

Midnight moves closer to Hina, embracing her in a tight hug, "Hey... it's... hard. Sometimes... maybe it's okay to let those emotions through. ... be open for once. Let it all go. It's okay."

With the soft arms of Midnight wrapped around her back, Hina leaned into her and ... cried. She let all of the emotions out that she had hid for years. Feeling the emotional tipping point hit her as Midnight held her close, the closest emotional connection she has had for years. Midnight stroked her back lightly, holding her close, "Hey... we've all lost someone. It's okay to be sad. There is a moment in everyone's life when they have to accept... that people are gone. And there's... nothing you can do to bring them back. No matter how hard you try... they're... gone. And they're... never..."

Midnight can't finish her sentence, feeling the tears already streaming down her face as she holds Hina close to her. They both let all of their pain, emotions, love... and losses go in that moment, knowing they both found someone who has been in a similar situation. This continues on for a few minutes, leaving both of the girls a mess in each other's arms.

Hina is the first to withdraw, staring at Midnight's beautiful blue accents across her dark fur, and her eyes that shone in the light of the night, "I'm... sorry about that. I guess I didn't realize... how lonely I've been throughout the years. I guess... all I needed was someone who knew my struggles."

Midnight chuckles, nodding her head as she wipes her eyes with her paws, "Yeah... I guess I needed the same. A time... to let it all go. With... my new friend."

Hina smiles down at the black panther, ruffling the fur on top of her head, "Yeah... I guess we are."

From there, the girls decided to settle in for the night, a soft blanket wrapped around the both of them. As Midnight is falling asleep, she can't help but feel that same warmth that she felt all those years ago, wrapped in the arms of someone... who she trusted. It is a weird feeling, considering the old pirate's thieving ways. But tonight... She didn't care. She needed that reminder... of the good still in the world.

And the warmth of being near someone.

From that day forth, both Hina and Midnight stole in their own areas of the kingdom. They raided shops day in and day out, finding themselves much better off when they had a partner to support them. This dynamic continued on for years, both Hina and Midnight growing closer and closer with every day that went by. The dynamic was clear between the two, both girls quickly considering the other as... family. Someone the other could trust, and who both knew would never betray them.

Midnight told Hina about her living arrangements within the castle. Hina couldn't contain her excitement as she heard about the castle, finally happy to get away from the makeshift home that she had been hiding in all these years. Despite all the years of the castle being out of use... no one got close to it, which made the whole situation of her parents leaving even weirder. It was when they got to her old room that Midnight told Hina... everything. From her parents mysterious disappearance, and the castle's sudden clearing out.

Hina sits there in amazement, entranced by everything that she was told. Until she shrugs her shoulders, staring at Midnight,

"You said you were in there for a few days, right? It seems plausible that they could have cleared everything out. It was a kingdom after all. I'm sure your parents had a lot of people to help carry things away."

Midnight opens her mouth to complain...!

Wait... she's right.

"I guess... I never thought about that before. I guess they could have gotten up and moved everything."

"Yes they could have!" Hina claps her paws together, standing up on her foot paws, "Now, show me around the castle. I want to pick out which room will be mine."

From then on, their base of operations was inside the castle. They both brought everything they stole back to the safety of the castle, their reserves growing bigger as they strived in their environment.

Until everything changed on Midnight's 23rd birthday.

Midnight had gotten back to the castle from her routine stroll through the night, coming home to the usual praise by Hina. Their victory is cut short however as a loud knock can be heard against the giant door of the castle. Both felines immediately look towards each other. No one... has ever knocked on that door.

Hina hides Midnight behind her, the elder cat leading the way to the front door as another loud knock radiates through the castle, making both of the felines jump in surprise once more. Hina pushes Midnight beyond the other door and slowly pushes the door to the castle open, a cleverly concealed knife in her other paw. She looks through the slight crack to find...

...A wolf diplomat.

"Hello there. We are looking for a..." He looks at the paper that was in his paws, "...a "Layl." Would she happen to be here?"

Hina relaxes her knife a little, looking Midnight beyond the door... to see a look of pure surprise on her face. She turns back towards the canine diplomat, "Why... yes. There is a Layl here. Who would be asking"

"Miss, I was told to deliver this letter. I don't know who they were. I'm delivering the letter."

As soon as he says that, he thrusts the piece of paper out, Hina taking the paper as if it held the secret to life.

"Good day madam."

And with that, the wolf diplomat takes off.

Hina closes the door to the castle, looking toward Midnight under the soft candles that glow around them, "...Layl huh? What a name!"

She doesn't get a response, a look of distraught across the black panther's face, "I... haven't heard that name... since I was little..."

"Midnight... What do you mean?"

The gears in Midnight's head were turning, trying to think of all of the things that this COULD mean... I mean...

"My... parents were the only people who called me Layl. This could be them. They may not be gone Hina! My parents could still be out there!"

"Woah woah woah Night! You don't know what that means! It could mean anything! Especially if this is someone out to get you!"

Midnight takes a moment to think, staring toward the letter in Hina's paws, "Well... we won't know until we open the letter."

With that, the two cats reside themselves in Midnight's room, and begin to read the letter.

And the very next morning, Midnight is already packing up provisions to leave.

It was all a bit sudden... but the letter told her everything she wanted to hear. Her parents are alive somewhere in the world. And she was going to find them. No matter the stakes, no matter the trials.

She had grown up to be quite a nice thief, able to steal anything if she set her mind to it. She was also quite agile, able to run atop rooftops and scale many different objects with her natural, cat skills. She had everything that she needed to head into the world.

...The one thing she couldn't take with her.. was the one thing she didn't WANT to lose.

Midnight stood in front of the door to the castle, feeling her nerves get to her after who knows how long. How were things going to go? What would she do when she found her parents that abandoned her? Would she be okay on her own? Would-

She is brought out of her thoughts as a rough paw lands on her shoulder, bringing her out of her haze, "Hey. It's going to be alright. I could see your nerves from the back of the throne room."

That look of nervousness didn't leave her face, the burgundy cloak that she wore did not hide her expression at all, "But... I am going out there... all alone again. Can't you come with me."

Hina can only chuckle at the comment, staring at the young woman that Midnight had become. With various dark shades across her body, from a gray cloak, to a medium gray shirt. And with different shades of burgundy and brown across the clothing that she

wore... she was ready to explore, "Layl. You know this quest is all yours. This has been something you have been thinking about your whole life. I'm not gonna stand between you as you figure out who you are. That... is not my mission." Tears begin to well up in Hina's eyes, staring at the beautiful Midnight before her, "This... is yours. So I'm gonna stay here. Maybe protect your kingdom a little bit. You have to come back to something amazing! And besides..." Hina ruffles the fur on Midnight's head, chuckling lightly, despite the tears starting to run down her cheeks, "...if anyone can find your parents, it's you."

Midnight stares into the beautiful, deep green eyes of the woman who helped her realize who she was. A woman who brought her in that night, and who honed her skills in the craft of thievery. The woman who found her when she needed someone the most. Someone... who she could call a friend.

No...

Someone... who grew to be...

Family.

With tears in her eyes, Midnight lunges toward Hina, wrapping her soft arms around her body, "Hina... thank you. For... everything. I couldn't have done all of this without you."

Hina holds back the tears, trying to maintain a little bit of sensibility, even as her adopted 'daughter' held her close, "Don't mention it kid. I'm a girl that supported you when you needed it the most. And Lord knows you needed it!"

Midnight has to stifle a laugh, squeezing Hina once more, before letting go. Tears still streamed down her face, as she looks up at her friend, "I was not that bad!"

"Are you kidding me? You should have seen yourself! Clacking along as you tried to steal people's money! It's a good thing the people in this town are suckers!"

"Oh shush! I got a lot better!"

Hina laughs lightly, "Yeah. Yeah you did. The best thief I have seen in a while." As soon as she says that, Hina's face lights up in realization, "Oh, wait! I remembered something! Don't leave yet!"

Midnight doesn't have to wait for long, Hina returning carrying two scimitars, "Here... I want you to have these. As I was running away from the pirates that threw my old love overboard, I stole these from a stand. And... I want you to have them."

Midnight hesitantly takes the scimitars, slotting the sword hilts in her belt, "I... don't know what to say. You would ... give these to me?"

Hina nods her head, tears starting to well up in her eyes again, "Yeah... of course. I want you to keep them. Think of it... as a going away present, and a birthday present. for you."

Midnight looks down at the weapons, tears starting to stream down her cheeks. She once again runs toward Hina, and completely wraps her in a hug, "Hina... I love you..."

That is the tipping point for Hina, the tears that had been welling up for the past few minutes finally streaming down her face, "I love you too... Layl..."

They continue to hold each other close for another minute, wallowing in their own sadness. Eventually they break free from the hug, both felines staring at each other once more. Hina is the first to speak up, starting to push Midnight towards the door, "Now go, before I cry again! Find your parents!"

Midnight wipes the tears away, staring up at the woman that protected her for so long. With one last glance at her, she gives an affirmative nod, before rushing out the front gates of the palace.

She takes to the rooftops, jumping from roof to roof effortlessly. Her burgundy cloak waved in the wind behind her, and the scimitars shook with every single step along the roof.

Layl and Hina...

Night and day...

Who knows what fun she was going to get up to, but with her trusty scimitars by her side...

Nothing can take her down.

And so she runs towards the harbor, a look of determination filling her mind, as her life finally starts.