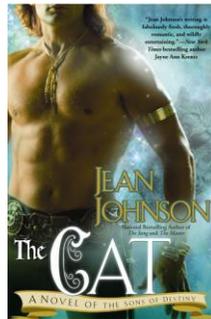


Review by: Heather

Pros: Enjoyable fantasy worldbuilding; fascinating milieu; entertaining characters; great sense of humor and style; very visual story

Cons: None

Rating: 5 out of 5



Series Note: Jean Johnson's *The Cat* is book five of at least eight in the *Sons of Destiny* series. I read it without reading the first four books and enjoyed it quite a bit, with only mild confusion. That said, it's an incredibly good book and I highly recommend starting from the beginning. The quotes that I couldn't resist reading to my husband were so much fun that he insisted we obtain the full series so he could read them from the start, and I wasn't about to argue after how much I loved this book! In addition, there's a lot of fantasy world-building going on here, and that's the sort of thing it's much easier to take in order. Ms. Johnson's ability to make this book stand on its own is impressive, but it's still the sort of series meant to be read in order.

The eight brothers were born in four sets of non-identical twins. An age-old prophecy foretells the arrival of their Destined brides in order from the eldest brother's to the youngest, and it's now the turn of the fifth-born son, Trevan.

The family has lived in exile for some time, and is attempting to build their own kingdom from the ground up—even though the only citizens besides themselves at the moment are the chickens. Trevan is all in favor of meeting his Destined bride, but in the meantime he's beside himself with the enforced abstinence he's had to endure. After all, he always considered himself a ladies' man. So when his future bride finally puts in an appearance, he's all too eager to set up housekeeping.

Amara is an extraordinarily powerful natural shapeshifter and a princess of her people—expected to become queen someday. She and her sister Arora were forced to flee from their homeland due to mages' greed for the power inside of Arora, and Amara is more than a little resentful of having had to leave behind everything she ever wanted. She's proud and stubborn, and everything Trevan thinks he knows about courting women goes against her people's highly formalized customs. Not to mention the fact that he and his family are powerful mages immediately strips away any possibility of trust between them.

Trevan, for all his smooth charm, has quite a bit in common with Amara: they're both highly intelligent and extremely stubborn people. And maybe they'll find that it's enough to help them get past all of those differences, and all of that mistrust...

The *Sons of Destiny* series appears to be every bit as much a fascinating fantasy world-building story as it is a romance series. The family is in the unusual position of trying to jump-start a kingdom with very few resources other than their own magical abilities, their quick minds, and some natural resources, and it's wonderful to observe their struggles. They have to do everything from planning a city to enticing settlers to move in. They have to create their own local customs to give people a sense of social identity, such as marriage ceremonies and clothing styles. They need to find ways to produce enough useful goods to export that they can afford to buy those things they need to import. And while they can do so much through spells and magic that most societies would need droves of people to accomplish, they can't simply make the things and people that they need appear out of thin air.

Because of the level of magic present, the 'technology' level is higher than you might expect for a typical medieval-style fantasy world. Rechargeable magical artifacts are used to accomplish all sorts of things from contraception to the availability of hot-and-cold running water. Magic is tossed about on that island like we use electricity.

The characters are quite a bit of fun. The interplay between Amara and Arora is interesting—the sisters clearly love each other, but they're also capable of fighting quite viciously when in the mood. Amara is stubborn and proud, as you'd expect from someone who'd been told she was going to be queen since she was a child, but she's also highly competent and intelligent and capable of learning from her mistakes.

Trevan is a spell-shifter, a mage who uses spells to change shape, and is 'the cat' referred to in the title. Contrary to expectations built up in so many other romance novels, however, his favorite feline shape is not that of a large hunting cat—no, he prefers to pad about on little housecat feet. His personality suits that in so many ways, and it's highly entertaining to watch him use that to his advantage in trying to get close to Amara.

In fact, one of the things that makes this book (and, I'm betting, the series) stand out above many of its peers is the wonderful sense of humor woven into its pages. Entire passages are laugh-out-loud funny, and in a ruefully 'all-too-true' manner. Johnson tackles things most authors wouldn't even think of, much less address—like what some

young and horny mages might try to do if stuck on an island without available women but *with* the ability to create illusionary people (and all the things that could go wrong with such an enterprise...)!

The most fascinating part of the book, however, is watching Trevan, Amara, and everyone else try to deal with the huge cultural differences that arise. Amara and Arora come from a highly-structured society with very formalized rules, and they aren't accustomed to dealing with many outsiders. Add to that the fact that courting is an activity that typically involves some of the most important customs in a society, and you have a real recipe for trouble. The ensuing difficulties feel very real, and not at all contrived.

The Cat is a delightful read: passionate, romantic, funny, and fascinating, and it makes me want to read the entire series.