

Series 17: Garden Tales

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- by Angie

Birds of a Feather

*Now droops the milk white peacock like a ghost,
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me*

- Alfred Lord Tennyson

Vincent wandered around the brownstone's garden, enjoying the scent of the warming earth and clipping off the dead sentinels that now stuck above tiny green shoots. When he got to the tarragon, he had to get down on his knees and clip with a vengeance. The stuff spread like a weed and had dozens of thin dead sticks to cut off. Were it not for the fact that he loved it in mushroom soup – a recipe that Catherine had learned from William – he would have declared that it was more trouble than it was worth.

The lavender was equally work-intensive, but he loved the smell of the flowers in the summer. After a couple of hours of dusty clipping and coughing, Vincent decided he needed a rest. He sat down on a bench he had placed at the end of a flagstoned path, a kind of private nook against the house. An apple sapling had blossom buds waiting for a little more heat before bursting out and a few tulip bulbs were reaching up tentative points. At least the daffodils and grape hyacinth were adding some colour to the well-mulched soil, he thought. Colour was what he missed in the winter months – the riot of sun-bright greens he'd never seen for most of his life.

It was always so peaceful in the garden. Even though it was loud with the songs of robins and scrappy sparrows, it gave a sense of quiet because the sounds of the big city were muffled. The kiss of the sun was like a benediction. Small movements seemed to flitter in the corner of his eyes. Bush tits, he thought. He could hardly wait for the warmer weather that would bring the colourful warblers and hummingbirds – and of course the butterflies. He never tired of watching them, having seen nothing of the sort in all the long years below in the tunnels. They weren't out at night when he went abroad – although he had seen moths.

Something white flashed in the corner of his eye and he turned to look, even though it was most likely a seagull. Their moaning cries, with the squawks of outraged crows, dominated the skies all winter. Whatever it was had disappeared, though.

He sagged back on the bench, closed his eyes and stretched out his legs. He was wearing only a dark coverall with a thin cotton "combination" under it. He had become fond of the one piece underwear. They did not chafe like traditional briefs – which he had ceased to wear long ago. Catherine, for some reason, found the sight of him in these erotic. She didn't seem to mind that they sagged in the rear and bagged at the knees – and her response always garnered one from himself, impossible to disguise. That must be what she really loved about them, he decided.

He was dozing off for moments at a time when a loud screech made him stiffen and open his eyes a little. What on earth made such a noise? It didn't sound like a seagull. He sat up and looked around, trying to locate the source. When it came again, he realized it was coming from the roof of their adjoining brownstone. Unfortunately, he couldn't see anything from his vantage point and did not feel inclined to investigate. He relaxed and prepared to nap again.

Just as he was closing his eyes, something large and white fluttered onto the pathway in front of him, drawing his immediate attention. Vincent sat paralyzed, so shocked he forgot to breathe. He stared at the creature, strutting along the flagstone walk like a regal bride with a long train. He wondered if he was asleep or hallucinating.

Upstairs in the brownstone, Catherine had just put baby Jacob to bed for his nap. She and Vincent had learned to keep their bond with their son on a sort of shunt line – connected to them still, but not disturbed by the daily force of their emotions. It was like having a third hand, she mused, one that could calm their son and communicate their love for him, but left both parents able to concentrate on work – and play. At the same time, they were both very aware of their special son. If he was ever in distress, they would know it immediately.

She was very glad of this separation when she caught Vincent's surprise and shock along their bond. In the early days, those emotions would have woken up the baby. She ran to the bedroom window to locate Vincent in the yard, afraid he'd had an accident. At first she couldn't see him and then when she did, she felt her mouth drop open in amazement.

Vincent's brain was awl. How had such an incredible creature come to be in their garden? He didn't dare move, merely feasted his eyes on it and watched as it paraded to the main path, then turned towards him again. With a shiver and a rattle, it lifted its trailing feathers and spread them out slowly into a glorious fan.

It was a peacock of course, which explained the screech. He had never heard one before, but he knew the Greek legend about how the peacock had lost its voice. Hadn't Hera put the eyes of Argus into its tail as well? This bird, however, was not the usual iridescent green and blue – but a pure, brilliant white. Only its eyes were dark. Its

breast was snowy and the white tail behind the fan was perfect in its symmetry. The long shivering plumes were a lacy confection with shy, pearly white 'eyes' among the long hairy fronds. The lower fan reached towards him and upwards from the ground. Each amazing feather was tipped with a soft hook, like a tiny two-fingered hand reaching for the sky. On top of the peacock's head, a delicate crown bobbed gracefully with every movement.

How was such an exquisite thing possible? More to the point, where had it come from? Vincent moved his head slowly to look up at the roof of the brownstone. No help up there. He'd heard of peacocks being used as sentries on rooftops – but in New York?

He saw Catherine gazing out the upstairs window and felt her delight along the bond now that he had calmed his own riot of emotions. She was as stunned as he. He could feel their baby's calm and that calmed him even more. Thank goodness he hadn't woken the baby. He caught her eye and gave her a feral grin and a shrug, then turned to look at the peacock again. It suddenly collapsed its tail like a matron folding a fan and gave another shriek. It tilted its head to look at him then turned left. Vincent watched the bird and then its long tail slide out of sight behind the riot of currant bushes. Before he could gather his wits to move and follow it, a flash of white materialized over the bushes and the peacock flew over his head towards the roof of their brownstone, its tail fluttering behind it.

Vincent craned his neck to try and see, but the roof overhang blocked his view. He got up quickly and dashed to the main path, then tried to see over the eaves. Where was the bird? Then he saw a flash of white as the peacock flew onto yet another roof, further away. He lost sight of it when it disappeared over the roof ridge.

He sighed and turned away, disappointed, but something white closer to hand caught his eye. He reached down and picked up one long plume, perfect in its beauty. It seemed almost alive in his hand as it responded to a breath of a breeze. He was holding it as if it was made of glass when Catherine reached him. She put her head against his chest and hugged him around the waist. He sighed again and put his free hand around her.

"Vincent, did you see where it went?"

"No, it seems to be roof-hopping. I didn't know they could fly so well."

Catherine nodded. "Nancy had a couple on their property for a while. They like to roost in trees." She turned to look at the feather in Vincent's hand.

"Isn't it extraordinary!"

Vincent couldn't take his eyes off it. The contrast between his own long-nailed, hairy hand and the dreamy frond shimmering in the sunshine, was almost obscene.

He made a sound like a whimper.

Catherine looked up at him and felt his emotions. She didn't have to ask what he was thinking. She put her small hand over the one holding the feather and spoke quietly.

"Stop it, Vincent. Your hand is beautiful too – and infinitely more talented and useful than that feather was to the peacock."

Vincent looked down at her and his mouth quirked. He knew very well what she was referring to. Then he regarded the feather again. It still seemed uncanny. He held it against the dark of the garden so he could see it outlined. It looked as delicate as a moth's antenna.

"It's magical," he whispered.

"No, Vincent. It's just a peacock feather – albeit a very beautiful one. You are the only magical thing in this garden. If you didn't exist, I'd have to invent you."

"Catherine!" That got Vincent's attention and his azure eyes stared into her sultry green ones. He dipped to kiss her lips. He could feel her happiness like a sun ray. His voice was low and almost a purr when he spoke.

"I'm not magical. I just am, that's all – exactly as you see me."

"I beg to differ, Vincent. You are beyond belief, at the very least. And what you hide under this coverall is more wonderful than anything I could have dreamed in my wildest moments growing up."

Vincent was silent for a moment and then remembered one of his favourite Tennyson poems, which coincidentally included a white peacock – and a princess.

"And she glimmers on to me," he quoted. "But not like a ghost. You're too real, too precious."

"And far less fragile than that feather," Catherine whispered as she looked up at him, then quoted from the same poem, one they had often read together.

"And all thy heart lies open to me.

"So fold thyself, my dearest thou, and slip

Into my bosom and be lost in me."

She had given him an unmistakable invitation – and it was one he never refused.

Vincent hugged her closer and whispered into her hair.

"Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet." And infinitely more lovely than the peacock's, he thought to himself.

They walked arm in arm into the house and upstairs to their chamber. Vincent put the plume carefully into a tall, glass bud vase on the bedside table. The vase often held a rose from their garden during the summer. The white marvel seemed no less surreal inside. It was a gift, he decided, from something as unique as himself.

But another imperative soon captured his full attention. There, in the spring sunshine streaming through the skylight, he and Catherine proved themselves neither magical nor beyond belief – just in love.

END

Bonding

Love sought is good, but giv'n unsought is better

- William Shakespeare

Since moving to the brownstone, Vincent had taken over the maintenance of the garden. It was of moderate size, enclosed on all sides by buildings. No windows but their own overlooked it. There was a small path and a tiny garden shed, and enough sun to grow a small vegetable garden and a variety of flowers.

Vincent was well-covered when he was outside. He wore gardening gloves, a long-sleeved coverall and a floppy hat, from which draped a piece of gauze. Since he was generally looking downwards, the gauze did not hinder him. It was a necessary evil, not because of the remote danger of being seen, but because he could not be exposed to direct sun for long.

He had discovered, to his chagrin, that sunburn on his hirsute body began with fire and ended with flaying. In between was a ferocious itching that made him want to scrape off all his body hair. He had no desire to repeat that experience.

So he puttered around like a Victorian gentleman, watching as seeds sprouted and matured into something recognizable. He weeded, watered, clipped, thinned and composted as necessary. He particularly loved tall flowers and their garden was a veritable, although well-ordered, jungle. He even left a small corner of the garden wild, for the fairies. The idea had come from a book he had been reading their son Jacob.

He regarded that patch now with some concern. A mass of long, arching growth seemed to have taken it over. He walked over for a closer look. It was definitely some kind of berry cane and he was reluctant to dig it up since it might produce something delightfully edible. He loved raspberries. He carefully moved the long trailers back on themselves, grunted as a thorn pierced his glove and stabbed his thumb. When he let it go, it pricked his thigh. Another caught on his gauze face protector and ripped it from his hat as it sprung back.

Obviously, this plant was not friendly. He hunkered down further, pushed up an arch with his trowel, and eased himself under it on hands and knees to seek the bases. Perhaps they originated in the next door yard. He certainly had not planted them.

Following one long cane led him, as he had feared, to the wall. How had it managed to find a way underneath? Several others were sprouting very close to the wall and even more were growing in between – a forest of barbed tendrils seeking the light. His gloves, mere cotton with plastic bumps, were not meant for such work and his fingers were already tingling from a dozen minute pricks.

Vincent made a snap decision. In light of the curiosity of his young son and the fact that Catherine would be bringing him home soon, there was no time like the present.

Remembering an article he had read about “invasive” species, he concluded the thick barbed canes were Himalayan Blackberry, not the thin, genteel ones which produced the tiny red fruit he liked. These ones would produce big dark berries, with big seeds that would crunch between his teeth. Begone with them!

Vincent pulled his shears from his gardening belt and went to work cutting the offensive canes close to the soil. He soon had them all hanging loose over his head, held up by each other. Now all he had to do was get them over to the compost pile. For that he would need a rake. Then another day, he would dig up as much of the root as he could reach. He put his shears back into his belt, then realized he could not stand up and would have to back out. As soon as he moved, his scalp protested and he grunted in pain as he tried to extract his long hair from the clinging canes above him. He moved forward again, only to find that the pain had moved to his neck. He reached behind his head and yelped as a particularly vicious thorn pierced his index finger through the glove and another lodged in a kneecap. This would never do. He ripped off the ridiculous remnant of gauze and removed his hat so he could look around him, almost getting a long thorn in his right eye. It was dim and too hot underneath the tangle. He needed air.

There was sunlight near the wall, so he ignored the pull on his hair and crawled to it. If he could get above the arching canes, perhaps he could just walk over the top of them. He managed to stand up next to the wall and had moved a foot to do just that, when something pierced his instep and he shook his foot aside to dislodge it. He looked at his footwear. He was wearing Crocs and his feet were bare inside them. They were the best shoes for gardening, comfortable and easily hosed-down, well-ventilated - but they were no protection against this vicious growth. He did not want to risk his feet as well as his hands. Reluctantly, he dropped to hands and knees again, grumbling as he gingerly extracted a cane thorn from his other knee. Perhaps if he went out forwards, with his hat pulled down and his hair down his collar, he would be able to avoid getting caught.

He began to crawl and all seemed to be going well until the weight of cut canes suddenly gave way and collapsed on top of him. He automatically dropped to his stomach and his hat was snatched from his head. He was pierced in several places along his back, including his rear end. Every movement forward now increased the pull on his hair, as if it were being ripped from his scalp. He hissed as an attempt to extract himself merely gave him yet another painful stab in his already abused hand. Where was his trowel? It wasn't in his belt and he couldn't see it under the tangle. He sighed in frustration, flopped onto the ground and lay still, his hair pulled painfully upright, his hat dangling from one of the canes behind him.

What was he to do? He automatically reached along his bond with Catherine and discovered that she was home and looking for him. Jacob was contentedly munching a cookie. He sent out a distress call, was gratified when he felt her run in panic into the garden. She stopped abruptly, her puzzlement evident because she was unable to see him. Jacob had followed her, his cookie forgotten in the pain he had also felt through their bond.

"I'm over here," he yelled, grunting again as the canes shook and tightened their grip. His hair was now so caught that his head was at an awkward angle and he could not even look straight ahead.

"Catherine," he moaned.

Immediately, he felt her nearby and caught a glimpse of blue as she assessed the situation. Jacob was trailing her, still dressed in his Tunnel clothes. She knelt down on the path and looked under the canes at him.

"Vincent, whatever are you doing under there?"

He could feel her humour building and became gruff in his embarrassment.

"I'm trying to cut down dangerous growths in our garden so that our son will be safe," he said imperiously.

"But they got you instead," Catherine observed.

"Well, there were more of them than I thought," Vincent admitted. "Catherine, you have to help me. My hair is being ripped out by the roots. And I'm dying the death of a thousand cuts." His voice sounded plaintive, even to himself.

She moved sideways and he moaned in pain as he tried to follow her movements.

"Just be patient, Vincent. I'll be right back. Jacob, come with me."

Vincent waited, getting hotter and more despairing by the moment. Eventually he heard two sets of footsteps returning.

He watched as something tore into the canes and lifted them up, exposing a glorious patch of daylight. Catherine hauled the bundle to one side with a rake and then worked a little closer. This time he yelped as something pulled at him. She immediately let the pile down again a little and had Jacob hold the rake high enough for her to crawl in. She used a pair of shears to clear a tunnel, nearly reaching him, then began to snip upwards. Then she sidled back out and took the rake from Jacob, hauling the cut canes to join their fellows. There was now an enormous cleared patch in front of him. But he was still caught from behind.

Catherine knelt down in front of him and examined his predicament. She was wearing heavy duty leather gloves that reached her elbows and looked huge in a pair of his old leather dungarees. She moved around him slowly, snipping here and there. Then she got the rake and again lifted the cut portions away. Soon he was able to sit up, but the pain on his scalp remained. His hair seemed to be sprouting tiny green, viciously barbed tendrils.

Catherine knelt in front of him again and clipped around his head. She managed to clip free enough of the clinging stuff for him to stand up. She rescued his hat and handed it to him. He took off his gloves with relief and put them in it.

"Come inside," she said, taking his hand. "You'll have to sit down so I can do this properly. Come along Jacob."

The three of them went into the house and Vincent was directed to a stool in the kitchen. What followed could only be described as exquisite pain. She was gentle, but the blackberry thorns were persistent and she had to keep her gloves on. Jacob stood open-mouthed watching this process, wincing every time Vincent did. Catherine had her emotions under strict control, but even so looked pale by the time she put down the scissors and took off her gloves. Large hanks of his golden hair were on the floor, tangled with prickly tendrils. She quickly swept

them up and into the garbage can.

She sighed and looked at him, tears released at last to run down her face.

Their tears mingled as she put her hands around his neck to kiss him.

“Oh Vincent, your hair,” she mumbled into his ear. “I hope the pixies appreciate your sacrifice.”

“Fairies,” he corrected her, nuzzling her neck.

She sat down on his lap and buried her face in his shoulder, shaking with emotion, part humour, part sorrow. Vincent put one arm around her and the other around Jacob as he shuffled near. The worst pain from his scalp relieved, he now felt the pinpricks of dozens of minor injuries elsewhere. He would have to take a bath in baking soda to ease the pain. He hoped no thorns were caught in his hide or Catherine have to help him again - with tweezers this time.

Catherine turned her head to look at them both and sighed ruefully. They were so alike. They both rushed blindly in where angels feared to tread – and expected her to pick up the pieces. They were also unapologetic to a fault. That puzzled her, come to think of it.

“Why is it that neither of you ever says ‘sorry’?”

Jacob answered. “Because we know you can tell when we’re sorry. We don’t need to say it.”

“And equally, there’s no point saying it if we aren’t sorry,” Vincent finished for him.

“Like father, like son,” Catherine remarked. “Devastating logic – even in the face of disaster. Thank heavens this time it was only your hair.”

She laughed, kissing her two favourite men one after the other. She felt their love – and decided that was all she really needed, after all.

END

Cat Fits

*Cruel, but composed and bland
Dumb, inscrutable and grand,
So Tiberius might have sat
Had Tiberius been a cat*

- Matthew Arnold

It was fall now, and Vincent was in the garden cutting and clearing up remains of his extravagant flowers. The sun was no longer a threat to his tunnel-adapted skin, so he was wearing a long black tank top and shorts. Catherine had bought him a number of them after she had recovered from her tumble down the stairs declaring them the sexiest thing she had ever seen him wear. He had to admit he liked them too – but because he liked the slight breeze stroking his hirsute body. It was a magical sensation and he never tired of it.

All that was left in the garden now were the hollyhocks and willowherb – their purple and yellow a beautiful counterpoint – and the big fans of Russian sage. He had already harvested a lot of the latter. William used it generously in his stews and soups, and Vincent found both the flavour and the scent delightful. He had bunches hanging from the kitchen ceiling to dry. Catherine, who had gained some expertise in both kinds of one-pot meals, also used it. To Vincent, it smelled like summer.

He carried armloads of dead flowers to the compost pile next to the shed. He had built a low wooden enclosure to contain it and periodically shoveled soil on top. Now, the pile was growing unwieldy. Those damnable berry canes were preventing proper settling. He would have to cut them into smaller lengths.

He was chopping the canes when he gradually became aware of an annoying noise. The door on the garden shed, which did not close properly, was squeaking in the wind. He sighed and went into the shed to find the can of lubricating oil. He found it pushed into a corner and diligently oiled the door's two hinges until they were quiet. He was testing the door with satisfaction, when the identical noise started again. It wasn't coming from the door now.

Puzzled, Vincent tried to locate the source and realized it was coming from the space between the shed and the compost pile. He got down on his hands and knees and peered into the dark crack, shading his eyes to see better. There was something there, something small. An animal. He reached in a long arm and was immediately stabbed by needle-sharp claws. He yelped and looked at his fingers. They were bleeding. He sucked them and went back into the shed for a leather glove. Then he reached in again until he felt something soft and made a grab for it. There was a plaintive screech, but he got a grip on its source and carefully brought it out into the light.

It was a tiny ginger kitten. What else? He was holding it by the scruff and all four legs were windmilling, the tiny paws extending needle-like claws. It was emitting the peculiar squeak, exactly like the rusty shed hinge.

Vincent sat down on the ground and removed the glove. He put the kitten in his lap, and began stroking it lightly. It immediately stopped its struggle and rolled on its back to have its belly rubbed. Vincent complied, realizing as he did so that the little creature was mere bones and fur. Some cat must have had a litter under the pile and this was the only survivor. Now the kitten was happy, its tiny body vibrating with a purr completely out of proportion to its size. Vincent abruptly decided he had done enough gardening for the day.

Cradling the kitten, he put his tools into the shed and closed the door. Then he went inside and gave his charge a saucer of milk. It did not attempt to lap it up and did not appear to know what to do. Vincent heated the milk, then found the eyedropper that Catherine used to measure warm olive oil into Jacob's ears when he had ear infections.

For the next hour, Vincent sat on a kitchen chair with the kitten on its back in his lap. He squeezed eyedroppers full of milk into its insatiable gullet. He had to heat up a second pan of milk. By the time it had swallowed the better part of two cups its little tummy was distended and it was purring with a noise like a ratchet wrench. Examining it carefully, Vincent realized it was a male. He had read somewhere that true ginger cats were always male.

He carried the purring bundle with him while he found a cardboard shoe box and lined it with a dish towel. He put the box next to the radiator in the kitchen.

He was washing his hands when Jacob came bounding up the basement stairs, followed by the more sedate tread of Catherine. He quickly dried his hands as his son burst into the kitchen and jumped into his arms. Vincent lifted Jacob up to eye level and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Jacob put his hands around his father's neck and hugged him.

"And what mischief have you been up to today," Vincent asked the squirming bundle.

"William taught us kitchen safety," he crowed as Vincent put him down. "We made cupcakes."

Vincent looked over his son's head at Catherine, who smiled, dangled a bag and put it onto the table. She joined her two favourite men in a hug. Their bonds radiated with their absolute love. All three sighed.

"Well, he learned more than that, but I guess the times tables aren't very exciting," Catherine finally managed to say.

"But very necessary, Jacob," Vincent reminded their son.

"I know Dad. But William is fun."

"Didn't he growl, just a little," Vincent asked, smiling. Everyone, especially the children, knew that Williams outbursts were just bark without bite.

"Aw no. He did clap Willis on the head for sticking his finger in the batter, though. Very unsanitary," Jacob laughed as Vincent put him back on his feet. Willis was Pascal's youngest.

There was a rusty squeak from the box on the floor and Vincent remembered his little charge. Jacob heard it too and gave a good imitation of that sound as he spotted the source and knelt to look at it. He stroked the kitten gently, his bond transmitting his delight to both his parents.

Catherine smiled, but was obviously puzzled.

"Vincent?"

"Ah, I found him stuck between the shed and compost pile. It's very thin and I fed it warm milk with your eyedropper."

Catherine hugged her hairy husband, then tilted her mouth up to be kissed. He used their private bond to transmit his pleasure and passion. It was something they had learned to do early on. Jacob was still connected to both of them, but their own, very private emotions now used a dedicated pipeline.

Catherine looked at Vincent with a promise in her eyes and he sighed, hugging her close. He would have to wait. Reluctantly, Catherine stepped out of his embrace and regarded him.

"Hmmm. You look scrumptious in that tank top, Vincent. But now it has cat hair on it."

Vincent looked down at himself for the first time.

"I guess I'd better not wear black with that creature around."

"Oh you can, Vincent, but you'll have to get used to using a brush. Actually, we'd better confine it to certain rooms, or we'll have cat hair in places we would rather not.

"Which reminds me - I'd better get some supper going. Could you take Jacob upstairs and make sure he changes and washes up? I'll find a place to put the kitten where it won't interfere with our cooking."

Vincent took Jacob upstairs and Catherine thought quickly. She definitely did not want an animal in the kitchen. The den would be the best place, she thought, and carried the box there, putting it near the radiator. The kitten was asleep. She closed the door with a sigh. She liked animals but was not sure a kitten was a good idea. They were a busy family and with others coming and going all the time. The cat was going to be a nuisance if it were not trained properly.

Litter box! It needed a litter box! Catherine ran into the kitchen, rooted through the cupboard for a foil roasting pan, and then went outside. They had made a small sandbox for Jacob, and she quickly scooped some into the tray. That should be enough for now. She would have to buy some cat litter. Cats usually did not need any training in the use of a litter box, once they understood its purpose, but she placed some old newspapers next to the tray near the shoebox. Thank goodness they had hardwood floors. Easier to clean up messes.

Then she washed her hands and dug into the freezer for one of her pre-made cartons of stew. She missed William's meals, but felt they should not join the tunnel community any more often than necessary. He had taught her everything she knew about one-pot meals, though. They were true Tunnel food, and her specialty. She was grateful that Vincent did not demand frequent T-bone steaks or ribs like other husbands.

In short order she had the stew ready and a pile of toast made from William's wonderful bread. She could never refuse that - or his muffins, pies and cakes. He was only too happy to indulge herself and Vincent.

Vincent and Jacob returned and they all sat down to eat. Jacob was anxious to see the kitten again and nearly inhaled his food in his hurry. His parents exchanged glances, and admonished him, with little effect. They did make him stay until he had eaten everything, including a cupcake, then he ran into the den. Vincent followed while Catherine put the dishes into the dishwasher.

Vincent had barely got in the door when a hurricane of ginger fur launched itself at his legs. It scrambled up him, its needle-sharp claws digging into the sweat suit he had changed into, and therefore mostly missing his skin. The kitten reached his upper chest and pulled itself under his hair, taking up position his right shoulder and purring.

Jacob stood looking up at him with his mouth open.

"I think he likes you, Dad," was his son's unnecessary comment.

Vincent tried to extract the kitten from his clothing, but was rewarded with needles in his neck. He grunted and gave up. He sat down in his favourite chair and picked up a book. He was sure the cat would get bored and leave.

Jacob sat on the arm and began stroking the kitten, whose purr elevated to ratchet level again – right into Vincent's ear, making it impossible for him to concentrate. He sighed and put the book down, just as Catherine came in. She took one look at the tableau in the den and burst out laughing.

Vincent looked at her and grimaced. "Catherine, it isn't funny.

"Well Vincent, pirates have parrots, so why can't you have a kitten on your shoulder?"

Jacob jumped on that immediately. "That's what we'll call him ... Pirate."

Vincent looked even more annoyed. "Whatever he's called, I can't concentrate with him purring in my" He stopped and a distant expression came into his eyes. Catherine felt a sudden frisson of delight through their bond. Jacob felt it too and giggled. She got closer to see what was happening under Vincent's hair. Then she giggled too. Pirate seemed fascinated by Vincent's slightly fuzzy ear. She could understand that. She was rather fond of it, and its mate, herself.

"Vincent, it seems that Pirate has discovered one of your ...um ... 'e' zones."

She sat down on Vincent's lap, stroking his chest. She planted a kiss on his lips and he focused on her. He was purring now too, and the result was an a-capella of delight.

"Gosh Jacob," Catherine remarked after a few moments. "You and I are being left out of this mutual admiration society, just because we can't purr."

She gathered her son to her lap and Vincent put his arms around them both, their bonds once again making a circle of love. The kitten, perhaps sensing it had been pre-empted, jumped into Jacob's lap. It quickly curled up and went to sleep.

Vincent looked down at the ginger ball of fur and sighed.

"Catherine, this cat is far too clever – and at such a young age. We will never be able to part with him now."

"True Vincent, but that's all right. He's lovely. We'll just have to make sure no catnip gets in the house. Did you hear that, Jacob?"

"Yes Mom. What's catnip?"

"It's something they stuff cat toys with. Your father is allergic to it. Okay?"

Vincent was shaking now and suddenly roared with laughter. His eyes burned into his wife's over Jacob's head.

"Catherine, you'll never let me forget that, will you?"

"Vincent, I never want to forget it myself. If I hadn't tossed that toy into the fireplace, who knows what would have happened? We might be there yet."

"Did Daddy get sick," Jacob asked, sensing something between his parents he could not understand.

"Not really sick, Jacob, just ... um ... dazed. Your father has a very sensitive nose."

Catherine got a grip on herself and quickly gathered up Jacob, who grabbed the kitten in his lap.

"Don't you have some homework, Jacob? Let's put Pirate back to bed. He's had a busy day."

"I just have a report to write," Jacob admitted, then smiled as he put the kitten back into its box. "I think I can put Pirate in it."

"When you're finished your homework, you get into your pajamas. Okay?"

"Okay Mom." Jacob ran upstairs to his room.

Catherine returned to straddle Vincent's lap. They carefully used their private bond as they indulged in some face-to-face time. Catherine reached her hands down Vincent's sweat pants to cup that soft and furry part of his anatomy. His automatic growl lit her with passion, as it always did. He put his hands under her shirt and cupped her breasts. Their kisses became deeper. They gloried in the sensation of being able to feel each other's touch and emotions - as if they were truly one. It was an unexpected side effect of their private bond and they indulged it whenever they could. They were both gasping by the time their lips separated. Vincent hugged her to him. Suddenly, she stiffened.

"Yikes," she yelped. Pirate was climbing up her back and didn't stop until he reached her shoulder and could jump onto Vincent - then immediately snuggled under his hair - purring into his left ear this time. Vincent began to softly stroke the kitten.

Seen side by side, Vincent's face no more resembled a cat's than her own resembled a chimpanzee's, Catherine thought. And he certainly did not have a cat's eyes. His were bright blue pools she lost herself in. She smiled.

"Well, I think you've made a friend, Vincent. No wonder. If you had saved me, fed me, and stroked me like that, I'd love you too. Come to think of it, you have - and I do.

"Nice of him to wait until we had finished, though," she whispered.

Vincent gazed down at her, love and passion beaming from his eyes.

"Catherine, no cat could ever compete with you. However, if Pirate insists on using me as a ladder, I'm not going to be able to wear those tank tops you like so much - or shorts either."

"Disaster," moaned Catherine. "However, it's almost winter, so by the time you want to wear them again outside, this cat will be much older and have outgrown all that - I hope. And you can still model the tanks in our bedroom."

"True ..." Vincent got a glazed expression again and Catherine realized the kitten was licking his ear.

"No fair," she whispered as she bent over to work on the other one. Vincent's purr began to escalate in volume, making her wish they were upstairs in bed with nothing but skin separating them. What came from his side of the bond was sheer delight. She nuzzled the delectable ear and he shuddered.

"Catherine," he mumbled. "I can't resist both of you. Maybe not even one of you."

"Oh definitely not either of us," she giggled into his soft ear. "But I get finder's rights."

Vincent moved to put his arms around her, forgetting the kitten, which yowled and slid down his back, sprang off the chair into the air and landed on the floor with its tail twitching in indignation. It emitted a plaintive squeak as it regarded Vincent. Catherine craned around to look at it, then laughed until she cried. Vincent laughed with her. The kitten sat down and began to wash itself.

"Oh Vincent, he's irresistible, in more ways than one. But I think he'll be a challenge."

"A special one," conceded Vincent.

"Not as special as you, my love," Catherine whispered.

By mutual agreement, Catherine gave up her perch and Vincent rose and picked up Pirate, placing him in the shoebox. He stroked the kitten, and recited in dulcet tones to its purr.

"Creep into thy narrow bed.

Creep and let no more be said!

Vain thy onset! all stands fast.

Thou thyself must break at last.

Let the long contention cease!

Geese are swans and swans are geese,

Let them have it how they will!

Thou art tired; best be still."

"Ah, Matthew Arnold," sighed Catherine. "'*He spoke, and loosed our heart in tears*'.

"Now let us to the '*land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new*'."

She grabbed Vincent from behind, reaching around to lay claim to her favourite parts, felt him rumble in his automatic growl. She sighed.

"Let's go and see if Jacob has finished his homework and can be put to bed," Catherine whispered. "We'd better shut Pirate in here. I don't want him cuddling up to that precious part of your anatomy. He might never want to leave - and extracting him would be excruciating.

Vincent winced at the thought. "I agree, Catherine. Maybe he'll develop a taste for literature."

"*Puss-in-Boots?*" she asked.

"I think he's already found his place in life. More likely, *The Cat in the Hat*," Vincent chuckled.

END