

TEDDY

by Avril Bowles

(from Reflections in Candlelight)

Catherine held the basket carefully with both hands as she made her way towards the basement entrance of the tunnels. This was one of her utterly spontaneous visits, so she was dressed casually in jeans and boots and didn't even have her purse with her. She'd secured the lid of the basket, stuffed her keys into her jacket pocket and left, eager to be with Vincent. She guessed he'd sense her coming and wasn't disappointed. As she put one foot on the first rung of the ladder the voice that set every nerve end in her body tingling, wafted up from a few feet below.

"Catherine.... this is a most pleasant surprise. I had not expected you this evening." He reached up to lift her down but she shook her head.

"Just take the basket, Vincent, please... carefully now. And don't open it!" Grinning at his puzzled expression, Catherine lowered her precious burden into his waiting arms and then climbed all the way down the ladder.

"What is in the basket, Catherine? Am I not allowed to see?"

"Soon, I promise." She beamed up at him excitedly and held onto his arm, hurrying him along the amber-hued passageways to the home tunnels.

"Where do you wish to go, Catherine?"

"Your chamber." The reply bore not a trace of hesitation. Vincent didn't argue.

When they reached the room that Catherine had come to love almost as much as the man at her side, she took the basket from him and placed it on the bed.

"Take off your cloak, Vincent, and come and sit over here."

Vincent raised his golden eyebrows even higher and did exactly as he was told. Laying his cloak over a chair, he crossed to sit beside Catherine on his bed and looked at her expectantly. She was quite obviously bursting to show him what was in the basket and he had a mischievous urge to see how long she could contain herself. Instead, he inclined his head and looked at her in tender amusement.

"Close your eyes."

"Whatever you say."

"Oh, and... hold out your hands." Catherine raised the lid of the basket and lifted out the content, placing it carefully in Vincent's waiting hands. "Okay... you can open them now." Biting her lips in sudden apprehension, Catherine awaited Vincent's reaction to the tiny, mewling scrap of ginger fluff nestling in his gentle hold.

"It's a kitten."

Catherine didn't know whether to be amused or angry by his declaration.

"His name is Teddy... he's for you... with all my love."

"For me?"

"Mmmm hmmm. For when I can't be here with you. For when you need something to touch and hold, that will love you back... unconditionally... as I do... until I can be with you again."

Vincent stroked the tiny head with one long finger. The kitten rolled over on its back and began to dab at Vincent's finger, seizing it and playfully sinking tiny pointed teeth into the tip. Vincent chuckled softly and raised the kitten to look it in the eye. Teddy paused in his gnawing and stared at Vincent with enormous green eyes. Very slowly, Vincent brought the tiny head nearer to his face until their noses were almost touching. Suddenly the kitten began to purr, and rubbed its little face against the furry space between Vincent's eyebrows.

"Oh Vincent, he loves you already!" cried Catherine, a tear sliding down her cheek at the picture they made.

"I've never had a pet before," Vincent said softly. "Father never wanted to encourage animals Below. I think he felt that if one child had been allowed a pet, then all the others would want one, and soon we would be overrun with animals. Thank you, Catherine, for your thoughtfulness. It seems you are always thinking of me."

Catherine leaned forward, putting her arms around the back of Vincent's head and burying her head against his shoulder. "Always, Vincent... always."

An hour later, a message on the pipes informed everyone that there was to be an impromptu children's poetry-reading in Father's study and anyone wishing to be involved should make their way there immediately for the session to begin at eight-thirty.

Vincent looked at Catherine. "Do you wish to go, or would you rather stay here and play with Teddy?"

"I'd really much rather stay here," Catherine laughed. "But I'd hate to offend anyone, and they're bound to expect you to be there. Come on. Teddy will be quite safe here until we get back."

Vincent poured some water into a small bowl and placed it on his bookshelf over the bed near where the kitten was playing with a frayed edge of one of the many home-made covers on Vincent's bed. Giving it a final kiss on top of the head, Vincent took Catherine's hand and they left the chamber to make their way to Father's study.

After a certain amount of squabbling over who was going to read what and from which book, five of the children eventually settled down to read. Kipper went first, followed by Samantha whose poem was so long that some of the boys started to whisper a few sarcastic remarks about '*some people*' wanting to take centre stage for the whole evening. Father admonished them with his fiercest frown and placing a finger to his lips.

Vincent, Catherine noticed, seemed to be unusually fidgety. He had stifled a cough on two occasions and seemed to be doing a lot of sighing and shifting around in his seat. Puzzled, Catherine laid a hand on his knee and leaned toward him.

"Are you bored? We can leave if you like?"

He shook his head but didn't turn to look at her. It wasn't like him to give the children anything less than his full concentration, but sensing he didn't want to elaborate, Catherine returned her attention to the poetry reading. Moments later, however, she felt Vincent move again beside her. When she glanced at him he was dabbing his eyes with his handkerchief, and while the poems were beautiful, she couldn't imagine that they would move Vincent to tears.

"What is it, Vincent? Are you all right?"

He leaned toward her and whispered in a voice that sounded strained and huskier than usual.

"Excuse me for a moment, Catherine." He stood up quietly and left the room.

Grateful that they were near the doorway, Catherine looked around and, realizing no one seemed to have noticed Vincent's departure, rose to follow him. She found him, coughing, several yards away in the passage. Concerned, she rubbed his back, and when he looked up she was shocked to see his eyes streaming.

"Vincent! Come on, let's go and get you a drink of water." He nodded and allowed her to lead him towards William's kitchen. Once there, Catherine made him sit down while she quickly ran a glass of cold water. He drank it straight down and took a deep breath.

"I apologize, Catherine. I could feel a tickle in my throat before we left but I thought I could control it. I do hope the children won't be angry with me."

Catherine sat down in front of him and gently wiped his eyes. "Don't be silly. It can happen to anyone. It happened to me on a crowded subway once and I felt as if the whole train was looking at me and wanting to tell me to shut up!"

Vincent waited a moment, taking a few deep breaths before he stood up. It was then that Catherine noticed how he seemed to be wheezing as he breathed. Rising, she laid a hand lightly on his chest.

"Vincent, I'm not sure this is just a tickle; you seem breathless."

"A little," he agreed, covering her hand with his own.

"Perhaps I had better not return to the poetry reading. I would hate to have to make another hasty exit. Would you care to accompany me to the Mirror Pool for a while instead?"

"Sure, if you feel okay."

"I do. It's nothing for you to worry about, Catherine. Perhaps I have a slight cold coming on."

Catherine frowned and took his arm as they left the kitchen. "Maybe. But there was no sign of a cold when I first came down."

When they returned about eleven o'clock, sleepy but happy to have had some precious time alone together, Vincent's cold symptoms had long disappeared. They stopped off at his chamber so that he could collect his cloak before walking Catherine home, and were concerned to find that little Teddy had disappeared.

"Where could he have gone to?" asked Catherine anxiously.

"Don't worry. I'll search for him all night if I have to," Vincent reassured her. "I'll find him. Now come on, it is time you were in bed, Catherine."

Concerned though she was for the kitten's safety, she was unable to resist a deliberately provocative reply just to see his response. "Oh, I couldn't agree more, Vincent. Care to join me?"

He inclined his head indulgently. "That subject is not for discussion right now, Catherine."

"Spoilsport," she pouted, but snuggled under his waiting arm and held him around the waist with both arms all the way to the threshold.

"See you tomorrow?" she asked as they kissed goodbye.

"Tomorrow," he confirmed. "Be well."

"And you."

Vincent didn't have to look far to find Teddy. As he peeped into one of the childrens' chambers, he spotted the kitten curled into the arms of little Alex, a four-year-old who had come Below only six months previously when both his parents had been killed in a road accident. Vincent smiled affectionately at the sight of the toddler and the kitten made. As he was about to turn and leave, the child called out to him.

"Vincent, is the kitty cat yours?"

Vincent returned to sit on the edge of the youngster's bed. "Yes, Alex. Catherine gave him to me. But if you want him to, he can sleep on your bed for tonight... if he's no bother?"

Alex smiled. "Oh no. I'd like him to stay. He's cute. 'Night Vincent."

"Goodnight Alex. Sleep well."

"Sure. You too." Vincent tucked the covers more securely around the child and stroked both little heads.

In his own chamber, he undressed and climbed into bed where, to his shame, he pondered on the possibility of what would be happening at the moment if he'd taken Catherine up on her suggestion. He reached out for her along the thread of their bond. She was relaxed and happy. He was sure she was also lying in bed thinking of him.

The following morning Vincent was about to leave for breakfast in the dining room when Mary called to him from outside his chamber.

"May I come in, Vincent. I have someone here to see you."

"Of course, Mary... please, come."

Ushered gently into the room by Mary came Alex, clutching Teddy in his arms. "I brought him back, Vincent. I guess he's hungry."

Vincent knelt down and accepted the kitten from the boy. "Then I'll have to fix him some breakfast, won't I? Catherine left two tins of kitten food in the basket. Would you like to help me?"

The child's eyes lit up immediately. "Sure, that'd be neat!"

Mary smiled fondly and reached into the basket on the floor beside her. "It's a good job it's one of those ring pull tins. We'll have to get you a tin opener, Vincent, in case the next lot are the old-fashioned kind."

She watched while Vincent and Alex carefully spooned out the cat food onto a saucer and then turned to leave. "I guess you two will come for breakfast eventually," she smiled.

Vincent looked up. "Oh yes, Mary, don't worry. I will bring Alex with me."

Breakfast was all but over by the time Vincent and Alex made their way to the dining room, but they were able to find some cereals and muffins before William insisted on clearing away.

Since it was Saturday, as in the world Above, less people in the tunnels were working, and Vincent decided to give Father a chance to beat him at chess. They both knew this was unlikely, but the old man liked to keep his hand in, and worked on the principle that while there was life, there was hope. They sat companionably, either side of the chess board, a cup of hot tea at their elbows.

Catherine arrived soon after they had begun, but insisted that Vincent continue and that she was happy just to sit and watch. They hadn't been playing long when Vincent began blinking and rubbing his eyes. This was followed by an irritating, ticklish cough which left him wheezing uncomfortably.

"Whatever's the matter, Vincent?" Father joked. "Has some tea gone down the wrong way? You're quite

putting me off my game."

Catherine frowned and uncurled herself from her position to Father's couch, moving to sit on the arm of Vincent's chair.

"It's happening again, Vincent. Here..." She pulled a clean handkerchief from her pocket and he took it gratefully to wipe his eyes.

"What do you mean, It's happening again?" Father queried. "Are you unwell, Vincent?"

"I don't... think so. It's just this... foolish cough seems to make my eyes water."

"Listen to his breathing, Father," urged Catherine. "He sounds almost asthmatic to me."

"Mmmmm. Now that you mention it... he does. I'll get my bag."

"Father, please... it is nothing. It passed very quickly last night." Vincent drank his tea right down to the bottom and leaned back in his chair. Catherine's handkerchief pressed to his right eye.

Father completely disregarded his son's assurances and limped over to retrieve his medical bag from the cupboard. Returning to the big, old-fashioned desk, he took out his stethoscope.

"Open your shirt, Vincent. I want to listen to your chest."

"Father, no..." Vincent protested, but he was cut off by the feel of a cold silver disc being pressed against his chest as Catherine slipped two of the leather ties on his shirt. Father listened in four places and then raised his eyebrows, removing the instrument from his ears and laying it on the table.

"Are you satisfied, Father?" Vincent asked darkly, embarrassed to be the centre of such unwarranted attention. "I told you there was nothing wrong."

"Well, yes and no," the old man replied. "There's certainly no sign of any illness. Does your chest hurt when you cough?"

Vincent shook his head irritably. "No. It merely feels tight and infuriatingly ticklish.... I wish I could scratch it from inside."

"What about your eyes?"

"A little sore while they're watering, but it doesn't seem to last more than ten or fifteen minutes and then I'm fine again."

"Mmmmm. It's very much like an allergic reaction. Have you eaten anything different recently, or come into contact with anything unusual, can you recall?"

Vincent and Catherine looked at each other. "Teddy!" They both chorused, causing Father to stare at them as if they'd both gone crazy.

"What, or who is Teddy?"

Catherine laughed and hugged Vincent as he retied his shirt. "Teddy is a beautiful little kitten I brought for Vincent to keep him company when I'm not here. Do you really think he could be the problem?"

The old man sat down heavily and picked up his cup. "I'm afraid it looks very much like it. Some people have a very strong allergic reaction to the fur of a cat. Whoever would have thought you'd be one of them, Vincent?" He began to chuckle as he sipped his tea.

It was an unwritten law Below, that while Vincent's differences were spoken of from time to time when the occasion seemed to demand it, his physical resemblance in some ways to the most powerful and majestic member of the feline family was never, ever referred to. It therefore struck all three of them that the most wonderful thing little Teddy could have done for Vincent, was to provoke this particular allergy.

"Well," laughed Catherine, raising Vincent's hand to place a kiss on its palm. "It looks as if I'll have to take Teddy back Above and find him a new home. I can't very well keep him myself, otherwise you wouldn't be able to visit."

"I have another idea." Vincent blinked and, satisfied that the watering in his eyes appeared to have ceased, put the handkerchief in his pocket. "This reaction seems to occur after close physical contact with the kitten. He slept with young Alex last night and I was fine, even though he'd spent part of the evening in my chamber."

He looked up at Catherine. "There is no need for you to find a home for Teddy Above, Catherine. I'm sure Alex would love to care for him. That way I can still see him and know that he represents your feelings for me, but I won't have to endure this...." He took a deep breath and touched the fingers of one hand to his chest,"discomfort."

"Sounds logical," Father nodded. "Do you agree, Catherine?"

"Oh yes! I'm so glad Teddy can stay Below." She looked at Vincent. "If you're absolutely sure. Let's give it a month's trial, okay?"

Vincent smiled and stood up. "Agreed. But I am almost certain it will be all right. Now, let us go and tell Alex he has a new pet. Will you come with me, Catherine?"

She stood up and took his outstretched hand. "See you later, Father?"

The old man smiled and nodded. "Of course. Perhaps we can finish this game that was so inconveniently aborted, Vincent?"

"Certainly, Father."

Alex's face when Vincent knelt in front of him and solemnly asked him to look after Teddy, brought a tear to Catherine's eye. When she looked at Vincent and saw that his eyes too, were shining with tears, she was unsure if this was brought about by emotion, or by the fact he had held the kitten close one last time before handing him over.