

Teapot

Jane M. Lindskold

They were stuffing me into the teapot again. I'd been sleeping, which I feel is the only reasonable way to get through an eternal tea party. Now, without a proper pause to come around, I was struggling to keep my nose out of the tea, my paws sliding on the soggy mash at the bottom of the china pot. My struggles did me no good.

With a resounding "Heave! Ho!" the Mad Hatter and the March Hare popped my haunches in through the opening and I heard the lid rattle into place.

My head went completely under but I managed to twist until the tip of my nose poked enough above the surface that I could breathe. Then I heard the Hatter speaking to the Hare.

"May I have some more tea?"

"Of course," he grunted as he raised the teapot, heavier by one soaked dormouse.

The teapot tilted and though I scabbled with my paws against the slick china, I was poured out through the spout, landing indecorously on my haunches on something hard.

Someone screamed—a high, shrill noise that curled my wet whiskers.

I blinked tea from my eyes. The tea table had vanished. Instead of having poured out amid the clutter of cups, saucers, and bread and butter plates, I was sitting on a blue-and-white tiled floor, surrounded by all manner of polished cabinets. A large fireplace with a kettle on the hob dominated one wall.

Three large faces, each nearly as large as my entire body, were staring down at me. One face was dominated by a large red "O" that I realized, as an afterthought, was a mouth.

"Good heavens, Elsie," said one. "What is that!"

"I don't know, Lacie," Elsie replied. "Do you know, Tillie?"

"I most certainly do not." Tillie—who was apparently the screamer—leaned forward. "It looks rather like a rat, but it's too fat. Perhaps it is a rabbit."

"No, it cannot be a rabbit," Lacie interrupted bossily. "It doesn't have long enough ears. Could it be a guinea pig?"

"Can't be," Tillie shot back. "It has a tail. Guinea pigs don't have tails."

I yawned mightily. I couldn't think of the last time I had been awake for this long.

"I am a dormouse," I started to explain, but Tillie was screaming again.

"Look at those horrible teeth!" she shrieked, backing away, crashing into Lacie, and bringing them both to the floor.

Elsie darted over to help them to their feet. Viewing the chaos critically, I decided to take my leave without completing my introduction.

Everything in the room seemed to be on an unnecessarily large scale, but a big door is as good as a small one when it comes to making an exit. Once through the door, I found myself in a completely different area. The white and blue tiles had vanished along with the tall counters and gleaming brass and chrome fixtures. In their place were grassy lawns and towering trees. The sun blazed overhead, indecently bright.

I scurried off to the shade of a nearby oak. I desperately wanted a nap, but more urgent than my desire for sleep was my fear that I was stranded in this strange realm. I knew how these things worked. Logically, as I had come here by being poured from a teapot, so I needed a teapot to return. I had seen a teapot on the hob in the room I had vacated, so I needed to get back to it. While I worried over how I was going to manage this, sleep claimed me.

I awoke to a dreadful shock. The sun had moved. When I had fallen asleep, it had been directly overhead. Now it was midway on the western horizon. However, this place of horrors was not through

shaking my sanity. When I looked back to where the door had been, I now saw a towering structure replete with towers, porches, gables, and lace-curtained windows. It was bordered with bright flower beds.

My door was still there, but from this vantage it was much smaller than I recalled. I wondered if I could get through it again.

As I contemplated the scene, Elsie, Tillie, and Lacie came out through the door. Each bore a pad of paper, a metal pencil box, and a fat cushion. They marched across the lawn and set their cushions in a row between me and the door. When they were seated, they busied themselves opening boxes and turning pages.

"I hate drawing lessons," Lacie said and pouted, sharpening a pencil.

"We live well, and a lady must learn to draw," Elsie replied sanctimoniously, her pencil already busy.

"But houses?" Lacie retorted. "I'd like to draw something rare—a moonrise or a mountain. Maybe even a monarch."

I started slowly walking across the lawn, heading towards the door. I hoped that the three girls wouldn't see me, but a shrill scream from Tillie banished that hope.

"The rat! The rat!"

"It can't be a rat," Elsie scolded. "Rats are gray. This creature has brown fur, rather pretty brown fur at that. It reminds me of the trim on Mama's best gloves."

My heart softened towards her, but I didn't wait around to see if she would pat me. With an almost athletic leap, I hid in some shrubs, creeping away under their rather thorny protection. But as I crept, sleep crept up on me. The last thing I heard as I drowsed off was Elsie rattling in her pencil box.

"Would either of you like some treacle? I have a jar here and some bread."

"No, thank you," Tillie answered. "I have some Turkish Delight."

"Treacle?" Lacie said. "Well..."

When I awoke, the sun had vanished, leaving the world a dull gray. The grass was damp and the girls were gone. The door, sadly, was closed. I hurried up to it, but it grew larger as I came closer. Although a dormouse is a much more statuesque creature than a house mouse, I still could not reach the latch.

Elsie, Tillie, and Lacie were inside. When I pressed my ear to the door, I could hear them arguing about someone named Millie. I looked around the dooryard, but no useful mushrooms or cakes presented themselves. At a loss as to how to get through this door, I decided to make my way around the house and try to find another entry.

Moonlight and houselight cast disconcerting shadows, distorting the decorative greenery around the house into dancing monsters. The roses I saw illuminated by the scattered light were neither red nor white, but unnatural shades such as yellow and pink. The lot were rudely uncommunicative. I tried a polite "Good afternoon" but not one answered.

An eerie "too-who" that made my fur stand on end stopped my attempts at civility. Then a silent monster with a hooked beak and glowing golden eyes swept down on me. I dove beneath a shrub with a speed that surprised me, but my troubles were not ended.

A large ginger cat, wicked and unsmiling, sprang from ambush. I hauled my tail from beneath her paw and rolled out into the open, the cat toying with me before closing for the kill. I jogged across the weirdly dappled lawn, barely ahead of her, my every breath aching in my sides, my feet protesting such ungentle exertion. I was near collapse when the owl glided in for another attack.

I froze in pure terror. The cat could not stop as quickly. Her momentum carried her up and over my huddled mass. Then a shrill caterwaul rent the darkness as the owl's claws bit into the cat's shoulder. Still trembling, I hurried back to the shelter of the house, hardly believing my good fortune. A shower of fur and feathers dusted the dappled greenery in my wake.

I didn't feel more than the least bit sleepy as I continued my search. The house's basement windows were locked securely, but at last I found a hole gnawed in the wood. It was a bit smaller than I would

have liked, but I gamely poked a paw inside. A sharp snap and a sharper burst of pain at my paw tip rewarded my effort. Drawing my injured member out, I found a mousetrap securely clamped around two of my toes. Pressing down on the release with my uninjured paw, I freed myself and hurried on—leaving the trap buried in some loose dirt so that its evil could work no more.

Sucking on my injured digits, I rounded a corner of the house. A large porch decorated with pots of geraniums dominated this side. Nodding a greeting to the flowers, I mounted the stair and found another door. Alas, this one was on the same titanic scale as the first, and I was near to weeping when I noticed a smaller door set within the first. The legend above it read "Mail" in curling script. Not seeing one labeled "Mouse," I supposed that this must do.

Stretching to the tips of my hind paws, I lifted the bronze shutter with my uninjured paw and bent to squeeze myself through. Nose and front paws fit without much difficulty, but my torso was well rounded from too much bread and butter or perhaps from taking cream and sugar in my tea.

Undaunted, I kicked and pulled and squirmed, my abused tail reminding me that the cat might come a-hunt-ing at any moment. Nor was I particularly enchanted by the prospect of Elsie, Tillie, or Lacie finding me. Thus far, the other side of the mail slot was a dull, dark place. However, I had no desire to be pitched out into the owl-and-cat-infested wilds by irate young ladies.

With a final heroic kick, I pushed my way through the slot. The shutter snapped shut with a parting pinch to my tail tip as I was propelled into the darkness. I fell for what seemed like an extraordinary distance, given that outside I had been able to reach the mail slot merely by stretching.

I landed with a clatter. No one screamed. No one yelled. The only sound, other than my labored breathing, was a familiar voice humming, "Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! How I wonder what you're at!" Hardly daring to look, I opened my eyes the smallest bit, than wider.

Just down the table, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare were methodically smearing butter into the works of the Hatter's watch. The sun beamed beneficently from the west, marking six o'clock—tea time—just as it should. As the scene fell into further order, I realized that I was upended amid a heap of disarrayed crockery, my feet over my head, the whole of me leaning up against a very familiar teapot.

I thought about moving, but sleep seemed so much more attractive. As I dozed off, the teapot warm at my back and my feet shading my face from the sun, I heard the Hatter and the Hare arguing as to whether a bit of cold tea might rinse the crumbs from the watch-works.

I smiled sleepily, glad to be back home where everything was so very normal.