

Arabella and the Unwanted Playmate

by Molly Montgomery

Arabella flexed her tail. That little human was crying again, and it had woken Arabella from her morning nap. Would she ever cease? Arabella thought the days of the girl child crying were over since she could stand now on her hind legs and grasp what she wanted. She had the freedom to roam around the house, the same as Arabella did, and you didn't see Arabella crying all the time. She fended for herself. Of course, sometimes she gave a pitiful "meow" to get a snack from the woman and she cried out if she was locked into the man's den while they had guests over, but she was drawing attention to her needs. The girl child, on the other hand, was just whining, and it was insufferable.

The adult humans called the girl child Vicky, which Arabella thought was a very ugly name. She supposed it was only fair that it was ugly since the child was quite repulsive. Hairless, except for a tuft of red fur sprouting from her head, and she often stunk since she did her business in her pants. She didn't even lick herself clean after. She was like a miniature version of the humans who Arabella lived with, except she was rude and stupid, pulling on Vicky's tail, not taking a hint from Arabella's hisses. Arabella wished the humans had never made a little human. Everything had been better before Vicky arrived.

Arabella leapt down from her comfortable spot in the living room armchair, narrowly avoided Vicky, who had wandered into the room, her eyes brimming with tears. She streaked past her and down the hall, until she reached the door of the woman's office. The door was closed, and Arabella could hear the muffled sounds of the woman muttering. Arabella could not understand what the woman could be doing in there that was more important than making her child stop her wailing. She scratched at the door.



“Arabella!” the woman snapped, opening the door and inch to poke a long red nail out.
“Stop that right now. I’m on a conference call.”

Arabella slunk away before the woman could say another word, but by that time Vicky had seen the door of her mother’s office was open. She ran over and planted her chubby hand in the doorway before the woman could close it.

“Mommy,” she said. “Mommy, I watch TV now please?”

The woman sighed loudly.

“Frank, I’m going to have to call you back in 5. Sorry about that,” she said. Then she turned to the child. “Vicky, where is your father? He is supposed to be watching you right now.”

Vicky burst into tears.

“Daddy say no TV,” she blubbered. “I wanna watch TV now.”

“Where is Daddy?”

“Da den,” she said, whimpering now. “No Vicky in da den. That’s the rules. That’s what Daddy say.”

“I swear to God,” the woman said. “I leave him alone with his daughter for one hour and he starts playing video games. Let’s go find Daddy.”

“I don’t want to go!” Vicky shrieked. “I want TV!”

She plopped herself down on the floor so she was at eye level with Arabella.

The woman picked the girl up, but she kicked and flailed her arms.

“Suit yourself,” the woman said. “I’ll be right back with your father. Don’t move.”

Classic mistake, Arabella thought as soon as the woman had disappeared down the stairs. If you tell that child to do anything, she will do the opposite. As soon as her mother was out of sight, the girl pushed herself to her feet. She spotted Arabella peering out from the bedroom doorway down the hall.



“Bell-bell!” she screamed, and this time it was from delight. Arabella didn’t understand how the child could like Arabella that much when the cat made sure to show her nothing but disdain, sometimes even outright aggression. But the child did not seem very smart.

Quickly, Arabella darted out of sight and climbed into her hiding spot under the mattress.

“Bell-bell, where you?” the girl called, tottering into the room like a drunk.

Arabella dashed in farther, but it was too late, the girl had seen her tail poking out of the comforter. No matter, she would go where the girl could not follow her. The cat clawed and wiggled, clawed and wiggled, until she reached the other side, her safe spot.

She had carved that hole herself through the mesh mattress frame only to discover that on the other side was not the other end of the mattress. It was a different world entirely, a little pocket of bliss where Arabella could come to relax and no human could find her. That is, until she turned around and saw climbing through the gaping black hole that led back to the out world, little Vicky dragging herself on her hands and knees into her sanctuary.

“No, no, no, go back,” Arabella said, hissing at the girl. Vicky looked puzzled. She cocked one ear towards the cat.

“Bell-bell talk?” she asked.

Arabella arched her back in shock. The girl could understand her. Somehow in this place, she and the human girl could communicate.

Vicky had already moved on to gazing at their surroundings. They were in a vast meadow carpeted by soft clovers and daisies. The clovers were so green it made your eyes hurt to look at them. The soft chirping of birds and crickets pricked their senses, though none were in sight. Above, the sky was a vast velvety blanket of swirling colors, colors that made it unclear whether it was day or night, or another time entirely. The opening they had climbed through was now a rabbit hole. If Arabella had been human, she would have been entranced by the surroundings. Since she



was a cat, she was pleased, but she didn't fall under their spell. She liked visiting here on days when the child was incessantly crying or the humans left her alone at home. But the otherworldly smells here were like artificial scents on markers. They were amusing, but definitively wrong. Arabella knew this wasn't where she belonged, and most importantly, she knew she could always turn back. Vicky would not know this.

"Listen to me," Arabella said, firmly placing her paw on Vicky's arm. "You need to go back home right this minute so you will be safe. It will all feel like a very beautiful dream, and it will haunt your memories for the rest of your life, but you won't be stuck here for the rest of eternity. Go now, before it's too late."

"Wha?" asked Vicky. Arabella let out a loud "hmmph" of frustration. Of course, just because they could speak each other's language didn't mean Vicky understood her. She was still a toddler, and not a very clever one.

"Go home, Vicky," Arabella said, using her head and her front paws to nudge the toddler back towards the rabbit hole. "Back to your mother."

Vicky stepped right over Arabella and continued to totter towards the center of the meadow.

"Butterflies," she said, as if she had not heard a word Arabella had meowed.

Arabella wondered whether she could pick up the girl by the scruff of the neck like she was a kitten and drag her back to the earthly realm, but the human child was too big.

"Why da trees like dat, Bell-bell?" the little girl asked, pointing to the forest beyond the meadow. The bark on the trees was made from the same sinew as Arabella's favorite scratching posts, and instead of limbs, there were perches for her to climb on. These trees had not been here when Arabella first discovered this place, but the world had responded to her desires, perhaps to make it more tempting for her to stay there for eternity. But the world was not calibrated right for a



cat. She would nap and play all she wanted in this world, chasing phantom birds and butterflies, but if she stayed too long, she would get lonely and return to the house where there were humans to acknowledge her dominance.

Still, Arabella couldn't resist the urge to patter over to the trees for a good scratch. She would just take one second to relieve her stress she thought, then she would deal with the girl. But when she turned around, the girl was gone.

"Damn it," Arabella swore. She went back to the meadow and tried to pick up the girl's scent again, but it was faint now, and intermingled with all the strange smells of the world. Then she heard a cry of fear.

"Bell-bell," Vicky shrieked. "Help me! Help me!"

Arabella raced back to the forest and looked up. Vicky was dangling from one of the perches, looking down at the ground below. Arabella didn't know whether gravity worked differently in this world. She always landed on her feet, but the clumsy child would probably hurt herself if she fell. She leapt up the tree until she was right below the girl's dangling feet.

"On my back girl," the cat said. "Come on."

In an instant she was transformed from the size of a housecat into a tiger. She still had the same calico patches, but she was now a sturdy seat for Vicky sit on.

"Bell-bell," Vicky cried, burying her chubby hands into Arabella's fur and holding tight.

"All right, now, don't pull my fur," Arabella said. "I'm a cat, not your stuffed toy."

She hopped down from the tree and sprinted back across the meadow. She could probably get the girl back to the house in time for her mid-afternoon nap. As it was, the girl was already falling asleep on her back.

"Now what do we have here?" a cheery voice boomed from above Arabella. It was so loud that it made her paws quake and woke up Vicky.



Arabella peered up at the sky. It was the stork. Of course, the fairies would take the form of the stork, her least favorite of Vicky's stuffed animals. It was the most useless of toys. A bird that didn't fly, a toy that could be converted into a hat that Vicky had forced Arabella to wear though it was far too large to fit her head, causing her to nearly tear it apart trying to get it off. The world reflected whatever was most dear back to its guests, or its victims, depending on how you looked at it.

"Bell-bell, dat's Sol-mon," the girl said, pointing up at the sky.

"No, it's not," Arabella said. "That is a fairy trying to trick you into thinking it's your favorite stuffed toy, Solomon. Don't listen to a thing it says."

But Vicky had already climbed off Arabella's back and was skipping towards the bird, who had landed next a pond. He dropped from inside his beak a full-size cradle. It was empty, and even to Arabella it looked inviting. She could feel her claws flexing as she imagined kneading the blanket inside, which looked soft as a cloud.

"Vicky, Vicky, Vicky, how we've waited for you," the stork parading as Solomon said. "We just want to welcome you home. Come join us. You'll have candy morning, noon, and night. Ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and most of all, you can watch all the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse you want."

"He's just trying to trick you into staying here," Arabella warned the girl. "But if you go with him you have to stay here for all of eternity. Remember your Mommy and Daddy? You're going to miss them all the time. It'll be like when the babysitter came, and you wouldn't stop crying."

"Oh Vicky," the stork said. "Don't listen to her. You don't even remember the babysitter, do you? And if you stay here, soon enough you won't remember anyone from your past life. You can go back to being just a wee babe again, all cuddled up, with nothing to worry about. We'll take care of you. Everything you need. Everything you want."



The storks' coaxing seemed to work. Vicky dropped to her knees and began to crawl through the grass on all fours, like she had when she was a baby. She even started making gurgling noises that she hadn't made in months.

Arabella considered where her responsibilities lay. If the girl wanted to spend the rest of her life, however long that was until the fairies drained the living essence of her being, playing with unicorns and taking bubble baths, who was she to interfere? She thought about the blissful quiet she would finally have in the house. She hesitated, one paw in the air, ready to abandon the girl to her fate.

But, she thought, if the girl disappeared, it wouldn't be the same quiet that the house had before the humans brought her home. It would be a forlorn quiet, a quiet filled with anguish. Arabella wasn't a dog. She wouldn't save her life for her owners, and she would rather be left alone most of the time. Still, her humans treated her well, gave her pets when she twined her furry body around her legs, and fed her food from cans as magical to her as this world was to the girl. They didn't deserve this, and neither did the girl, stinky as she was.

"That's enough, Solomon," Arabella said, leaping right over Vicky and pouncing on the stork. She pulled off its plushie outer skin to reveal the ugly, hairless fairy underneath, that looked like a cross between a naked mole rat and a mandrake.

"See," Arabella said to Vicky, after she had spit out the plushie stork skin. "That's what a fairy really looks like. You can't trust them."

Vicky shrieked. The furless creature grew until it towered over them.

"Come on, Vicky," Arabella said, and nudged the girl onto her back. "Let's get out of here."

"Not so fast," boomed the fairy's crackling voice. The swirling sky turned black, lit only by flashes of lightning, and it began to pour. Vicky burst into tears.



“I wanna go home, Bell-bell,” she whined into Arabella’s ear as the cat tore a path through the meadow back to the rabbit hole. But the hole had disappeared. She spun, disoriented, looking for the way out. She had never lost it before. She couldn’t lose it.

“Just stop whining and let me think for a second,” Arabella said. The fairy was stomping after them, trying to snatch them with its claws, but Arabella was too quick. She sniffed the air and found the trail that led back to home. She looked around and saw that it came from the cradle, which was seated on an undisturbed patch of the meadow, in strange sunlight. Just beneath the cradle, there was a dark spot. Could that be the rabbit hole?

To get back to the cradle they would have to run through the fairy’s terrifying legs.

“Put your head on my fur, and whatever you do, don’t look up,” Arabella said, and then she tapped into a reserve of energy she didn’t know she had within her. She raced like a cheetah between the fairy’s legs, avoiding his giant, sharp toenails, and knocked the cradle aside. Sure enough, there was a hole in the ground beneath the cradle. She burrowed in it, using her claws to tear through the fabric that separated the two worlds. When she got to the other side, she tumbled out, finding the girl asleep next to her, entangled in the blankets that draped over the bed and sucking her thumb. She was unscathed.

Arabella licked her fingers to check that it was really Vicky, and the girl was, in fact, alive. She nestled against the girl and could hear her deep breaths. The toddler was fast asleep. Might as well join her, Arabella thought, and snuggled up next to her, closing her eyes.

“Look at the two of them,” the mother said, when she found the pair curled up together underneath the blankets. She had spent the past few minutes frantically searching the house for her daughter, wondering if the girl had wandered out into the street. She had even roused her husband from his gaming den and made him search for her. Just when they had started to panic, they finally found the girl and the cat nestled in the blankets.



“I knew they would grow on each other,” the father said, squeezing his wife’s hand. The fight that had been brewing minutes before had dissipated, like they were in the eye of the storm.

Arabella opened one eye and yawned. The toddler stirred.

“Bell-bell,” she mumbled. Then she turned over in her sleep, so she was back-to-back with the cat. The couple noticed the hole the cat had burrowed into the mattress.

“Arabella,” the mother exclaimed. “You’ve been a very bad cat.”

Arabella opened one eye but didn’t respond to the slander. They could think whatever they wanted, she thought. She knew what kind of cat she was, the kind of cat they were lucky to have around. If only, she thought, someone would give her the appreciation she deserved. She yawned and stretched out on the soft blanket and decided a nice long nap would have to serve as her reward.

After that day, Vicky stopped playing with Solomon the Stork. The couple replaced the mattress with a sturdier one that a cat could not scratch a hole into. Arabella was disappointed by this development, but she knew it was only a matter of time before she discovered another corner of the universe hidden in a closet or underneath a sink, hopefully one where she could find some peace and quiet without any nasty fairies interfering. The couple dumped the old mattress in a landfill, where rats found the fairy world, attracted to the scent of delicious trash that wafted from it. They scurried into the portal, never to return.

