

The Itch

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Steven Lovan Cord, after greeting the last invited guests to his retirement party and announcing his capacity as advisor in the company, fell into a contemptible heap before Mrs. Donalson on the floor. Boagaphish, Cord's grey and silver tabby, who's attention was across the room on a tiny ball of fluff, watched with awe and curiosity at Cord's flailing arms and Mrs. Donalson's looks of fear and disgust of such an unsocial act shot randomly throughout the gathering crowd. Boagaphish quickly gave up on the fluff, and cutting through and between many sets of towering thin and thick legs covered in black and blue cloths remarkably similar to those found on his scratching post, stood over Mr. Cord's face. Gazing intently down at his wincing expressions, he sniffed Cord's cheek angularly and reeled back as the face went into spastic convulsions. Such a curiosity, this face, never before had Boagaphish seen it quite like this, the face had always appeared far above him, engrossed in reading a newspaper or the Quarterly Reports for the company while sitting by the fire in the den--one of the few rooms he was allowed in. Never was he given permission to be in Cord's bedroom, or the study, or the library, or the kitchen--except during feeding time when his dish would be placed by the door and the careless servants would "accidentally" kick him in his hind or step on his outstretched tail. And he had sneaked into the basement several times marveling at all the bottles, the sets of tables and pieces of shiny metal bars mounted above them twisting this way and that, and the stink of formaldehyde. The only smell Boagaphish could really identify, by name, was formaldehyde; he remembered the smell when he was sick, lying on one of the cold metallic tables, his vision smoky white, his ears barely able to register the sounds of things clanking together, his body immobile. Cord was standing over him, looking intently down at him, doing strange incomprehensible things, removing pieces from him he did not know what, and the smell.

Yeats, the servant, rushed over and put his arms under Mr. Cord, scooped him up and lifted him away. Boagaphish had seen this spectacle three times now, Yeats was entrusted to everything around the mansion; he helped Cord out of bed in the mornings, plucked him out of his chair after dinner and bathed him most of the time. This had gone on only for the past

several months, ever since Cord had changed and something indefinable had come over him. But Boagaphish never could understand what had caused the change. One day Cord would be nice to him, set him in his lap and stroke his fur, until Yeats told him it was time for bed, then the next he would have nothing to do with him. Lately, in efforts to avoid everyone, he had been content to lie by the fire where he could warm himself to his heart's content. It was the only way he could sooth himself, to subside the strange itchy sensation (especially behind the ears) he almost always had--the heat and Cord's affections--were the only two things that could relieve it. Nothing else could. Not even bathing, which he constantly performed, would send the itch away. He felt as if it might cause him to go berserk after awhile. And maybe Cord got "the itch" and that's why he changed and had not given him his meals or allowed him into the more familiar parts of the house. He had directed Yeats to see to his daily affection who seemed less than adamant at the prospect of such an undertaking. Boagaphish thought Yeats didn't like him, he was unwilling to pet him, his hands cold and clammy, and moving at such a quick pace he felt as if he were getting no affection at all. Besides, he did not whisper to him like Cord did, his breath full of rapid and frequent sighs, disturbed with the idea of doting on such an animal only because his master tells him to. He missed the caresses of his friend. And what would happen now? Now that Cord lay draped over Yeats' arms, who would give him attention? Who would see to his meals? Who would be so clumsy as to step on his tail as he lounged by the fire, and not offer one word of apology? The more he thought about it, the more a sick feeling rushed through him--not to be with Cord at all and be completely at the whims of Yeats. It only made him more nervous, on edge; without brushing by a careful, caring hand followed by a slow, graceful massage that could relieve him, the itch would drive him out of his mind.

He watched Yeats carry Cord away and the anxious, inquisitive crowd huddling and murmuring amongst themselves. Some glances were cast to him, and words were spoken, the emotions behind, Boagaphish could understand; he felt the fear and unrest and apathy in the guests. He had seen them before, when Cord brought him to this same group of people some time ago. All eyes were upon him and fingers pointed and heads shook and nodded like wind chimes caught in the breeze--he was certain the fear and the loathing had been directed at him. Back then it didn't bother him, the itch wasn't so bad, but, over the long months, it had gotten much worse.

He was hungry and made his way along the wall to avoid as many of the people as

possible, into the kitchen. If there was food waiting, it could serve as the distraction he desired. And maybe with a full stomach, he could settle down for a nap by the fire and pleasantly dream.

A few morsels lay in his dish and he quickly scarfed them up. Then to the den, another bath and the warmth of the fire where he could feel the heat relax him, taking away the prickly feeling in his hind quarters, and quelling the needle-like sensation in his side. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

He dreamed, of pleasant times and pleasant things. Of long pastures with tall grasses adorned with yellow flowers and butterflies and insects which he could endlessly stalk, chase and pounce upon. The butterflies would always get away. Then, after such an exertion, he could lie down in the grass with the sweet smells in his nose, and sleep peacefully without having to dream. He had a lot of memories in the garden just beyond the walk. Vivid recollections that seemed slightly odd to him. They were like a series of pictures, of photographs, devoid of any emotion as if he were at the window thinking of himself outside. He remembered but couldn't feel them, memory to him was not just a series of pictures but an actual nuance of the experiences. And these memories had no nuances. He found himself wondering if he had ever been in the pasture or garden at all. Had he ever been outside? He didn't know. His unrest was growing and in his dream, as he was lying in the sun, a strange sensation came over him. It started in his side then moved down his leg. It was as if he was feeling a bug crawling into his fur and biting the skin underneath. He turned his head around and bit into the place, but it wouldn't stop, he bit again, nothing. Then he raised his leg to scratch his side but the sensation wouldn't go away. He was frantic trying to put a stop to it. He had to sooth himself, to stop the itch; nothing he did, no matter how hard he tried, would put it to rest. He saw his leg as a blinding swipe, moving so quickly it appeared as a blur. He was pressing his claws deeper and deeper into himself to no avail. Soon, his fur was coming off in large clumps, stripped away to the tender skin--the itch wouldn't subside. He bit into his leg tearing into the flesh, pulling away layer after layer of skin until he discovered a curious sight within. Metal, he saw metal, like the shiny material he had seen in the lab, now it was in his leg, a part of it. Multi-colored pieces of string were wrapped around it, they were hard and when he bit into it, he got a shock. He did not understand but hated what he was seeing. Although the pain, although the shock and although the gradual decrease of the itch, he continued to tear into himself.

Yeats appeared and scooped him up.

"Look at what you've done to yourself!" He said, pulling at his leg. Boagaphish hadn't heard him, he was dazed, still half-asleep, looking about him, watching the scenery pass. Yeats was taking long strides, in a hurry to get where he was going.

"There's little time, I have to do something before the both of you fall apart."

He carried him downstairs to the lab where he saw Cord lying on the cold table he had so many times before. Yeats set him in a chair and went about clanking pieces of metal together--the smell of formaldehyde in his nose.

Yeats' back was to him, and by the incredibly feeble look in Cord's eyes, Boagaphish decided to sit by his side. He bounded off the chair to the table, where he sat on Cord's chest and gazed longingly at him. Cord smiled and tried to raise his hand to pet him, but couldn't move it more than a foot off the table. Then Boagaphish saw multi-colored pieces of string for the second time, this time they were inside Cord's arm, several of the strings were cut and they dangled lazily out of him. They reminded him of his dream, the same strings in his leg. As he went to look, Yeats scooped him up and threw him into the chair, holding down his midriff.

"You stay!"

Yeats frowned, then turned his back and went to Cord. He started playing with the strings, pulling some apart while twisting others together, who then looked at a screen watching wavy lines cascade across it. He fidgeted and poked while the lines shifted. Boagaphish was quite confused as to what was going on, it was as if Cord was some sort of toy doll being taken apart and then sewn back together. He thought of his own leg, the odd strings hanging out of it. He had the uncontrollable urge to pull them out, they seemed so alien, so unnatural, they didn't belong in him. He lay on his side and began chewing.

First the red, then the blue and green; with each sever, the itch lessened. For the first time in his memory, the sensation was finally going away. Relief! It expedited his work--and soon he couldn't feel his leg at all.

"Boagaphish. . ." A weak, familiar voice called. "Boagaphish, come here. . ." Cord's hand patted the top of the table where it lay.

Boagaphish tried to get up but couldn't find his balance, his leg had given out and he tumbled off the chair. Looking at Cord, a sense of bewilderment came over him, and he struggled to regain his composure. Cord's hand once again patted the table. He had to jump up to be beside him, to the one who had always taken care of him, the one who had given him

plenty of affection, doted on him, had given him his meals and most importantly, talked to him as a friend. With all strength left in him, he pushed against his three remaining legs and jumped for the table. He didn't get as far as he wished, only half of his body made it, he held on for dear life, clawing wildly at anything that would keep him from falling to the floor. He brought up his good leg and dug into the edge of the table. It was the stability he needed to pull himself up the rest of the way.

"My lovely Boagaphish," Cord croaked. "Come close to me."

He climbed up onto his chest and peered into his eyes. His skin was deathly pale, the pieces of string were dangling out of his neck. He could barely hear his breathing, the heaving of his chest was slow and erratic. He knew all the signs, his sense told him his friend was ready to pass on. He hung his head and mewed softly. Cord managed an arm up and stroked him behind the ears. He purred.

Then he slid his hand down his back and to his atrophied leg, where his fingers probed the wires. It was then, the relaxing peace ceased and the itch began.

"I'm so sorry I have done this to you," He began slowly. "But I couldn't have you die." Boagaphish furiously scratched himself, the fur coming off his other side. "But maybe I should have," he said in a low tone. "You can't cheat death, can you, my friend? And I have been at his game too long. And I see you have too." He tried stroking him as best he could, perhaps he could settle the itch, as he'd always had.

"An unfortunate side effect to living past your time. I feel the itch too."

He stopped scratching and suddenly looked at Cord.

"If you could only understand me, but you can't, can you? If you could, you would know I want to die. I can't stand it any longer, it has taken over my entire body. I am powerless to put an end to it all. If I only could. . .but old Yeats won't let me. It's not his fault, he's just doing as he's told. Don't hate him for it."

He hacked dryly and his body quivered. He closed his eyes then opened them again-- Boagaphish could smell formaldehyde.

"I want to rest, my friend. As probably do you."

Boagaphish got on his haunches and looked closely at Cord. He knew what he'd said, but didn't know the words. He peered around the lab, Yeats was nowhere to be found. After the last bit of clawing to relieve his own itch, he set out on soothing Cord's.