

The Third Adventure The Enchanted Garden

When Mr. Todd finally stopped driving, Thimble had to scramble to get out of the car unseen. Thimble had never been on a car ride before, and the journey had made his head swim a tad, and his tummy a bit weak. He wiggled his ears, they hurt a little from the sound of the radio. Out he plopped from the car door, worse for the wear, onto the hard pavement.

Ouch, thought Thimble, and then looked up in wonder.

Hard, stony pavement as far as he could see. No flowers, no leaves, no grass, no earth. He turned to follow Mr. Todd (who had collected all his things, and was once again juggling his briefcase, the box of files, and his lunch pail. He had even put the pencil back in his teeth), and it was then that Thimble saw it, the second building he'd ever laid eyes on. It was very unlike the Todd House. It was bigger, made of cold stone and glass. There was not a spot of lemon cream paint to be found. The doors, Thimble presumed that's what they were, were glass like windows and slid open and shut without being touched, and above them was a very large dark green sign, and on it was the creature, the creature with the round eyes.

Thimble shivered. *This must be it*, he thought, *The Terrarium Lab and Research Center for the Preservation of our Global Ecosphere.*

Thimble put his ears back as he followed Mr. Todd across the parking lot. The glass doors slid open like a great mouth, and Thimble found he was trembling a little. He took a deep breath and ran inside behind Mr. Todd.

Thimble gasped. If the outside of the building was cold and stony, the inside was just the opposite. Thimble was met by an absolute wave of heat and humidity, the air around him smelled of flowers. Pungent, velvety flowers, that Thimble had never smelled before. He was standing in the midst of a great lobby, and around him everything was green. There were many human beings walking about. Boys and girls with their parents, they were laughing and exclaiming, and pointing through glass, though Thimble could not see what they pointed at. Behind the glass set into the walls, Thimble saw big, green leaves. Leaves like he had never encountered in the garden behind the Todd House.

Above all the this bustle, a woman's voice spoke:

Welcome to the Terrarium Lab and Research Center for the Preservation of our Global Ecosphere. Our planet is a beautiful place, but we will only be able to save it with the right knowledge and understanding. Every day here at the Research Center our scientists are working to deepen human comprehension of the world we share with animals. Thank you for visiting us.

Then the woman's voice began talking about tour times and special exhibits, and Thimble shook his head and wiggled his whiskers, he suddenly realized he had simply remained standing still in the middle of the lobby.

Where was Mr. Todd? He peered about the crowd of excited people. They were all so big. Finally he caught a glimpse of Mr. Todd teetering toward a pair of metal doors with his box of files. The doors opened with a *ding!* Thimble ran, he was dodging feet every which way. He didn't come all this way to get flattened under someone's shoe! The metal doors were sliding closed with Mr. Todd on the other side. Thimble ran with all his might, but just as he was getting to them, the doors shut tight.

Thimble put his paws up to the metal. He saw his reflection staring back at him, and he thought he might cry. All he wanted to do was find Chickpea, but that was such a big task, and he was such a small mouse. Mr. Todd had taken her here, and Mr. Todd would lead the way, but how would Thimble find her now that he could not follow Mr. Todd through these heavy, shut doors?

Ding!

To Thimble's delight, the doors slid open again, and he rushed right inside. He found himself in a small room, by human standards, with no chairs or tables or windows, and no Mr. Todd. The only thing Thimble saw in the room was a panel with a number of round, white buttons.

"Cool!"

"What are we seeing now?" Two children were being ushered into the room by their mother, Thimble sat very still in the corner.

"The primates," said the children's mother and she pushed a button.

The doors slid closed, and the room began to rumble and shudder. Thimble spread his paws out on the floor as far apart as he could, trying to keep his balance. Then the door stopped shuddering, and came to an abrupt halt nearly knocking the mouse over.

Ding!

The doors slid open, and the two children rushed through them giggling, followed by their mother. Thimble padded out after them, and found he had been transported to an entirely different land. He assumed he was still inside the Terrarium Lab and Research Center for the Preservation of our Global Ecosphere for he could hear the woman's voice coming again from above:

Welcome to The Primate Exhibit. Here you can interact with primates from all over South America and Africa. Each primate enclosure contains plants native to that primate's natural habitat.

The air was more humid than it had been in the lobby, and light poured in everywhere from windows above. Thimble looked up and saw that the entire ceiling was made primarily of windows, and it gave him almost the sense of being outside.

I am in a very new kind of garden, thought Thimble, and indeed he was.

He walked down a path with soft earth underneath his paws, and he smelled the air. Oh, the air. It was filled with the various aromas that come of moisture on plants. Plants that were from far away, plants that made an art out of smelling beautiful. The air was intoxicating and hot.

“Tell me about the flowers,” Chickpea had said on a summer day.

She had been snuggling in the wood chips that lined her cage, enjoying the sun on her white fur.

Thimble was lying next to her just outside her cage on the top of the table. They were holding paws through the bars. Thimble hoped, one day, he would be able to run his paws through Chickpea’s fur,

“Flowers are the most beautiful things in all the world,” he said.

“You haven’t seen all the world, how do you know?”

“I just know,” Thimble squeezed Chickpea’s paw and she looked into his eyes, “Morning Glories, and Snapdragons, Dandelions... I wish I could show them to you. They come in all manner of colors, and hues. Oh Tulips, Tulips are wonderful. You can climb right inside of them and take a nap. A nap in their colors. Red, purple, pink, yellow...”

“I can see yellow flowers from the window. Very tall flowers, as big as Mr. Todd.”

“You mean the Sunflowers.”

“Yes, the Sunflowers.”

“Chickpea,” Thimble had whispered after a moment, “are you asleep?”

She was, she had fallen asleep, holding his paw, smiling slightly in the sunshine.

“Someday,” Thimble whispered, “I will show you all the flowers in the garden. Someday.”

Here in the Primate exhibit, Thimble was dumbstruck. All about him were the most beautiful flowers he had ever seen, an abundance of colors and vibrance. Truly, this garden must be an enchanted garden. He left the path and found a netted barrier between himself and the glorious blossoms. No matter. He was small, and did not hesitate a moment before climbing through the net.

Thimble was in a world of pure delight. He would sniff the air and follow his nose to one



gorgeous blooming beauty after another. A Hibiscus, papery blossoms bigger than himself of yellow, and peach, and dark magenta, unfolding before him. Pink Orchids clustered around him like descending cloud formations. Flamingo Flowers so big and red and smelling so delicious that Thimble climbed right atop one to get his nose as close as he could.



What a magical garden this was. Bewitching, and haunting, and so, so beautiful. Thimble was in paradise. He stood atop the Flamingo Flower, thinking for a moment about how awful it would be to leave this wonderful place.

He was looking around at the gloriousness of the exotic, enchanting garden that stretched before him, and he did not notice that a paw, or a hand, as big as he was, was reaching its lengthy fingers around him. He did not notice that the paw was enclosing his body. In fact, he only looked down when he had been snatched up into the air. He struggled, but he was trapped tight in the paw's grip, he was powerless. The paw, or the hand, rotated Thimble slowly until he was staring into the face of the creature that held him. To Thimble's absolute horror, it was an animal with paws like hands and feet that clung to the vines about it, it had a long tail, and big, round eyes.



Thimble screamed in terror. When mice scream it sounds high like a whistle, and this made the animal with the round eyes laugh. Its laugh chattered and echoed, a great *Ooo, ooo, ooo, aah, aah, aah* that made Thimble go quiet again. For as it laughed, it showed its teeth, and Thimble saw it had long white canines, sharp like Tuppy's, gleaming with saliva.

"Oh, please don't eat me," Thimble cried, and little tears fell down his nose.

"Why shouldn't I?" asked the creature, and its eyes glowed and sparkled with mischief.

"Because I haven't done what I came here to do."

"Well now, that's a different one," said the creature, and it laughed again, the sound bounced off the walls and made Thimble tremble, "a lunch with an agenda."

"I hope I am not just a lunch," Thimble spoke up.

“An entree then,” conceded the creature.

“No, I am *someone*! Even though I am very small,” cried Thimble.

Behind the strange animal’s head, Thimble could see up into the vines and leaves. Now several pairs of big, round eyes were staring down at him.

“I came here with a purpose,” he said to the creature.

“And what was that?” it asked.

Thimble was quiet for a moment. The creature holding him tilted its head inquisitively to one side, and behind it the several pairs of watching eyes tilted their heads, too.

“I came here to rescue someone I love.”

“Oh dear,” the strange animal sighed, “I don’t think I will eat you, after all.”

“Thank you,” said Thimble, but the creature did not deposit him back on the Flamingo Flower as he had hoped, “you can put me down now, if you don’t mind.”

At that it laughed once more, *Ooo, ooo, ooo, aah, aah, aah!*

“No, sweet mouse, you are a case for Calixto. Up you go!” Up went the creature’s hand, or paw, with Thimble clutched in it, and suddenly at the apex of the animal’s reach it opened its palm, throwing Thimble upward into the air. Thimble was flailing freely, and he thought he might plummet to the ground, but another hand-like paw caught him with a jolt. All around was the laughing of the big eyed animals, *Ooo, ooo, ooo, aah, aah, aah!* That paw thrust Thimble as high as it went into the air and again released him. Thimble shrieked, but another paw caught him before he fell. Up he went, higher and higher through the vines. A paw would catch him and throw him upwards, only to be caught by another paw that would throw him upwards again. Thimble was very, very high up now.

Finally, at what must have been the very top, a paw caught him, and held him still. Thimble shook his head, and blinked his eyes. Everything seemed to be spinning, and the creature before him was blurry for a moment, but when it came into focus Thimble saw that while it was certainly one of the big eyed creatures, it had a calm expression, and was



regarding him curiously, but gently. It's grip on him was also gentle, and slowly it placed Thimble on the vine before it with care.

"Hello mouse," the creature said, and his voice was deep and velvety like the aroma of the flowers below, "My name is Calixto."

"My name is Thimble."

"Fitting," said Calixto, and he waited for Thimble to say more. He seemed to be a very patient creature.

Thimble straightened his whiskers, and he told Calixto about the garden, and the sunflowers, and Chickpea asleep in wood chips on a warm summer day. He told Calixto about the scrap of newspaper, and the frog company who'd aided in getting Thimble to the research center, he spoke of Mr. Todd and the elevator, and how he was quite lost now, and only needed to find Chickpea.

Calixto listened, and only when Thimble had finished did the creature speak again. His voice was low and calm.

"Coming here to find your mouse is indeed a great undertaking, and I have no doubt it takes enormous bravery for an animal like you to stray so far from home," Calixto and Thimble regarded one another in silence for a moment, and then Calixto continued, "I would like to help you. There are mice here, Thimble, like the one you lost, but you will not find them in this part of the center, in this beautiful cage they have made for us."

Thimble looked all around them. Could this beautiful place really be called a "cage?"

"Oh yes, this is a cage," Calixto said, "just a big one. Thimble, do you know what this place is for? What the purpose of it is?"

Thimble shook his head.

"It is a place where human beings learn things from animals. In *this* cage of vines and flowers they learn things merely by looking. They think we are beautiful, or strange, or funny, but there are parts of the center where they take a different approach to learning things from us."

Thimble was quiet. It was his turn to listen.

Calixto's very first memory was of his mother. He remembered her only if he closed his eyes and reached his mind way back to the very first thing he could see, or touch rather, because the memory was of her fur. He remembered the way it felt grasped in his hand. It was coarse, easy to grip onto. He remembered the way it felt against his face when he pressed his nose to her back and breathed her in. He remembered the way she smelled, too. Musky, and wild. More than her fur or her smell, when Calixto closed his eyes and took himself back to this memory, he was overwhelmed with a feeling of love, and joy. He felt protected, and he felt that no one

could take him and his mother away from each other. They were free.

His next memories were all white. He saw white lights that reflected off white walls, and white floors, and men and women in white suits. He could close his eyes and see their faces. They were not unkind, the human beings who held him in the white place. They were warm to the touch and he liked to climb into their arms and be held. They spoke gently, and had kind faces, soft smiles, gentle eyes.

He had several memories, however, of being poked with needles. Needles that made him feel sleepy, and he would be taken to rest in a small metal cage with bars, and a blanket at the bottom. He would snuggle into the blanket that only smelled vaguely of himself and the metal cage. He would close his eyes and imagine his mother holding him on her back.

This place, the white place, is where Calixto first began to understand what the purpose of the Terrarium Lab and Research Center for the Preservation of our Global Ecosphere was. There were many animals in the white place with him, other monkeys yes, but also rats, and mice, and just a myriad of creatures. Everyday, the animals took tests. The tests were frightening and difficult at first. Calixto was dropped into a maze and he could not find his way out. It seemed every corner he turned, there was another white wall. Barriers staring back at him. He would grow afraid and cover his eyes and cry. Though, as days went by, the maze began to look different. He stopped being afraid. He began to remember the path he took, and he was met with dead ends less and less frequently. When he turned a corner and found himself face to face with a white wall, instead of shivering and crying as he had done only days before, Calixto would instead take a deep breath, maybe he would stretch. He would turn around and choose a different route. The people in white began to say sentences like, "His cognitive abilities are markedly improving." They talked about "recognition," "problem-solving," and "intelligence."

It was then that the people in white began sitting Calixto in front of a series of pictures and symbols. They would hold up a card with the image of something Calixto truly loved, a mango perhaps, and Calixto would become excited. He loved being given mango to eat. It was so soft, fleshy, juicy and sweet. He loved the brilliant color of the fruit, and he loved the sugary taste, and he loved the way the smell would stay on his hands and in his fur for hours. A real mango, however, was not produced, instead the people in white would hold up a card with black and white symbols. This did not make sense. The symbols did not look like anything. They were just black and white markings. Calixto would become angry, and cry, and wish with his whole self that he could have a real mango.

Slowly, over days, something strange began to happen in Calixto's mind. He noticed that every time the humans held up a picture of an apple, they would follow it with a card that had the same symbols on it. The first one looked like a leaf cut in half and stood straight up, so that the point reached for the sky, and Calixto began to

associate the picture of the apple with the symbol "A." Over more days all the symbols began to come into focus for him. The humans let him play with the cards as well now, and what had once been a tedious test, became a game. A woman would hold up a card that said "Kiwi," and Calixto would shuffle through the set of cards with pictures he had been given until he found one with the image of a kiwi on it. To his delight, when he read the cards correctly, the woman would produce a little fruit. Now it was a game with treats! Calixto was very good at it.

Orange! Found the card with the orange! Treat! *Grapes!* Found the card with the grapes! Treat! *Mango!* Oh, need you even ask? Calixto would hold the mango card as high up as he could. Treat!

Calixto was having such fun, and getting better and better at the lessons. He did not even realize that he was learning to read.

"The game is how you learned to read?" Interrupted Thimble.

Calixto was a bit flummoxed at the mouse for speaking so abruptly and out of turn, "Why, yes."

Thimble considered this for a moment before he asked, "Did this place ever have a squirrel?"

"It's possible," said Calixto.

"I know a squirrel who can read. I suppose I just thought some animals could. It never occurred to me to ask how they'd learnt."

"You must ask him when you get back to your garden, Thimble. I imagine it's a story from this place," Calixto hung for just a second to see if the mouse had any further questions, but he seemed not to, so Calixto continued on.

He graduated from identifying the words for various fruits, to vegetables, to room items like chairs and windows. He learned to read words for different creatures. He, himself, was a monkey. He liked the way the word looked a little like himself, "Monkey." He imagined the tail of the "y" was his own tail as he stretched out on a vine. Then he



wondered if he would ever lay about in vines again, eating fruit that was not given to him because he read a word.

Calixto would snuggle into his blanket during the night, peering through the bars of his cage. He could hear the other animals in the lab stirring in their troubled slumber. He stared at the sign above the door. He recognized the letters, he could put them together in his mind, "Exit." "Exit." The sign cast a red glow all about the room. He put himself to sleep thinking of the word almost every night. "Exit," "exit," "exit."

"I did have a conspirator," Calixto said.

"A conspirator?" asked Thimble.

"Yes, a rabbit next to me. We spoke through the wall of our cage. She wanted to get out of there as much as I did. Peony. That was her name. One day, they came for me, the people in white. They were bringing me here, to this cage," he told Thimble, "where there are vines, and beautiful flowers. Where humans walk past and look at us everyday. I didn't know where I was being brought, and I screamed. The last memory I have of the white place was Peony calling to me as they carried me out. She said that she would find me and set me free."

"What became of her?"

"I don't know."

"And what will you do? Will they bring you back to the white place?"

"I imagine if the troop and I stay in this cage, there will be more tests, yes, more things to learn."

"*If* you stay in this cage?"

"Indeed. Thimble, I would like to help you find your Chickpea. I believe she is most likely in the white place. When we have rescued her, you will help me, and the rest of the animals here, you will help us to the exit," Calixto said his final sentence with a gravity that made Thimble shudder a little, "no one wants to live in a cage."

