

SHADO

by Marylois Dunn

Cat slipped under the castle gate and stood surveying the world outside. Fog softened the meadow shrouding the nearby forest with gray robes. There was no breath of breeze, but the cloud shifted, thickened, thinned, captured and released the objects outside the walls. To Cat's disgust, it left a thick residue of moisture over everything. Small beads of water even formed on his whiskers, which he wiped away with an impatient swipe of his forepaw. It was a dreadful morning to hunt.

Cat, however, had learned that while his kind generally chose to remain indoors near the warmth of the kitchen fires, the field mice regarded a foggy day as a Mouse Holiday and ran about fearlessly, not expecting depredations from fox, hawk, or cat on such a day. Perfect weather for a fellow who did not mind getting his paws and tail wet.

Wet grass bent silently under his paws as he made his way toward a slight declivity which had always been productive. He wanted two mice this day, one for himself, of course. He would eat his on the spot. The other was for White Cat who had been somewhat off her feed lately. She was always generous to share with him. A fat, juicy mouse might make her laugh, make her eyes sparkle again.

The trouble was that they were growing older, she somewhat older than himself. Cat was still in his full strength, but White Cat had not brought a litter in more than two cold times. The human closed her door on those days when Cat would most like to enter. No matter how he begged, cajoled, sang his most melodious songs outside, the door remained closed and White Cat barren.

She was depressed and her sadness troubled Cat. He did his best to be amusing, telling her the castle gossip and bringing her his problems to solve. He often acted in kittenish ways which he found embarrassing but as long as it amused her, he did not mind.

A large drop of water from a berry bush struck him on the nose, and he stopped, shook his head, and stepped forward without looking where he stepped.

Several things happened simultaneously which utterly destroyed his dignity and left him frightened, embarrassed, and ready for battle all at the same time. As Cat stepped forward, his paw fell on something which moved under his foot. Unnerved and unbalanced, he hissed, leapt into the air, became entangled in the bush and leapt even higher to escape the new enemy, squalling aloud his fierce battle cry. He came to earth several feet from the spot he had left it, fur erect, back bowed, tail switching furiously.

His eyes were wide, flashing green fire, and his growl frightened every mouse in the meadow into its hole.

Nothing moved under the bush.

Cat watched for long moments before he stalked slowly to the bush to see what had so alarmed him. At first he saw nothing, but as his eyes gradually returned to normal he saw one shadow which seemed more solid than the others under the bush. It looked like a living creature, a very still living creature.

Cat hissed and struck at it with a hooded paw. If it was a snake, he did not want to battle with it, merely warn it away.

A tiny, trembling voice said, *Please don't hurt me.*

Cat stepped back astonished. The voice was that of a very young kit, barely able to communicate. He moved closer and nosed the kit lightly. Why are you here alone? Where is your mother?

The kit trembled violently and drew back farther into the brush. Are you going to eat me?

Of course not. Do I look like a cannibal? Be still. I'm not going to hurt you. Cat sat down.

You frightened me when you flew through the air. I have never seen a cat fly before.

Cat harrumphed. *You are not very old. You'll see many things before you are my age. Where is your mother?* he repeated.

I don't know. She brought me here and told me to wait. She said she would come back, but it's been a long time. Three darks. I'm afraid something has happened to her. The kit seemed frightened to have said such a long speech before this giant stranger. He made himself as small as he could waiting for what might happen next.

Cat thought to himself that the kit was probably right. Either the mother was an irresponsible fool to bring her child out here and leave him, or something had happened to her. In any case, Cat could not leave him out here alone. There were many dangers to a grown cat outside the walls. He was surprised the kit had survived as long as it had.

The kit had to be starving. Three days without food was a long time for a little one. *What have you eaten?* Cat asked.

I found a beetle yesterday, a large beetle. My stomach hurt, but I would have eaten another had I found one. I licked water from the grass.

Cat said, Don't move from this spot. I will bring you some real food. Wait for me.

The field mice, not privileged to understand cat communication, had come from their holes when they did not hear any more growls and were going about their business under the grass. Cat quickly selected a small one, killed and brought it back to the hungry kit. He showed the young one how to slice open the belly and draw out the entrails. He bit off the tail, paws, and head himself and left the meaty part for the youngster who fell on it and devoured it with much high-pitched growling and many mock kills.

After the kit had eaten, Cat lay down beside it and began to bathe it gently. The tiny kit's fur was wet and matted and, through the fur, Cat could feel all of its fragile bones. His eyes grew large again, flashing with anger as he thought of the negligent mother who had treated her kit so. *Were you born in the castle?* he asked between licks. *I don't remember a gray kit of your age in any of the litters I have seen this spring.*

I don't know, the kit said. *I was born in the forest a long way from here. What is a castle?*

A feral kit, Cat thought. His mother must be one of those who left the castle for the freedom of the woods. He looked closer at the kit who was so small there was no way to know, but it might be one of those who were combinations of the small wildcats of the forest and the feral cats. If so, it would be an interesting creature when grown. Certainly, it did have enough spunk to speak up to him.

I can't leave it here, he thought. That something has not already eaten it is pure luck. And then Cat began to purr. White Cat might find a kit just the thing to bring back her good spirits.

Would you like to go back to the castle with me? Cat asked. / fear your mother will not come for you. If she could, she would have come long before this.

The kit trembled. *That is my thought, too. Oh, I hope she did not fall into one of the traps. What would my sisters do?*

You have sisters?

Two. What will become of my sisters?

Cat stood, switching his tail impatiently. *What do you expect me to do about that? Can you find your way back to them? Isn't it enough that I am taking you to safety?*

I am very grateful to you for rescuing me. But I am concerned about my sisters. They are very beautiful and no larger than I. If Mother was caught in a trap, who will take care of them?

I'm sure I don't know. Rat's eyes. I can't take care of every stray kit in the forest.

The kit did not answer, but its chin began to quiver and a quavering wail came from its mouth.

Now, now. Stop that. What would you have me do?

If you go slow, I think I can direct you back to our birthing place.

If I go slow! Cat muttered to himself. He THINKS he can find the birthing place.

How long did you say it took your mother to bring you here?

The kit, excited by the thought that Cat might take him in search of his sisters, straightened up. Oh, sir. *Not very long at all. From daybreak to the middle of the afternoon. The sun was still up when she left me here and told me to wait.*

Cat switched his tail again looking at the mid-morning sun. "Dawn to middle of the afternoon" would put them at the nesting place after sundown. His ears went back as he considered the journey. The kit was small and helpless. Somewhere in the forest there were two more like it. Two more for White Cat to cuddle. Three is always better than one in mice, in biscuits, perhaps in kits as well. He sat down and washed his front paws, taking care to pull the burrs from between his toes.

All right, he said in a grumpy tone. We will go looking for your sisters, but you'd best know the way.

I think I can direct you, the kit said.

You certainly cannot lead the way, Cat said. I'll carry you.

Mother carries me by the back of my neck.

I know how to carry kits. Cat's tone was dry. He took several trial nips and, finding the proper hold, picked up the kit and carried him easily.

The kit directed him past two large trees into a rabbit trail which they followed for some time, the kit muttering from time to time when he saw something he remembered. The sun had begun its downward descent when Cat sensed something ahead. He stopped and dropped the kit under a bush, covering it with leaves as he said, *Stay here. I want to investigate ahead. I will be back for you in a little while, and I'll try to find us something to eat.*

Mother said she was coming back, the kit said in a tiny voice.

I am not your mother. If I say I will come back, I will come back.

I'll be here, the kit snuggled down in the leaves, already warm and growing sleepy.

Cat moved with caution through the tall grass until he found what he feared. Under a trap of the type called "deadfall" he found a gray and white female cat. He could not see for a moment what had triggered the trap that she would allow herself to be caught so. When he came close he heard the squeak of live mice and as he stepped over the log which had broken the back of the female, he found a small box woven of green willow and something he had not seen before, a silvery colored vine and very strong. In the box were three live field mice.

A few bites told Cat he could not chew through the silvery vine any more than the mice could. They were there for the eating, but he could not get to them. What a waste. They would probably starve before the traps were run.

The one thing the tragedy told him was that they were on the right track. The kit had been uncertain in a few turns and crossroads, but when it made a decision it was correct. This had to be the mother cat. He leapt the log again, landing lightly beside her crumpled form. Her head was under the log and when he looked closely, he saw something else.

A small leg extended stiffly from under the log. She must have returned to the birthing place and was bringing a little sister to join her brother. While he sniffed the remains of the kit's family, Cat was alert to the forest around him.

A tree-climbing rodent was chattering angrily at him, running up and down a nearby tree, its tail switching furiously. Cat watched it dispassionately. He had caught one in his youth, but of late, he had not tried for one of the swift rodents. Saliva flooded his tongue, making him swallow. As he remembered, they were delicious.

The rodent grew bolder when Cat lay down beside the dead one. Cat did not look at the rodent directly but faced the trail away from it. He heard the creature make a short run on the ground, then turn and leap for its tree.

Cat did not move an ear.

He heard the creature land on the leafy ground and begin a short run toward the log where he lay.

Cat did not quiver a whisker.

The creature's claws scabbled up on the log which had smashed the kit's mother as it came forward to see if Cat also was dead.

Cat was not dead. From his prone position, he came up in a leap that took him over the log, almost over the curious creature, but Cat had not intended to pass over it. He grasped it with tooth and claw, carrying it off the log onto the ground on the other side. He was the heavier and, though the creature tried to bite him and did claw him seriously several times, he kept shifting his mouth hold until he reached the position he wanted. In a few moments the creature was as dead as the kit's mother.

Cat dragged the creature across the log and up the trail to the kit. *Wake up, Shado, for Cat had begun to call the kit by name in his mind. I have something for us to eat.*

After they feasted, they curled up together and slept.

The edge of the sky was light when they woke. Without mentioning his mother, Cat picked up the kit and carried him around the clearing where the mother lay. He followed the kit's instructions with more assurance now that he knew they were reasonably accurate. Before he had time to tire of carrying the kit in his mouth, they had come to the river. A short way upstream brought them to the rocks the kit had described.

He had been here before. He and the yellow-eyed hound had come this far to find the camp of the magician. That camp lay on the other side of the river. He remembered the shallow crossing, glad this day that he would not have to go to the other side. The birthing place was on this side of the river.

There, the kit said. Up the hillside is a small cavern. My sisters should be in there. Perhaps Mother, too.

Cat carried him up the hillside, placing him on the ground just outside the cavern. *I must tell you, Shado, you will not find your mother here. Perhaps not either of the sisters. Far back on the trail, while you were sleeping, I found your mother and one of the sisters in a deadfall trap.*

They were – the kit hesitated, dead?

Both, Cat said. He did not know what he expected from the kit. Whatever it was, he didn't get it. The kit made no expression of sorrow or regret. Instead he got to his feet and walked as steadily as he could into the cavern. In a few moments Shado came into the morning light followed by a beautiful black kit with a bit of white at her throat and both ears outlined in white as if edged in frost.

Cat felt an inward tug at the beauty of the sister. For the first time, he stopped grouching to himself and was glad they had come the long distance to find Shado's sister. White Cat would certainly be pleased to have this pair to raise.

When Cat began to wash his whiskers without saying anything, Shado sat down in front of him. *My sister has not eaten for two daylights. Could you find something? I'm hungry, too.*

No doubt you could eat a mastiff if I were strong enough to kill one for you, Cat said. Stay here. I'll see what I can find.

Before the sun had moved very far in the sky, Cat was back, dragging a rabbit almost as large as himself. He chewed the head off and showed the kits how to reach the meatier parts without swallowing too much fur. He sat back and watched as they attacked the dead creature, "killing" it for themselves several times before they settled down to eat.

I suppose it is the way they learn to kill for themselves, Cat thought as he watched from the top of a nearby rock. The kits were out in the open and he watched the area around them for movement. He did not want them to be endangered by some animal he did not know was coming.

Before they had finished eating, he heard dogs. The voices were those of hunting dogs on a trail and the sound was coming from the direction they had taken. The dogs might have been trailing them and where there were hunting dogs, there were men with weapons.

At the first distant sound Cat was down off the rock and beside the kits. *Quickly now, I will have to try to carry both of you at once, and I am going to move fast.* He took Shado into his mouth first and then pulled her close to the black and white kit. She had been carried before because she allowed herself to go limp to make it easier for him to carry her.

He set off upstream to where he knew there was a shallow ford. Of course, when they reached it, it was not as shallow as he remembered. Although he held the kits as high as he could, they were all soaking wet when he came out of the river on the other side. Both kits mewled miserably and Cat growled, *Silence! We are all wet. We will dry shortly, but you must be silent. The dogs can hear as well as smell.*

The kits fell silent, and Cat turned downstream and began to run. He leapt a log and Shado fell to the ground with an audible thud. Cat turned and tried to grasp both of the kits again. The sound of the hounds was almost directly across the river from them and he was anxious to get far down the river before they followed to the crossing.

A red fox stepped out of the shadows before Cat and he stopped, dropping the kits from his mouth between his front paws. He bowed his back and hissed.

Easy. Easy, friend cat. I thought the dogs were coming for me, but it seems you have the same thought. I have never seen you here before and I know the forest well. Would you trust me to take you away from the dogs?

Cat allowed the fur to lay down along his spine and relaxed slightly. *Do you know the castle on the plain where the sun rises?*

The fox gave a delicate cough. *I have been there. They have good hounds and we have had some interesting chases. Is that your destination?*

Yes, Cat said. *It is on the other side of this river. Is there another shallow ford? I do not swim well.*

Certainly not carrying two kits. I know a good crossing farther down. Allow me to carry one of the kits and we will move faster.

I am not sure I can trust you, Cat said.

The fox sat down facing him, its white paws together, tail curled around them. / know that. Decide. I will help you, or I will leave you alone. As you choose.

Is this creature our friend? Shado whispered.

I'm sure I don't know, Cat sat down and licked his aching pads. But I think I trust him.

Her, the fox said. *I have had kits of my own. I will take good care of yours.*

They aren't mine exactly, Cat said, *but that is a longer story than we have time for here. All right. We will take your help and be glad of it.*

The fox stood as she said, *Then let us be off. The dogs will soon cross the river and start back on this side. We do not want to lose our lead.*

She reached between Cat's paws and picked up the trembling kit.

Cat picked up Shado and followed the fast moving fox as she slipped into trails he would not have seen had she not been leading. In a little while, they came to a log that lay across half of the river. The fox leapt onto it and walked over to where it ended, waiting until Cat caught up. *Do you mind getting wet?*

Of course, Cat said.

I'm afraid it can't be helped. There is a branch that goes to the other side, but it is under water a couple of inches. I think we can keep the kits dry.

Cat looked at the difference in their heights and growled to Shado, *Curl yourself up as tight as you can. You may get wet anyway.*

I've been wet before, Shado said.

The fox led the way over the slippery branch through the swift water. Cat was almost swept away by the current but quickly learned to walk with claws unsheathed, almost as if climbing a recumbent tree. They reached the other side with the kits only minimally wet.

Better than the first time, Shado murmured.

Hush! Cat said between his teeth and kitten neck. What he wanted most to do was drop Shado, sit down, and give himself a good wash, drying the cold water of the river from his fur as best he could. The fox's tail disappeared into the underbrush beside the river and Cat could do nothing but follow as fast as he could.

In a length of time that seemed much shorter than it should have, they reached the edge of the forest. The fox stopped under a clump of broken conifer limbs, putting the kit down carefully between her paws. She spent the time waiting for Cat to catch up washing the kit, massaging with her large fox tongue to get the circulation flowing again. After awhile, Cat came up and began the same treatment on Shado.

With both kits cleaned and curled together in sleep, Cat began his own long-overdue toilet. He began at the tip of his tail and worked his way methodically toward the final lap, ears and whiskers. Finished, he looked around to find the fox as meticulously grooming herself as he had.

Thank you, Cat said and the fox stopped in mid-lick.

My pleasure, the fox replied. *I like to see a family stay together and I did not think you were going to get far trying to carry two kits at once.*

Cat smoothed his whiskers again with a clean paw. *I'm sure,* he murmured. *But I couldn't come back for the other kit. You heard the hounds.*

I do believe we left them at the river. I haven't heard them in some time.

You really do know these woods. Are you as familiar with the castle?

Goodness, no. I have never been in the castle. The hounds would scent me in a moment. The fox made a sound which could have been taken for amusement. Wouldn't that stir the stale air inside those walls? Can you manage from here?

Thank you, Cat said. I might not have escaped the dogs without your help. What may I do for you in return?

I don't have a need at the moment, except for dinner. All this excitement has made me hungry. The fox looked at the kits with her mouth open, tongue curled.

Both kits drew back into Cat's shadow. Cat understood that the fox was making a small joke and took no offense. Do you know the declivity across this meadow where there is a city of mice?

The fox looked across the meadow. No, I have not hunted there. A city of mice?

Holes everywhere. Follow the line of the forest. When you reach a small hill, go carefully as you pass over it. On the other side you will find many fine, fat mice for your dinner. If there is ever anything I can do for you, send word to the castle. I will hear of it and meet you in this spot.

With a final poke of her sharp nose at the kits, the fox disappeared into the forest in the direction of the mouse haven Cat had described to her. Cat was hungry himself and knew the kits were as well, but food would have to wait. First, he must get them into the castle and up to Cat's domain.

The shadows of evening were long across the meadow. Cat picked up the two kits and, following the darker shadows, made his way to the castle gate. He waited until the humans had gone inside to their evening meal before he carried his double burden under the gate and up to the kitchen entrance.

I'm hungry, Shado muttered as they slipped through the kitchen and toward the stairs.

Don't think about it, Cat mumbled. First, safety. Then, food.

*Cat tried to keep to the shadows and out of sight of the other cats and the stupid dogs. He was not altogether successful. One of his hunting companions, a black and white torn with only half a tail, came out of the kitchen just as Cat started up the stairs. The torn raised his hackles and hissed in mock horror, *What is this? Cat, Lord of the Castle, swinging not one, but two kits. Where are you taking these little beggars? They look like something our companions would toss to the dogs.**

Cat felt the little ones tense with fear. Be still, he said to the kits. You are perfectly safe with me from both the dogs and from cats whose manners are as short as their tails.

The black and white torn hissed and bowed his back, but he was not close enough for Cat to take a swipe at him, so Cat moved up the curved stairway, the kits swinging as he climbed.

He isn't following us, Shado stretched his neck to watch the stairs behind them.

I would be surprised if he did, Cat said. *He does all his fighting with speech. Perhaps having part of his tail missing makes him feel inferior. He rarely throws himself into a real fray.*

Do the other cats tease him about his tail? a soft voice asked and Cat realized the little sister had spoken for the first time.

Cat put the kits down at the narrow end of the stairs and sat, with them between his front paws. *Most of the time the castle cats are kind to each other, even to him. I was unkind to speak of his short tail. I will bring him a mouse one day soon.*

Now, we are almost there. I am taking you to the White Cat. She is very wise and will know what to do with you.

The two kits sat obediently, seeming overwhelmed by the castle and the activity in it. From the stairs they could watch people and animals passing below. Is it always like this? Shado whispered.

Most of the time, Cat said. *Come, let's finish our journey.*

White Cat said, *My, my.* Then repeated it for the seventh or eighth time, *My, my. Where did you find them, Cat?*

Cat told her the entire tale including the flight through the air which made her laugh. He told her everything that was known about the kit's mother and other sister, about the hounds, and the fox who had helped them escape.

Through all the discourse the kits sat silent, backed up against Cat, watching White Cat with dark luminous eyes. They had never seen a cat of such size or beauty. When she leaned down to sniff them, they shrank closer to Cat, trying to hide behind his front legs.

Ho, now. I have just finished telling what brave kits you are, and you are making a liar of me. Sit up straight. White Cat is the best friend you will ever have.

The kittens straightened and tried to endure White Cat's scrutiny without trembling.

Do the younglings have names? she asked Cat.

Not when I found them. I think Shado is a good name for the gray. I have not thought of anything for the little sister.

Appropriate for him, she sniffed. The little sister reminds me of the lace Milady wears on her gowns at the edge of the sleeves and hems. Would you answer to Lace, little sister?

If it pleases you, the smaller kitten answered.

I see your poor mother taught you some manners. How long has it been since you had a bath?

Cat nearly washed my fur off, Shado said, and the fox washed her.

The fox! she murmured in surprise as she flattened Lace with one white paw and began at her ears to wash away all traces of the forest and of strangeness. Hours ago, I am sure.

Although he needed a wash himself, Cat began to wash Shado to hide his expression of amused satisfaction. White Cat was purring. She had not sighed once since he walked in the door with two kits swinging from his tired jaws.

The journey had been arduous. Even the hair on the tip of his tail ached, but it was worth every step if it made White Cat happy.

Baths over, White Cat pushed the kittens toward her dish of fresh cream and showed them how to lap from the bowl. While they drank, she curled herself around Cat and began to wash his ears. *How do you know, Cat? How do you always know what will make me happy?*

Cat did not answer. He put his weary head down on White Cat's flank and allowed himself to drift off to sleep. The kits were safe and White Cat was happy. What more could any cat want?