

There were some caves in the cliffs, so Gitlam and I headed back down to explore them. We were approaching a small one when we heard an animal growling. We stopped in our tracks and, after a short whispered conversation, decided to cautiously approach.

We stopped again when we saw a hyena crouching over its victim, a smaller sand-colored furry mammal with pointed ears. Gitlam immediately picked up some rocks and threw them at the hyena. Although his aim was excellent, the hyena merely moved back a little instead of fleeing. We could hear more yipping howls nearby and exchanged worried glances. We both knew we couldn't just turn around and continue down the cliff; the hyenas would attack as soon as our backs were turned.

I could see the Nubians' tents not far below us and had an idea. "I'm going to slip down and ask their archers to help us. Keep throwing rocks until I return with them."

"I can keep this one at bay." He looked at me anxiously. "But not more than two." I scrambled down the rocks as quickly and quietly as I could. Thankfully two of the Nubians were sitting down whittling new arrows, and I recognized them as Amaros and Bahiti. They looked bored.

When I explained the situation, they eagerly grabbed their bows and quivers, and mounted their horses. Amaros threw me a hand to climb up behind her. "Show us where to go and we're with you."

Part of me wished our flight would last longer, but mainly I was relieved when we arrived in time to reinforce Gitlam. Other hyenas were approaching and it was clear he couldn't hold out much longer against so many. But before I could call out that we were coming, arrows were flying and hitting their targets, generating yelps of pain from the hyenas as they fled. But the Nubian archers followed until we heard only silence.

When they returned, they praised Gitlam for his excellent throwing prowess. “You should definitely take up the javelin, or maybe the sling,” they encouraged him. Then Bahiti’s expression turned serious. “That hyena caught a sand cat,” she said sadly. “A nursing mother.”

Amaros nodded. “So her litter should be hidden nearby.”

“Help us find it.” I couldn’t stand the thought of those kittens starving to death.

Gitlam was as soft hearted as me. “Surely we’ll be able to hear her kittens mewling,” he suggested.

The two Nubians looked at each other and shrugged. “It’s not as if we have anything better to do right now,” Amaros said.

We searched the nearest caves first, without success. But just as the sun began to fall, Bahati stood still and put her finger to her lips. We immediately quieted and listened carefully. Sure enough, we heard feeble cries coming from the back of the cave we’d just entered. Gitlam was younger than me, but my hand was smaller, so I was the one who reached down into their hidey-hole. The two kittens, miniature versions of their mother, weren’t strong enough to scratch me badly, but my hands were still bloody when I pulled the kittens out.

Gitlam and I, each cradling a terrified kitten, were soon mounted behind the Nubians as they galloped to our tents. Mother took one look at what we carried, then smiled and rushed off. She returned with two rags and a small bowl of goat milk. She twisted the rags, submerged them in the goat milk, and held them up to the kittens’ noses. To my delight, and great relief, the kittens took hold and began to suck. Tears filled my eyes and tender-hearted Gitlam actually began to cry.

Mother gave us a serious look. “I know you think they’re adorable, but if you two want to keep these creatures, then you will be responsible for them: feeding them, making a bed for them

that they can't escape, cleaning up after them and protecting them from your baby sister Tantara." She paused and shook her head before continuing. "You don't need to worry about this yet, but Grandfather will be furious if they get into his workshop when they're older."

"Don't worry," Gitlam said. "I'll make sure they stay out of it."

Then she smiled. "On the other hand, it will be good to be able to store grain without rodents spoiling it."

I remembered a torn reed basket that I hadn't gotten around to repairing. When lined with a worn blanket, it was large enough to contain the kittens and keep them comfortable. Gitlam wanted them to sleep in bed with him, but Mother insisted on waiting until they were bigger. However she did allow us to keep the kittens' basket in the children's tent, as long as it was placed out of our baby sister's reach.

During the following month, the sand cat kittens began eating manna mixed with goatmilk. Gitlam and I were astonished when the manna abruptly appeared inside their basket one morning, but we decided to keep giving them goat milk as well. They were now playing with each other, although it looked more like fighting to me. Gitlam used some wood scraps to make a barrier to the woodshop's entryway, but the kittens merely crawled in under the tent's lower edges. Grandfather tried to discourage them by throwing dowels at them, although he didn't use enough force to hurt them. The kittens considered this an excellent game and batted the dowels around relentlessly.

Our Nubian friends, Amaros and Bahiti, stopped by a few times a week to visit, once bringing a string toy woven from strands of horsetail. The kittens chased it so vigorously and exhaustively that sometimes they just fell over asleep where they were.