

Feline Education

by Tanya E. E. Schmid

A kitten can't tell the difference between a piece of string and a poisonous snake. My gray and white furball is sitting on a sun-warmed rock and confusing an Aspis Viper with the old black shoelace that I pull across our kitchen floor for entertainment.

I have learned a lot about vipers since we moved to the farm a couple years ago. Part of the beauty of our remote location is the abundant wildlife. Including the slithering kind. Normally, I would need my camera in order to zoom in on the snake's eye, to see if it has a devilish slit instead of a harmless round pupil. To see if there are more than one row of scales beneath the hinged mouth. But I know this four-foot-long viper. I have passed her almost daily on my walk to the woodpile, her perch set back far enough from the path not to pose a threat. Not a significant threat to a human, at least. Her bite holds a deadly portion of venom for a mouse...or another small animal.

Kitten's claws are sharp. But Pete just taps the silky black coils with his left front paw pads. Trying to get the thick string to move. To play.

"Pete!" I call out, knowing snakes are deaf, and trying to break my kitten's intense focus. I'm still frozen about six feet away so as not to upset the momentary balance.

Vipers aren't easily disturbed. Especially when they are sunning on their favorite rock. They play it cool. They know their powers well. Bites usually result from a blind step while picking blackberries. Thus, the knee-high rubber boots we purchased first thing. Snakes wait silently in the leafy shadows of the briars for those mice who crave fruit and are naïve enough to tempt fate.

My voice is ignored. The rope has come to life, its rings shifting slowly like a kaleidoscope. My kitten's eyes dilate in exhilaration.

Does the viper know that this little dude will grow into her competition for mice? No worries there. The mouse population on our two hectares abounds, which is why we bought a cat. No, the viper's not out for a fight. But God help anyone who wakes her from her beauty sleep.

My kitten lifts a white powder puff paw and holds it over the unwinding coils.

“Pete, no!” I step closer, softly because vibrations would alert the viper.

The biggest problem is the thin lattice of blackberry briars that form a loose net between me and my pet. My brain calculates the necessary angle and the odds of me successfully sweeping through the thorns with my bare arm and slapping Pete to the ground without either of us getting bit.

The small paw hangs for a moment, quivering, then Pete taps the coils again and the head of the snake pops up like the hook of a clothes hanger. The triangle head looms large in comparison to my grapefruit-sized pet and the pores on the back of my neck tingle. We are miles away from the nearest vet. Not much they could do anyway.

“Honey?” My husband’s voice calls from the house. I know he sees me poised like a statue on our gravel drive, but I don’t dare look away from my baby. “What’s taking you so long?” he asks.

The screen door slams shut and his boots crunch towards me.

Wide kitten eyes fix in a staring contest with two slits, then Pete recognizes the problem and pulls back an inch or two. He raises himself slowly to his feet and his fuzz stands on end as he arches his back and stands sideways on tiptoe.

No way I’ll be fast enough.

Then I notice the vines growing under the viper's perch. A split second to guess how heavy the rock is, if I could get it to tip back. I leap forward, just behind the snake, and yank at a handful of the creepers, thorns piercing my fingers.

It's just enough to give the throne a shudder, and Pete jumps down through the bushes and bounds away as the head of the black whip darts at his shadow.

"Didn't you hear me?" My husband arrives next to me.

"That snake almost bit Pete!"

"What snake?" my husband asks as we stare at an empty rock.

I hold my scratched hand while he gathers the wood I'd dropped a lifetime ago. Over his bent back, I spot Pete down by the newly planted apple trees, stalking a robin in the grass.