



To Kill a Dog

Have you ever killed a dog, Kit asked about every cat he knew.

None had. That left him doubting he could do it even though he had to do it even though it had to be done.

After hours stalking on the beach and watching the water with his tail waving in rhythm with the waves, Kit finally decided he'd do it. He appealed to Blackie to help him.

She agreed on one condition: he had to listen to her.

The twosome plotted the killing from a pile of rocks where the nip field ended and the slope of the ridge began. They squirmed into the rocks and found a spy hole. Kit put one eye to it.

Two gangs of dogs were mucking out irrigation ditches clogged with mud deposited by the rollers from the recent blow and another gang was hauling wood from the nearby forest to be burned that winter. Kit singled out a spotted, dangle-eared digger from one of the mucking gangs as the ideal target. As he watched, the digger lagged behind the other dogs. The guards didn't seem to mind; two watched the spotted pup but only licked their shoulders and paws, swiping the G's shaved on their broad foreheads. The laggard was spirited, too, and Kit liked that. After a day of pawing muck the digger still had enough zip to bark at sea birds, who zoomed down and tried to shit on his head, to chase an occasional frog, one of which he caught and ripped in two with his paws holding down the fore legs and his teeth clamped on the hind ones. Then he dug frantically, forming a pile of mud by his butt and a hole beneath his muzzle, all the while growling and barking like the biggest bone ever lay just a little deeper in the dirt.

"We could get him alone by the water wheel," Kit said, "we could shove his head under and he'd drowned."

"Can I look? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sorry."

Kit shifted, curled his paws so she had room to get her eye to the slit between the

rocks. He stared into the moist net of her ear. He felt rocks bending the tips of his whiskers and saliva puddling in his throat. Blackie said the gang was going toward the water wheel, which Kit could hear creaking as it turned in the stream coming down from the hills.

"If we do it in the rain," she said, "the wind will kill the noise while we kill the dog."

"The target," Kit said.

She swivelled her head, her whiskers entangling his. Their eyes were inches apart. "Cut the target crap," she said. "He's a dog, not a target. We're going to kill a dog."

Kit wanted to glance down at his paws but couldn't because the space was too cramped. He looked into the yellow slits of Blackie's eyes until she shifted her attention back to the spy hole. The water wheel out there creaked and moaned.

The weather cooperated rather quickly. The very next day gray clouds hunkered over the rings of the city and rain fell from their dark bottoms in diagonal strings. Before dawn Kit and Blackie squeezed into the pile of rocks, off which the rain splattered noisily.

They got as comfortable as possible on folded legs, then hardly talked as they waited. When the dogs formed ranks at twilight, the guards were anxious to get them moving. Every guard and dog was dripping water. Kit's head pressed against a rock. Drops of moisture quivered on his whiskers. Every bone on his left side seemed to ache. He'd never gone this long without a stretch. Still, he kept his eye on the target and hoped it didn't chase off after something, ears flopping, barking, ruining the plan. For a minute it appeared that the plan might be foiled by the digger dog acting obediently and just trotting along with the others. He stayed in the ranks until the dog gang was so far away that it was turning into a wet blur. Then bad luck sealed its destiny.

The digger dropped back, nose down, tail up, and stalked an undulating serpent through the nip stubble. The snake took a long time slithering around the water wheel but there was little doubt of its destination. Its narrow little head weaving back and forth

above the stubble, it came straight to the rock pile.

Frizzed now, hardly able to move, Kit couldn't believe it.

The digger splashed behind the snake and thrust its wet muzzle at the elevated head.

Maybe it was tired or slowed by the cool weather, but the snake paid no heed and kept coming. The reptile reached the stones and slipped in and faced Blackie.

She hissed at it.

The bulbous-eyed canine shoved its head straight into the rocks, trying to lever them apart. It scrabbled with its rear paws in the muck, breathing hard. Stones shifted. They moved enough so the head, ears pressed back, made it partially into the space, one eye blinking. Unable to bark because its muzzle was angled in rock, the digger attempted to shift its momentum into reverse. Rear paws churned, front ones shoved, stones shifted around its head. It was stuck. As was its wont, the dog began to dig frantically as the cats hissed and the snake got out of there. Squirming backward as best he could, Kit exited the gap through which he and Blackie had crawled in that dawn and pounced up on the rocks in the hard rain.

The digger's tail aimed straight toward the sky. Mud flew in an arch from beneath its rear paws. Kit leaped on its back but couldn't get a paw on one of its eyes. The dog bucked in panic, feeling the cat's claws. Flustered, Kit jumped from the back and flattened himself on a rock, ears back, tail slashing in the wind and rain. Down on the ground the snake, alarmed, tongue darting, was slithering away.

Kit spotted a small gap in the stones. Through it he saw a bulbous, gooey digger eye. Instinctively, his paw shot into the gap and clutched the orb. The dog's frantic struggle heaved the stones. The whole pile of rocks convulsed and shifted as Kit curled his claw around the eye ball. And then there was quiet. The dog, the target, was dying, its head crushed in a slow squeezing of the shifting rocks. Rain bounced off the dog's spine and finally it stopped the awful digging.

"Blackie?"

No answer.

Kit slithered over the slick stones like a hairy snake. All entries to the interior had closed tight. He kept calling Blackie's name, but she didn't answer. When he looked towards the city he saw guard cats coming his way, probably returning for the delinquent digger dog now dead here in the rocks. He had to intercept the guards, turn them back before they got closer. He jumped into the nip stubble and bounded towards the cats, taking an oblique direction to shift their attention away from the rocks and towards the sea.

The guards were impatient. They accepted the young cat's story of having seen a floppy-eared young spotted digger dog fleeing as fast as its feet would carry it into the forest. After conferring briefly, rain navigating down their G's, the three guards thanked Kit and stalked back the way they'd come.

Once dark fell, Kit returned to the stones. A quarter moon glowed. The sky had cleared. With a log he and three other cats levered one rock loose, then another. They found Blackie alive, but barely breathing. They rolled her with paws and noses onto a makeshift sled of bark and dragged her across the stubble and by the waterwheel. It was slippery climbing the hillside so they zigzagged, one cat below the sled and shifting sideways on its rear paws. He used his front ones to keep Blackie from rolling off. Once they reached Rex's place on the ridge, Blackie came to by the fire. She managed to stand and to drink from the swollen stream.

"The growling, that awful growling," she said to Kit when he touched his shoulder to hers. "That's all I remember. Is it, he, the target, dead?"

He nodded. "We're skinning him in the woods."

That night Kit felt like a bad dream. He was at the bottom of the sea. He'd been betrayed and dumped over the side of a dugout and weighed down by a net of skulls and sinew. He imagined creatures with waving claws and eyes on stalks eating him. The

fantasies were a consequence of the digger outfit. No amount of adjusting could make comfortable. The smell, the tightness, the way his paws folded back on themselves because it had been impossible to hollow out the very bottoms of the digger's legs—all of these played tricks on him. He couldn't separate myth from reality. He wondered in his dream if he was dreaming.

No, this was real life and he was on his way toward the island of the dogs in a digger dog outfit and stopping now to look out its mouth.