

# Defender of the Small

**Jody Lynn Nye**

Dawna Keen-Eyed upended her water skin and drank the few last drops. Walking the rough horse track between villages was thirsty work, but she was happy. It was better to be breathing country air full of the smells of new-cut hay, wood smoke and pig poop than blood, rot, burning oil and the smell of corpses beginning to decay. The way the land sloped, the river shouldn't be far ahead, and by it the town where perhaps a decent meal and a clean bed waited. Her longsword, carefully cleaned from the last battle and wrapped in its oiled cloth, and her shield with its red stripe down the center bumped against the tall woman's back with every step she took. The red pennant that indicated her status as a mercenary fluttered from the hilt and tickled the back of her neck under her long, brown braid. King Drealin III himself had handed the pennant back to her with a brief statement of gratitude, at the same time that the paymaster gave her her fee. The money wasn't much, but it ought to last long enough for her to reach home. For the moment she longed to sit down. Her legs were tired, and she had finally worn through the thin place in the sole of her left boot.

Cabbage Town, the gold-lettered plaque read, as the track changed from mud to gravel at the edge of the village. Dawna glanced around with pleasure. Life was here, not death. It was market day. Hearty merchants wrangled with their customers, apple-cheeked women in kirtles and wimples, or tall men with colorful liripipe hoods. Farmers argued about the relative merits of this or that cow. Dogs slept in the sun.

A plump gray puss slept tucked up on a window sill beside a scarlet flower in a pot. An orange-striped mother cat, her teats heavy with milk, wound about the legs of the tables on which the merchants' goods were displayed.

A group of shouting and laughing children ranging in age from five to ten or eleven years old raced up the hill along a lane that led up from the river that Dawna could now see from the village's main street. They stopped to stare at the mercenary in armor with her pack and sword slung upon her back. She smiled at them.

"Good day to you," she said, shifting the heavy load to the other shoulder.

Immediately the children went wide-eyed with distrust and curiosity.

"Are you here to conquer us?" asked a little girl with long plaits tied with blue ribbon.

Dawna laughed. "No, I'm just back from the wars."

"You were fighting?" asked the biggest boy, hair the color of fresh wood and eyes of leaf green.

"Indeed I was. I killed eight men in the last battle at Songhelm. I and my fellow sell-swords were in the front line when we laid siege to the pirates' stronghold at Valorin on the coast. We broke the walls down in only three days, and saved the town."

"Ooohhh!" the children gasped, awed.

"Did you burn their boats? Did you meet the king? Did you find bags of gold?" Now that she had proved friendly, questions bubbled up out of the children like steam in a stewpot.

"Perhaps I'll tell you a tale or two later. I just want a rest now," Dawna said, with a smile. She turned back to the butcher, who was hacking a slab of meat into collops. "Where's a good place to get a meal and a bed for the night?"

The man stuck the tip of his carving knife into the chopping block and consulted the sky. "Oh, well, there's Brenner's tavern, or Mistress Peck's . . ."

The biggest of the boys, bored by such ordinary talk, picked up a stone and heaved it at the orange cat. It struck her in the side. She let out a cry and skittered underneath the weaver's table, next to the butcher.

"Stop that," Dawna ordered. The boys paid no attention. They picked up more stones and continued to pelt the cat, who mewed piteously, trying to find a place to hide. "For Gods' love, what's the matter with you? Whose children are those?" she asked the tradesfolk.

"Just children," the butcher replied, with a shrug. "Just a cat. What do you care?"

"It's wrong," Dawna exclaimed angrily. "Cats are the Gods' creatures, the same as we are."

The man blew a derisive raspberry. Dawna felt her temper flaring. Those brats were hurting an innocent animal, and he didn't intend to do a thing about it. After all the killing she had seen, senseless cruelty fired her blood.

"Mind that for me," she said, thrusting her pack into the butcher's arms. She drew her sword and stuck it, point quivering, into the nearest tree. No need for it in what she intended to do.

As she turned the children instantly divined her intention. They dropped the rest of their stones and fled down the street towards the river. A coracle lay on the churned-up mud bank. No doubt they intended to make their escape in it, leaving the woman unable to follow them in her heavy leather-and-bronze armor. They had the advantage of lightness, but her temper lent speed to her feet. With a surge of strength she hurtled down the hill, angling to come up in front of the largest boy, the initial stone-thrower.

"Now we'll see how much *you* enjoy a thrashing," she said, grabbing him by the arm. She sat down on the coracle's edge and swung him over her knee. "*That's* for assaulting a poor innocent beast. And *that's* for harming a mother. And *that's* for not listening to your elders." Her open hand smacked down hard on his upturned backside again and again.

The other children fled as soon as their leader had been captured. By the time Dawna marched her captive up the hill, a crowd had gathered.

"What the hell do you think you're doing to our children?" demanded the weaver.

"They needed a lesson," Dawna stated, thrusting the boy toward the crowd. He immediately ran to a prosperous-looking man whose sandy-blond locks suggested to her that he was the boy's father. "Cruelty to animals is a sin." The gray cat had been awakened from his nap by the shouting. He wound around the legs of the crowd. The weaver distractedly aimed a kick at it when it brushed against him.

"Get away with you," he growled.

Dawna turned on him. "You're no better! Children learn from their elders. You should teach them kindness. These animals are your friends and protectors."

"Oh, please," the weaver groaned, rolling his eyes. "Don't spout your animist noises at me. The Father put all creatures under the command of humans. If He wishes us saved from plague, He will be the one to save us, not some dumb animal." From the sound of the grumbling, the rest of the crowd agreed with him.

"Dumb! Can *you* catch a rat with your hands?"

"You're a fine one to talk about holding life sacred," a gaunt, gray-haired woman declared, shaking a finger at her. "That red flag of yours gives you away. You work for a price, killing for pay."

Dawna walked over to the tree beside the butcher's stall and pulled her sword free. The crowd watched with worried eyes as she sheathed it. "I accept a fee to defend what I think is right, goodwife. I only use my weapon in worthy service. I never harm anyone who cries me mercy and lays down his weapons. Thank you." She tugged her pack out of the butcher's limp arms.

"Fine words," the prosperous man said, "but you were quick enough to paddle a harmless boy."

"It's a lesson he had coming, if not from you, then from me," Dawna said frankly. "If the king's marshalls saw him he'd have gotten more than a swat, I can tell you that. His punishment was with my empty hand. I will never draw my sword against an unarmed man, woman or child." She sighed. "I am only passing through your town. I'm not looking for a fight. But don't doubt that I can defend myself well without it. I don't want a fight with you. All I want is to sup here and sleep, and I'll be on my way in the morning."

"Not in my establishment, you won't. You stay out of my inn," the wrinkled old woman ordered her.

"And mine," added a stout man.

"Leave our town," the boy's father declared, shaking his fist. "We don't want you here, sell-sword. No one here wants your services, or your presence."

Dawna growled to herself. If she hadn't been so tired she'd have given them *all* the flat of her hand. If anyone she'd ever met needed spankings, it was these people. "I'm on the common property, and I claim the king's peace." She raised an eyebrow, defying anyone to disagree with her.

No one did. The king's peace meant they couldn't drive her off the green or within a body-length of any public highway. Paying her no more mind the townsfolk closed up their market stalls and went in to dinner. Dawna watched longingly as a cluster of merrymakers followed Mistress Peck through the cheerfully-painted wooden door at the corner of the square. *Beer*, she thought, wistfully, *roast beef*. Tempting smells floated out to her on the evening breeze.

No chance getting a hot meal from Mistress Peck or the other innkeeper, nor of paying a villager for a share of their supper. Dawna sat down against a tree and began to rummage in her pack for dry, tasteless journey biscuit. It'd gripe her belly more than usual knowing that good food was so close by.

She jumped back in alarm as something cold and slimy fell on her hand. The tabby cat she had rescued sat at her feet with tail wound around its paws, looking up at her with big, green, saucerlike eyes. The thing that had now fallen off Dawna's hand was a freshly caught trout.

"Taking pity on the hungry traveler, eh?" she said, reaching down to scratch the cat behind the ears. "Thank you. It'll be most welcome."

With flint and tinder from her pack she struck a small fire, gutted and staked the fish over it to cook. It was delicious. The cat watched her eat, accepted a morsel and no more, rubbed against Dawna's knee, then disappeared into the darkness. Dawna banked the fire and settled herself uncomfortably against the tree. With the townsfolk unkindly inclined toward her she didn't dare strip off her armor. After a few drinks they might be bolder. She hated fighting with drunks; they always threw up on her, and bronze took so much polishing.

The blanket of twilight began to draw across the sky. Now that the sun was down the chill river mist was rising. She pulled her gray wool cloak out of her pack and wrapped it around herself, tugging the hood down over her forehead. Not warm enough, but it would have to do. She'd have to sleep with one eye open and her sword at her side. It'd be a cold night and a wakeful one.

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Birdsong woke her at false dawn. Dawna's free hand clenched on something unfamiliar, which squirmed. She struggled to sit up. A heavy weight on her chest and legs shifted. Her hand fumbled for her sword. Instead of metal her fingers touched fur. Her eyes flew open. Green eyes in a wedge-shaped gray head regarded her from an inch away.

"Wha'?" Dawna sputtered, thrashing. "Gah?"

The gray cat was curled up just underneath her collar bone. More of the weight on her moved. She raised her head to look. Behind the gray cat a blanket of felines rolled or stalked off Dawna's body, leaving behind cold morning air. Dawna gaped in amazement. They had spent the night on her, providing her with a living blanket. But that was not all. From the protected hollow in the crook of her arm four kittens, two gray, one orange and one calico, looked up at her with trusting eyes. The mother cat unwound herself from a ball next to Dawna's head and came over to rub against Dawna's jaw, then began to lick the kittens vigorously.

"Well, so much for my reputation for vigilance," Dawna said, touching the little ones' delicate heads. The kits were so young their ears were still rounded. The mother cat's rough tongue pushed her fingers away from the calico's ear. "I'm glad my sisters-in-arms weren't here to see me sleep through that. Thank you for keeping me warm. I was comfortable. A kindness for a kindness."

The mother cat arched her back upward, stretched forward and back, then stalked away, leaving her kittens in the curve of Dawna's arm.

"Wait, I'm not a nursemaid!" Dawna called, then chided herself. How could she expect a cat to understand what she was saying?

It wouldn't be long before the townsfolk emerged to take up their chores for the day. If Dawna hung about too long they'd begin to gather in small groups, eventually working up enough mob courage to drive her out of the village. She intended to be on her way long before *that* psychological moment arose, but in the meanwhile, her damaged boot needed attention.

Gingerly, she peeled off the battered black shoe. It would have been nice to have the local shoemaker fix it for her, but under the circumstances he'd most likely be afraid to do business with her. Never mind: she had pieces of leather, waxed cord and a needle in her pack, same as she used for patching her armor.

The kittens crawled in her lap and batted at the end of the string. Dawna gently pushed them away as she took another stitch.

"You still here, sell-sword?" a voice demanded. Two very nice, honey-colored boots stopped just over a body's length from her knee. She'd have liked to have a pair like that. Dawna looked up, in no hurry. In them was the weaver, wearing a defiant expression, though his eyes were scared.

"I'll be gone soon enough," she said.

"Sooner's better than later," he replied. It *almost* sounded like a threat. Dawna went back to her work. The weaver hesitated for a moment, the beautiful boots rocking back and forth with indecision, then strode away. Dawna dismissed him. He wouldn't be the one to attack her, but he'd stand at the back and shout encouragement to the stupid ones at the front. Dawna knew his kind.

A soft but insistent mew interrupted her thoughts. The orange cat had returned, laying another fish at her

feet. Her right paw was wet up to the shoulder, but the rest of her was dry. A good hunter.

"You've decided to feed me, eh?" Dawna said, picking up the fish. It was a mature brook trout, twice the length of her hand. Plenty of good meat on it. The cat chirruped, expectantly. "Is it out of gratitude?" Dawna asked. "Because you already thanked me last night."

The cat chirruped again, and settled down with her paws tucked under her breast. Dawna had had few dealings with cats except on her father's farm. They seemed curious, independent, brave and cowardly at the same time, taking their business and pleasure equally seriously, just like people. But she'd never taken the time to talk to one, assuming their comprehension was limited to their own language. This one listened carefully, her orange-striped head cocked to one side, almost as if she understood. Then, to Dawna's surprise, the cat walked from the fish to the pennant hanging from Dawna's shield and back again, rubbing up against the mercenary's knee with each pass. Dawna let the corners of her mouth perk up in amusement.

"You couldn't be . . . hiring me?"

The cat chirruped again.

"How can you understand what I said yesterday? How could you possibly know what I do?" The cat gave her a wise look. "What is it you want me to do, then? Protect you? Or you *and* your babies?"

It was a test. The cat passed it. She climbed into Dawna's lap, briefly licked the top of each kitten's head, then stared up at the warrior again as the kittens burrowed in toward the tabby's nipples. "By the Gods, I believe you *are* hiring me. Why not? Very well. It's a bargain." She put out a hand to seal the deal, as she did with her human clients, and laughed at herself as the cat sniffed her fingers. "Here, then," she said formally, unhooking the pennant. "My gage is the symbol of my service. Carry it until my duty to you is discharged."

She wound the streamer twice around the cat's neck, tying the loose ends in a bow. "A bit gaudy with your coloring, my lady, but not too bad."

The cat seemed pleased, and began to wash her wet paw. The kittens were well into their morning meal.

But how to discharge her commission? Dawna thought, pushing the needle through the hard leather. She could hardly follow the cat on her morning rounds, nor shadow her as she stalked vermin. The cat solved the dilemma by departing abruptly from the mercenary's lap, leaving the now sleeping kittens behind. The

mercenary shrugged and went on with her repair.

As morning began, the smaller children emerged carrying slates and headed toward a house at the opposite corner of the square, where a goodwife was waiting with her hands on her hips: the village schoolteacher. The older children who were apprenticed were already on their way to and fro, discharging commissions for their masters. They all gave her a wary look as they passed her, sitting under the tree in the middle of the green, especially the blond boy whom she had spanked.

Once in a while the cat returned to feed her kittens. She had decided Dawna's lap was by far the best place for the job. The butcher passed by with a cart full of meat, saw the red streamer around the cat's neck, and snorted.

"How much is it paying you?" he asked.

"Two fish a day," Dawna replied. "I've had better wages, but I've had worse, too."

"You're mad," the butcher informed her. "That's the silversmith's cat. He'll do as he pleases with her, scarf or no scarf."

"If she has the wits to ask for my help, then she's master of her own fate," Dawna said.

Word spread quickly through the small town about her contract with the cat. From her vantage point on the green she could see all the comings and goings. Even the boy, who appeared to be apprenticed to the brewer, gave the orange cat a wide berth as he wheeled kegs of beer up and back from the brewery. The cat strutted, proudly displaying the red scarf around her neck as she went about her business.

One dark-haired lad did work up the courage to shy a stone at the orange cat. It just missed her, striking dust up from the pathway directly under her belly. The cat levitated in surprise, spun around to glare at her attacker, then she turned and stared directly at Dawna. No doubt remained in the warrior's mind that the cat understood what she had commissioned. Dawna, grinning, began to rise from her seat under the tree. The boy's face paled in fear, and he fled into an alleyway, his loose shoes pattering on the cobblestones. Dawna settled back again. She doubted he'd ever try again.

As long as she was there, that was. Dawna could not stay in Cabbage Town for long. By her reckoning she had perhaps a day, maybe two, before the townsfolk decided they were tired of the looming presence of an armed mercenary, one they thought was at least a little mad because she considered herself employed by a cat!

Shouting voices drew her attention to the river path. She saw nothing at first, but a small black-and-white cat came tearing up the hill, running full out. Its eyes were round with terror. It spotted Dawna and made directly for her. As it neared, Dawna saw blood, bright red on its fur. A cluster of children pelted up the hill ten steps behind it, throwing stones and clods of earth. By the time they reached the green, the black-and-white was crouched underneath Dawna's shield, trembling. Its eyes lifted to hers, beseeching. The blood dripped from a cut in its side.

"I won't give you away, little one," she said, laying a gentle hand on its neck.

The children cast about, looking for their prey. "It got away!" one of them shouted. "Let's go find another!"

They shot Dawna defiant glances. So that was the way of it, she thought. As long as the orange cat was off limits, they were going to have their fun with other animals. She loathed this town and everyone in it.

She opened her pack. "Stay there, little one," she said, as the black-and-white began to edge away from the strange sounds. "I've got salve that will ease the pain and stop the bleeding." The little cat held still for its physicking, then lay purring weakly as Dawna tied a makeshift bandage around its middle. When the orange cat returned she touched noses with the newcomer, then gave it a good washing before lying down to feed her kits. Dawna had a new client.

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"Nay, I'll not sell you red cloth, nor anything else," the weaver said severely, spreading his hands protectively over the stock on his counter. "I'd suggest you go visit the priests and see if they'll pray for your sanity. Now, leave."

Dawna gave up the argument and departed from the white-painted shop. She had not gone five paces out of the door when something bumped her leg. She looked down to see the gray cat, a long, red ribbon trailing from its mouth. It draped the end over her boot and blinked moonlike eyes at her. She groaned.

"Not you, too! Does no one treat their beasts with respect in this town?" Dawna glanced about to see if anyone was watching her. She took a small coin and wrapped it in a scrap of cloth. "Give this to your master for pay," she said. "I won't have either of us in trouble for theft. I accept your commission."

The gray cat dipped his head as if nodding, and trotted back into the store with the little bundle in its mouth. Dawna strode hastily up the hill, not wanting the weaver to come bursting out and accuse her publicly of sorcery.

Word had spread among the four-legged denizens of Cabbage Town, too. When she returned, her small camp was occupied by a dozen cats. Some of them bore the marks of recent ill-treatment; still others had old scars and limbs misshapen from being broken and left untreated. None of them had come empty-handed, or, rather, empty-mouthed. A little pile of offerings guarded by the orange-striped mother cat included sausage links, a raw chicken leg, a silk handkerchief, a child's purse containing one copper coin and a thumbprint-sized religious medallion depicting the Forest God. The length of red ribbon from the weaver's was barely long enough to make collars for all the worried-looking felines huddled near her. More clients. That night, they once again provided her with warmth, fresh fish, and not a few fleas. If she was going to be the protector of the local cats, she was going to have to pick them some fleabane.

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"Rats!" the silversmith declared, confronting the warrior nose to nose as she stumped back up the hill after making a rough toilet at the river's edge. The orange cat followed her, her latest catch clasped proudly in her jaws. "There are rats in my shop, and *my cat*," he pointed accusingly, "has spent all the last day up here with you. Release the witchery you've placed on her so she can do what I keep her to do!"

"There's no witchery," Dawna replied, glancing at the cat, who'd taken her favorite spot among the knobby roots of the tree. Her kittens, looked after by her other charges, played with their mother's tail, a leaf and a strand of hair from Dawna's comb. "She'll go, but your son must promise not to abuse her."

"Er . . ." the silversmith began. If he thought it was sorcery how could he argue? "Er. Done, then."

He rushed away. Dawna glanced at the orange cat. "In your own good time, then. We'll see if his word's his bond."

She was beginning to enjoy the company of cats. In many ways her little enclave on the hilltop reminded her of the war camp she had just left. Each warrior had her job to do, but was glad of the society of fellow warriors at the end of the day. She wished they could talk as well as understand. Dawna missed human conversation. Her keen hearing allowed her to eavesdrop on the innkeeper's guests at the edge of the green.

". . . Say the war's over, so I guess that female up there was telling the truth . . ."

". . . Raspberry season down south. It'll start here soon . . ."

". . . Sixty dead in one town. Can't tell *me* that's not sorcery from the enemy!"

" . . . Never happen here. Come on, let's have another drink."

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By the next morning Dawna could feel that the town's tolerance limit had been reached. Though they couldn't tell she knew what they were doing, the adults went about furtively, peeking at her from behind trees, ducking into one another's shops and homes, coordinating what they planned to do, to drive away the invader. She had plenty of time to divine their intention. By the time they'd formed up into a mob, three hours after they had begun, she had had time to bathe, enjoy a hearty breakfast of grilled fish and purloined sausage, pet and doctor all the cats, and don her full armor, including her buckler and newly-polished sword. The gleaming hilts of dirks poked out of both boot tops, and a war hammer, her least favorite weapon but a good one of last recourse, hung ready at her belt. She had fifteen cats with her now. Most of the adult felines of the town had come to her during the last day, bringing an offering, hoping for protection. They clustered behind her heels.

Led by the silversmith, nearly the entire human population of Cabbage Town stalked into the common and surged partway up the hill where she held her vigil. They were carrying tools of their trades, such as shears and hammers, or garden implements like hoes and spades. Only two bore themselves like former soldiers: the schoolteacher and the dyer, who both carried short-swords of uncertain age. The rest held their makeshift weapons with no conviction. Dawna felt certain she could defend herself if it came to a fight, but she intended that no fight should begin. A few of them stopped dead when they saw how she was attired. She smiled. Half the battle was already won.

Pushed by the others, the silversmith finally stepped forward out of the mob. He cleared his throat.

"Sell-sword, we've concluded . . . all of us," he turned to gesture at the crowd, "that, er, it is disruptive to the, er, well-being of our town, of which you are not a citizen, that . . . that . . ."

"That I should leave?" Dawna finished for him.

"Um . . . er . . . yes," the silversmith squeaked out, surprised at her capitulation. He seemed to take heart. "I mean, that is, forthwith. You must be on your way at once. Carrying only what you came with. Er. Yes. You must leave our cats behind."

"Very well," Dawna said, crossing her arms. "I won't touch a single one." Muttering erupted amongst the townsfolk. She had agreed so easily. What were they missing? They would be missing quite a lot, soon, if she was not wrong. She raised her voice. "I've got a few words to say that I want everyone to hear. I wish to thank the citizens of Cabbage Town for the use of green for the last two nights. It would have been a cold and uncomfortable place to stay, if not for the hospitality of your cats. They've shown me the common courtesy that I thought humans owed to one another, certainly that which one might expect to be extended to fellow subjects of this kingdom.

"To my hosts and clients, then," and she turned to look into the round eyes of the cats huddled at the foot of the tree, "I depart now for my home town of Marigold Down. If you are afraid to remain here, you may come with me. I'll find you somewhere better to live where you need never again fear a boot or a stone. I know my father would be grateful for good hunting cats. His barley harvest is much troubled by rats."

"Now, sell-sword!" the silversmith protested. "Didn't you just agree not to take our cats with you?"

"Now, silversmith," she countered, turning to face him. "They're dumb creatures, aren't they? You've all said as much for the last two days. You don't honestly believe that they can *understand* me, do you?"

"Uh. Er. No. I suppose not." The muttering in the crowd got louder. Dawna pitched her voice so it could be heard clear down to the bottom of the hill.

"I swear to you by my soul that I will not take a single animal out of this town. If any follow me, it will be by their own volition. Will that satisfy you?"

"Not me," the butcher growled, stepping forward with a cleaver in his hand. "I'll see you to the edge of town, mercenary, just to make sure you don't steal anything of ours."

"And I!" exclaimed the weaver.

"And I will, too," said the barber-surgeon, a dark-complected man with beefy arms. In all, six of the boldest elected to act as her escort. Dawna glanced back as she marched down the hill with her honor guard trailing behind. All of the cats who had been there had melted away into the undergrowth.

"Go on about your business," the butcher ordered the rest of the crowd. "We'll see she doesn't turn back."

Dawna led the six townsfolk toward the northern edge of town. Six days' march would bring her within sight of Marigold Down, and another half day to her father's home to the northwest.

"Goodbye," she said, nodding to her escort.

"Good riddance," the butcher said. As one, the men turned and stumped back toward town.

"Same to you," Dawna said under her breath. The sooner she shook the dust of Cabbage Town off her feet, the happier she would be. And now to see if her speech had had any results.

It had. As soon as she left the clean, gravel track for the muddy forest path, cats began to appear like magic out of the surrounding undergrowth. The orange cat popped out from beneath a flowering gorse bush with her kittens marching in a file behind her, and claimed the warrior with a cheek swipe along her boot top. Dawna stopped only long enough to scoop up the little ones and put them in a makeshift sling made of a fold of her cloak. The gray cat and the injured black-and-white came running from another hiding place. In all, eighteen cats and a couple dozen half-grown kits would be making the long journey northward with her. As soon as she felt safe stopping, she would tie red ribbons around the necks of each to show the people they met that these cats were under her protection. She hoped she wouldn't run into anyone as thick as the denizens of Cabbage Town.

"Come along," she said to the cats, setting a light pace once she was out of sight of the town. "We've got a long way to go, and I've always found a story helps to pass the time. Now, let me tell you about the siege of Valorin . . ."

The kittens against her chest purred their approval.

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