Name: _____ Date: _____

The Small Hunter on the Sofa

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 867 words

Every morning at six, Mina's cat, Sorrel, attacks her shoelace. Sorrel has just eaten a full bowl of food, so she is not hungry. She is hunting anyway. Mina used to find this odd, until she read that a cat's natural instinct is to hunt its prey. Even well-fed indoor cats feel that pull. That is why Mina now plays with Sorrel every day with a feather on a string, and she watches Sorrel stalk and pounce as if the feather were a mouse.

A cat's body is built for that job. Its whiskers are highly sensitive to touch, which helps it feel its way in the dark. Its eyes are so good that it can see at about one sixth of the light a person needs. Its claws pull back into its paws, so they stay sharp while it walks. Even its tongue is part of the kit. The tongue has tiny backward-facing spines, and they work like a hairbrush when Sorrel licks her coat clean.

Because Sorrel is a hunter, her food has to match. A cat is an obligate carnivore, which means it needs meat in its diet and cannot be vegetarian. Cats also need a nutrient called taurine, which they cannot make enough of themselves, so a properly balanced cat food includes it. Mina's mom chooses the food with the vet's help, and Mina never feeds Sorrel from her plate. Some human foods, such as onions, are poisonous to cats, and cow's milk is not a substitute for water.

Mina keeps a chart on the fridge for Sorrel's rhythm. Every day Sorrel needs fresh, clean water, and Mina washes and refills the bowl. She plays with Sorrel for a few minutes, and her mom scoops the litter box at least once. Sorrel eats several small meals, because that is how cats naturally eat, although one source says twice a day, so the vet has the final say. Treats are small and few. Mom brushes Sorrel regularly, and about once a week she empties the whole litter box and refills it.

The litter box matters more than Mina expected. Cats will not use a messy, smelly box, so it has to be scooped every day and placed somewhere quiet that Sorrel can easily reach. If a cat will not use the box, that is a reason to ask a vet, not a reason to be cross. Mina's mom does the scooping, and everyone washes their hands with soap afterward, because the CDC says to wash after touching a cat, its dishes or its supplies, and especially after the litter box.

One day Mina found a scratch down the arm of the sofa. She was upset until she learned why cats scratch. They use scratching to mark their territory, to strengthen their muscles and to sharpen their claws, so it is not bad behavior. The answer is a sturdy post, tall enough that Sorrel can stretch all the way up, and it must not wobble. Once Mina's family put one by the window, Sorrel started using it right away, and Mom trims her nails every few weeks.

Sorrel talks without words. When she walks across the room with her tail straight up and the tip curled over, she is relaxed. If her tail is tucked tight against her body, she is worried, and worried cats often hide. Cats also sleep for many hours a day, so a long nap is nothing to worry about. Mina has learned that a cat can be upset or in pain without making it obvious, so she pays attention when Sorrel acts differently from usual.

Cats like company on their own terms. Mina does not force Sorrel to be picked up. She sits still and lets Sorrel come to her. When a grown-up does lift Sorrel, one hand goes behind the front legs and the other under the back end, and never by the scruff or the front legs. Mina's mom also reminds her that cat scratches and bites can spread germs, even if the wound seems small, so a grown-up stays close and everyone washes up.

A cat should see a vet at least once a year, even when she seems well. A vet checks that she is up to date on shots and can talk about a microchip, which helps a lost cat find her way home. Between visits, Mina tells her mom if Sorrel stops eating or seems low on energy. If that goes on for more than two days, it is time to call the vet. Nobody gives a cat any medicine a vet has not prescribed, and Mina never tries to be the doctor.

Mina's mom decided on an indoor cat. Outdoor cats are at risk from cars, fights with other animals and illness, and they do not live as long as indoor cats. So Mina keeps Sorrel's days interesting with play, a window and a good post. It takes a family to look after a cat well, and a grown-up decides to adopt one. The feather is on the floor again. Mina picks it up, and Sorrel crouches. Ask a grown-up to look at Peabody Pets with you. You will find it at pet.peabody.kids.

Questions

1. Why does Sorrel attack the shoelace after she has eaten?

A. She is still hungry
B. A cat's natural instinct is to hunt
C. She dislikes shoes

2. What does it mean that a cat is an obligate carnivore?

A. It eats only fish
B. It needs meat in its diet
C. It cannot digest water

3. Why does Mina's family put a sturdy scratching post by the window?

A. Scratching helps a cat mark, stretch and sharpen
B. It keeps the cat awake
C. It replaces the litter box

4. What does a tail tucked tightly against the body show?

A. The cat feels relaxed
B. The cat feels worried
C. The cat wants a treat

5. In the book, what does "territory" mean?

A. A favorite toy
B. A space a cat claims as its own
C. A kind of food

Words to know

instinct: natural urge
carnivore: meat eater
taurine: needed nutrient
territory: claimed space
microchip: tiny ID tag

Answer key: The Small Hunter on the Sofa

1. B. A cat's natural instinct is to hunt
2. B. It needs meat in its diet
3. A. Scratching helps a cat mark, stretch and sharpen
4. B. The cat feels worried
5. B. A space a cat claims as its own