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Grade: 8

Story Title: The Flower of Skye

The cat looked at the girl, tempted to remind her of his dignity. But as always, his hard sunlit eyes softened when they looked at his young charge. She was a sweet thing, a small playful human girl of four or five years, with pale gold hair and eyes as blue as the sky. The cat was currently being held in a most undignified fashion, his legs dangling off in the air and his body held stiff in the space between her arms and body. The girl swung him around, and his livid gold eyes bulged slightly. But he put up with it, albeit ungracefully. He put up with a lot, as was usual with human children of this age, but she was sweet and meant no harm.

“Wee!” she cried gleefully, spinning in circles with the cat held out in her arms, beginning to stumble as the dizziness crept over her. But as the cat clutched to her, eyes wide, she slowed, and finally, set him down. He sat in front of her, gazing at the child rather grumpily.

“You don’t like that, Leti?” she asked him worriedly. She stopped, thought for a moment, her brows creasing as her mind worked. “Let’s go play with the Iso-tammi!” She scooped him up and began to march in the direction of the garden. At the door out of the house, a woman with fair skin and dark hair scooped her up, cat and all, and smiled as the child squirmed in her arms.

“Aiti!” the girl shrieked in happiness. The cat winced and wished he could cover his ears. “Mama, let me down, let me down right now! Please?” Her mother smiled, once again, and chuckled.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe. Where were you going, Lemmikit, with your poor kitty in hand like that? Don’t you think he can walk himself?” she questioned.

“Yeah, but I’m carrying him! Isn’t that fun?” Lemmikit grinned impishly at her mother, and the cat sighed in annoyance. The Valkoi-nainen, the Emäntä-sekä-yö, really ought to tell her child to set me down!! But there’s not much chance of that.

“Down here! Please! Look at me! Set me down! Come on, I’m begging you. LET ME DOWN! Meow! Down here! MEOW!” he practically shouted at them. The Valkoi-nainen glanced down at him with her silver eyes, but other than that neither of them noticed his yowling.

“I’m not sure Lehti-silmät likes to be carried, kultaseni. He’s a proud young tom, and likes to walk on his own.”

“Oh, all right, mama, since you say so,” decided the young lass. She set the cat down, and he nuzzled her gratefully.

“Now, where are you two going?”

“Oh yeah, that,” she remembered. “We were going to go play at the Iso-tammi!”

“All right. But remember: don’t go beyond the wooden gate,” warned the mother once again.

“I know, I know, you’ve told me a gazillion times!” insisted the five-year-old as she sped through the door on small stubby legs into the outdoors.

The garden was Kuu’s. She tended to it; spend much time in the place. But at least half of the work done was by the child, for quite literally anything would grow beneath Lemmikit’s small hands. The garden was beautiful; with idyllic flowers opening delicately placed just so, perfect hedges rich dark green, old tall trees growing peacefully in the sun, lush vegetation giving just the touch of wildness about it, fountains sprouting clear fresh water glittering in the evening

sun. A grove of ancient trees grew in the center: alder, apple, ash, birch, blackthorn, cedar, elder, elm, fir, hawthorn, hazel, holly, juniper, mistletoe, oak, pine, rowan, willow, yew... The silver birch was strong and slender, queenly, the elder had a touch of fey, the dark silent holly waited, the ash burned low a healing fire, the white-blossomed hawthorn, the old sweet pine, the smooth golden yew, the sweeping willow, and the oak, golden and kingly, crowned with leaves, grew tall and strong in the peaceful sunlight, with ivy its faithful servant twining dark around its base.

The child gleefully hopped into the old woods, ignoring the other vegetation.

“Hello, Iso-tuhka, hello, Iso-mänty, hello, Iso-koivu... Oh, there you are, Iso-tammi!” she bounced onto the roots of the great oak tree, the great tammi tree. It seemed to welcome her, sunlight streaming through its leaves ever most brightly. The cat picked his way through the sacred woods, acknowledging the powers of the great trees. He paused in front of Lemmikit, waiting for her to reach out for him, and leapt forward to the next root. She shrieked in laughter, giggling as she jumped after him. He continued the game, and put his whiskers forward, smiling. Finally, she caught up with him and exclaimed, “I got you!” as she sat suddenly on her knees. He smiled tolerantly and purred, butting his head against her now dirty hands. They enjoyed the silence broken only by Lehta-silmät’s purring. The girl stroked his fur, still rather clumsily, and when he jumped into her lap she squealed and clapped her hands in delight, then guiltily returned to petting the cat.

Creak, the cat heard the gate tell him. Squeak, squeal, creeeak.

He jumped up rather abruptly with a sudden sense of alarm and ran towards the entrance to the garden, the child stumbling behind him. What he saw-

What he saw was the ornate metalwork gate into and out of the garden, with twists and spirals not unlike the ivy twining up its sides, being pushed slowly open by an older boy, perhaps fifteen, dressed in odd, close-fitting clothing and with oddly short brown hair. He looked up at the sounds of Lemmikit stumbling through the brush and protesting at her cat.

“Kitty, where...” she saw the boy and stopped. “Oh.” The boy and the girl stared at each other, mouths wide for a moment, then the girl spoke to him.

“What are you doing in my garden?” she demanded.

“Uh-uh- why shouldn’t I come here?” Lemmikit thought about that for a moment, scowling at the interruption.

“Well, I’m not allowed out, so I don’t see why you should be allowed in! This is my garden- well, mine and Mama’s...and...”

“But it’s so pretty! I know some cool games we can play.”

“Cool? Why are you describing a game with a temperature? But so do I, and mine are better.”

“Maybe. But you’ve never played mine before.” At the boy’s response, the cat put his hackles up, an odd sense of foreboding coming over him.

“Hmm. Maybe not... How did you get in?”

“I walked through the gate.” Lehti-silmät glared at the young boy, telling him with a single glance that the human was nothing more than a mouse-brained furless dog born to obey the regal feline. He sniffed and turned his head away as his well-trained human glared at the boy as well.

“No, no, no!” she exclaimed impatiently. “Why did you come here?”

"It was pretty. It's even prettier now that I'm in here. And your clothes look weird. So does your house! I've never seen an actual stone cottage, though it is blue stones, with a real straw roof before, like in the Three Little Pigs!"

"My clothes aren't 'weird', yours are! Are you insulting me? And how could you not have seen a thatched roof before, or a stone house? That's the only kind of house there is, my Mama says! And why are you talking about pigs being little? They're huge!"

"Well, yeah, I guess. I've never seen a real pig before either, except for that one time at the ranch. The Three Little Pigs is just the name of the story!"

"A story?" Lemmikit's eyes widened in delight. "You know stories? Tell me, tell me!"

"What's your name?" asked the boy patiently.

"Oh yeah, that. My name is Lemmikit, his name-" she held up the rather annoyed cat for inspection- "is Lehti-silmät. What's your name?"

"I'm Thomas Smith."

"You can't be a smith, you're too little! My Dada does a little smithing, though he's not really a blacksmith, and he has to be big and strong!"

"What? No one's a real smith! That's just my last name."

"Last name?" asked Lemmikit blankly.

"My family name," replied Thomas slowly, as if to an even younger child than Lemmikit. The cat thought the boy seemed shocked at the idea that someone could not know what a "last name" was. Lehti began to wash.

"Oh, that. The name of my family is Päivä-Yö. What's your family like?"

"Well, my parents are both American, although my mom's half Finnish. She's a dentist and my dad's a computer programmer. I also had a sister."

"My isä, my father, his name is Aurinko, he's always doing something important all day, and my äiti, my mother, her name is Kuu, she stays with me when Papa's gone, and when he comes back, she has to go," Lemmikit commented dreamily although she clearly had no clue what the boy was saying. "I don't have any siblings."

"Then they never see each other?"

"Oh. Well, she leaves just before Papa comes back, and Papa does the same thing with her in the morning, so I think they probably meet for a little bit out there. I thought you said you'd tell me a story? Please?"

The cat had the impression that the boy was impatient and didn't actually know any stories. At least, not stories that he counted as such...

"What is this?" The clear voice of the Valkoï-nainen, the mother of the child, rang out in the air.

"Oh. I found him. His name is Thomas Smith, he's not a blacksmith, and he's gonna tell me a story! You can listen too, Mama, if you want."

"You know, I do believe I will," decided the Emäntä-sekä-yö. She sat down on the grass beside the gate, her white skirts flowing around her. "Go on, then, boy." He began.

“Once upon a time, there was a boy.”

“Why does it have to be a boy? Why can’t it be a girl?” protested Lemmikit.

“Because that’s how the story goes. Anyway, this boy had a mom, a dad, and a sister. That sister was older than the boy, about to go to college. Her hair was black like a raven’s wings and her eyes a deep, soft dark purple that had grown moody of late. She wore pale green, usually, pale green and dark purple. The boy appeared much more ordinary than his sister, but his activities were far more unusual: he loved astronomy. There was nothing he liked better than to look up at the stars, rather than more ordinary things like watching TV or playing video games. He found his own constellations: an old woman, a tinker, a horse, an old gardener, a flower, a cat, a house that was at the horizon every dawn and dusk... But one day, his sister disappeared. The family told everyone they could in the hopes that someone would find her, and finally the police came to the house, but still they couldn’t find her. In the next few months, the mom and the dad started to get grumpy. They would snap at the least little thing, and soon they started yelling at each other. The boy got scared, because it looked as though his Mom and Dad were angry at each other, they stopped speaking to each other except to yell, and he thought they were going to separate and never see each other again. Those fears were confirmed one day of those miserable months when his mom sat down at the table and told the boy that his parents were getting a divorce.”

“What’s a divorce?” Lemmikit asked, engrossed in this tale of a world foreign to her. The cat thought furiously, realizing who he was, who he must be. This “Thomas Smith” was a boy from the outside world, from the world inside time, and Lehti listened carefully to his story. He had a guess, and he suspected that Kuu thought the same as well.

“It’s where a married couple is angry with each other and they sign papers to be separated and not married anymore.”

“Keep going!”

“So the boy got so angry with his mom when she told him that. He ran into his room and after a few hours, he ran out of the house with a pack on his shoulders, telling his mom he was going to find his sister. She was horrified, of course, and called him back, but it was no use. The boy took a train with the small amount of his allowance that he’d saved up and the train took up all the money, and he ended up in some city he had never heard of before. It was called Konstelvil.” The boy paused, as though hoping one of them had heard of it. When it became apparent that they did not, he continued with the story.

“Yeah, I know, I thought it was a weird name too. So the first thing the boy did was get lost. He got out of the train station and walked around for a bit, trying to find somewhere safe. He had no idea where he was, how to get anywhere, where he would sleep, and since it was bed time he took out his sleeping bag he used for camping trips that he brought in his pack and laid down where he was, on the sidewalk. He cried himself to sleep.”

“Does he end up all right?” asked Lemmikit anxiously.

“I daresay yes, he does. When he woke up, he wasn’t still on the sidewalk. He was in someone’s house. It was a nice house, similar to his, though not the same house of course, for the walls were white and not green, as his own had been. As he sat up, rubbing his eyes, an old lady hobbled into the room. ‘What was a young boy like you doing sleeping on the sidewalk like some ruffian?’ she demanded. ‘I was lost,’ he replied to her. She shook her head and told him that he was welcome to stay with her. But he told her that he was looking for his sister, his poor Violet, and he told her about Mom and Dad and all that. She shook her head at him and told him that he had less of a chance of finding his flower-sister in this city than finding the moon up in the daytime. But the boy insisted, so he ran out of the house, this time with nothing, to search for the moon in the morning sky of Konstelvil. But out of that doorway was another room of another

house, this time with red walls,” Thomas said, and the cat thought, This adventure aged you beyond your years, you poor boy. Who stole your childhood?

“There was a small dark man in the room, a tinker. He spoke to the boy as well, and when the boy explained his situation to him the tinker told him, ‘Your sister is in a place outside of time. You have as much chance of getting there as to a house in the sky.’ Once again the boy fled the room, and once again he ended up in another. But this one was huge, and seemed almost to be outside, for on the dome ceiling was a beautiful painting of the summer sky, and beneath the feet was perfect jeweled grass. There was a large, white stallion that seemed to be eating the grass. As the boy stared at him, the stallion asked, ‘What are you doing in this house?’ The boy told him his story, which had grown like a weed the longer he stayed in that house, and the stallion thought for a moment, then replied. ‘I daresay your sister is growing just fine on the ground. But you couldn’t find her if you flew!’ The boy left that room as well, and found himself in a garden. It was weeded, overgrown, and a little old man with his back to him was watering an overgrown hydrangea. But when the boy stepped in, the old man turned around and looked at him. Once again, the boy stated his plea and the old man chuckled. ‘Your Violet lies in a grove of old trees more ancient than I. There are no mortal trees tall enough to carry you to those branches.’

“He thought for a long time. Putting together what the old woman, the tinker, the horse, and the gardener had said, he realized that they had helped him indeed. When he realized that, he stepped out of a final doorway and peered around. He was on an old, run-down street, with old houses and

overgrown gardens. It was a dead end, so he would have just turned right back around if he could figure out how, but at the end of it there was a beautiful garden. He could see a small blue house peeking out from behind the hedges with a roof golden like the sun. A grove of ancient trees stood in the center. He opened the gate to another world and a small girl with hair like the sun and skin like the moon, and eyes like the sky between raced up to him with her precious cat, begging him to tell her a story.” The Emäntä-sekä-yö and Lehta-silmät looked at each other. Lemmikit’s soft blue eyes were filled with wonder.

“That was well told, Thomas Smith,” Kuu began.

“I do believe you can tell me where my sister is, Moon-woman. Mistress of the Night, White Lady, you can tell me where Violet is.” stated Thomas.

“I... I cannot. She is somewhere in this garden, that I can tell, yet there are many little violets growing here. Lemmikit, can you think of a violet that popped up only recently?”

“Uh... I think so. Here...” the girl hunted about, peering under moss, around trees, and many other rather incongruous places.

“Aha!” she exclaimed triumphantly. “I knew it was here!” Growing delicately between the roots of the Iso-tammi, thankfully not squashed by Lemmikit’s playing, was a small violet. It was the most beautiful such she had ever seen, and for that, the cat had seen his charge take special care of it.

“Now how does she become human again?” demanded Thomas.

“She doesn’t,” answered Kuu. The boy stared at the Valkoi-nainen in shock and despair.

“What! They sent me all the way through that awful endless house for nothing! They knew she could never become a human again! They sent me on a useless journey, just to amuse themselves! I won’t be upset if this turns out to be a dream and I’m sleeping on the sidewalk of the constellation town, this has become so awful! My sister is lost forever,

and I won't ever see her human body again, and Mom and Dad are gonna divorce, and I'll be stuck here forever outside of time, and...and..."

"NO!" shouted Lemmikit, her little fists balled up in determination. "I won't let your sister be stuck here! Mama, can't you do something?" she turned to her mother expectantly. But Kuu was not there. In her place was a moonflower. The violet at the roots of the great oak was gone, and in her place was a young lady, with long hair black as the night and eyes a deep soft purple that were blinking in astonishment. "NO!" Lemmikit shouted again. "If Mama can do it, so can I!" And with yet another bang! the daughter of the Sun and the Moon disappeared. In the grove of the First Trees there was a carpet of blue forget-me-nots, the pale color of the sky near the sun at dawn, with the occasional purple thrown in. There was a blaze of light as Aurinko returned late from his journey, wild-eyed with worry. His eyes lit upon his dazed wife, the new flowers carpeting the mossy ground, and the mortals sprawled in the ancient woods. But Lehti was too busy sniffing the flowers to look up and see the Sun. He turned and turned, mewing like a lost kitten, nuzzling the delicate petals. His sun-gold eyes were wide like moons, gazing at his charge transformed. And though he tried, he could not turn into a flower to replace her.

"We would need as many people willing to sacrifice themselves for her as forget-me-nots!" he mewed aloud in despair. The people around him stared at him in astonishment, for he had spoken and been understood.

"I'm not going up tonight," declared Kuu flatly. "I don't care how much the people will wail that the world's ending, but this one night I refuse to climb the sky. Even if this becomes a dark time, if evil spirits can intrude upon the Earth, I don't care. I will spend a night to try to find a way to save my daughter!"

"What has happened here?" roared Aurinko. "Where is my daughter? Why have mortals intruded in the garden of Skye?"

"A boy in search of a violet has happened, kultaseni," the moon explained softly.

"Blame is useless, and does not apply," advised Lehti. "My charge has chosen. So have I," he added. And the Cat of Skye curled around the Flower of the same name and would not leave it.

When the Moon next rose, Thomas and Violet Smith were peering through their telescope eagerly. He counted his constellations.

"There's the Old Woman, and over there is the Horse. The Tinkerer is over by the Gardener, who's watering his big hydrangea. And- wait for it, wait for it... There it is! I see it! There's the Flower and the Cat!"

"What about the House?" asked Violet, fascinated.

"The House won't appear until the sun does. The moon and the sun will be in the sky together for that moment until the moon disappears into the House."

"Thomas! Violet! Come eat dinner!" shouted their mother, and the children ran into the dining room to eat with their parents.

"I had a really weird dream last night... But I can't really remember it..." Thomas trailed off, looking rather confused.

"So what constellations did you see this time, Thomas?" asked their father.

"All the usual ones. But it's weird. I could swear that the Cat moved, 'cause now it's twining around the base of the Flower."

When his parents shooed Thomas into bed, he peered into his telescope for one last look.

The Cat was still there, curled up around his Flower. His eyes were bright stars, shining strong against the night. And for a moment, one of them went out, then shone again.

"Mom! Dad! The Cat winked at me!

