

Vivace Has the Blues

“Why are you still up at this hour?” I asked in a Facebook chat with Lynne. Lynne breeds Russians, I breed Somalis and Abyssinians.

“I’m on kitten watch” answered Lynne. “Zhanna is due”. “Me too, Nibbles had a discharge tonight, even though she’s not due until Tuesday”.

Good luck was wished by both parties.

I didn’t think much about this after I switched off the PC. There was enough to think about keeping an eye on our queen. She didn’t deliver that night. Four days later, on due date she had a caesarean section to deliver the single live kitten.

Nibbles, more properly known as Grand Champion Vivace Dolce Aphrodite, had had a most problematic pregnancy. At around week four of the nine-week gestation, she had miscarried one kitten and one had been resorbed. There had been weekly vet visits, ultrasounds and progesterone shots. Both were fine and healthy after the delivery, Nibbles and her daughter were thriving.

Around two weeks later there was a phone call at 11.30pm. Unusual... and from Lynne! “Do you happen to know anyone with a queen with 2 week old kittens who might take on some fosters?”

Lynne had returned home from work to discover her Russian queen dead in her nest, alongside her two kittens. No sign of any upsets; for all the world looking like she was curled up asleep. A blood clot seemed the reason for this untimely death. Lynne was understandably distraught and along with her shock and grief, worried how her kittens would cope. They were still very much pre-weaning stage, and would have required much feeding by Lynne, around her work commitments of course. In this situation the ideal is a foster mother, but that is usually easier said than done. To find a mother who is around the same stage, who will accept kittens that are not their own. The first flush of maternal hormones has gone. Not only can the queen reject the new babies, she may even wish to harm them. Of course the foster mother does so much more than feeding. She nurtures, cleans, loves and teaches them all the important skills for their lives ahead as little cats. The lack of this socialisation can be seen in kittens that have been



removed from their mothers at too young an age, as a lack of confidence and good adjustment as cats.

There was only one way to find out if it might work. Evelyn rushed over to Lynne’s house to collect the kittens. Nibbles didn’t share any of our apprehension. Within minutes of hearing the squeaks of the Russian kittens, Nibbles rushed up to the basket and seized one, as if to say ‘what are you doing out of the nest? Babies should be in bed!’ During the next hour she began to wash the new babies, giving an occasional little growl when she came across an unfamiliar smell. And they began to nurse.

Once she had accepted them we could all sigh with relief. Then, we began to wonder if some of the breed characteristics might be affected by being raised in a foster family. Would the raising by a mother of a different breed have an effect on these babies? Yes, we faced the old nature versus nurture debate.

Somalis and Russians are very different in nature, what might eventuate with this situation? Somalis are inherently curious, very active and playful, and like their parent breed the Abyssinian, love space, heights and are natural clowns. Russians on the other hand had always looked so aristocratic that I would almost tug a forelock in front of their cages at cat shows. They have a way of looking down their long noble noses at you. They sit with regal contemplation while the Somalis are busy tearing apart the judges’ wands. Would the Russians influence the Somali kitten, or would they follow the Somali mother’s example?

The blue kittens were already bigger than the ‘native’ Somali kitten. The boy in particular had a



Harmonia was running here and there and pulling down the backdrop and everything else she could get her little monkey paws on.

Nibbles had helped them grow into fine, large healthy kittens. They returned to Lynne at nine weeks, and were adopted by Uncle Rimsky and Father Max [now desexed]. The kittens readily accepted their new Russian caretakers. Lynne began asking me about certain little habits she observed in her newly reclaimed kittens. She reported that Zhanna spent

voracious appetite. For a while it seemed that the Russians were dominating the milk bar. Nibbles' milk supply took a couple of days to adjust to the increased demand so I helped out with some bottle feeding.

As they grew and wanted to do more than just nurse, a small difference appeared in early behaviours. The Russians began tentative wrestling with each other in the family bed. Harmonia the Somali took several days longer to join in; she was much more interested in exploring the outer world and what lay beyond the nest box.

When I began to play with interactive toys to stimulate them, the Russian boy was not at all interested, but Harmonia was avid and lightning fast and Zhanna just behind. Nibbles also joined in. Alexei, the boy showed no interest whatsoever, but remained steadfastly on his back paddling upwards at the dangling toys on the play mat. I tried in vain with every toy I could find to interest Alexei, to be met each time with the same stare. I thought that he definitely wasn't gaining any "Somalian" behaviours. He did surprise me when on one visit he showed me how he could climb to the very top of the cat gym, which is almost ceiling height. I had never seen any of them, not even Nibbles, sit up there.

Their differences were highlighted at Christmas photo time. The Russian babies, just like their adult counterparts at shows, were a dream to photograph. They stayed where they were put and just looked at the camera. Naturally

much time chasing her father up and down the hallway. "Zhanna keeps sticking her leg out of cage to reach me! Is that a Somali thing? Russians don't do this, and I remember Nibbles was trying to touch me all the way to the vet when we were in the car together"; "the Russian kittens usually aren't as quick and active as the little girl, they tend to play then rest but this one doesn't want to rest she just loves all the activity... is this what Somalis do? Wondered if she'd picked up the trait".

Yes. That's exactly what Somalis do. And anyone who has been near the Somali and Aby cages at shows knows how they reach out to grab whoever and whatever they can reach with their monkey hands. There were many more such stories from Lynne about Zhanna especially. She described her as a "livewire",



not a term usually used for Russians of any age.

What can we take from this? Of course we can't generalise from two kittens. And of course these behaviours are not unique to the Somali breed. One kitten more than the other showed increased activity, although Alexei did demonstrate a head for heights which is an expected trait in Somalis. There are other variables that may have also been at work. It could be that these behaviours, which I expect to see in a healthy growing Somali kitten, were encouraged and reinforced, so I may have been responsible for Zhanna's increased activity levels. This didn't,

however, increase toy-playing with Alexei, the kitten with whom I tried the hardest. Overall though, I think it is reasonable to say that the unusual upbringing may have increased or emphasised some behaviours that the young Russians already possessed, and these were developed to their full potential with Nibbles, Harmonia and me playing a role. The main thing is, all three kittens benefited from their joining together, the Russians had a mother's love, Harmonia had two siblings to help her grow, develop and learn with, and Nibbles raised three kittens that she was originally going to have.