

Chapter Eleven



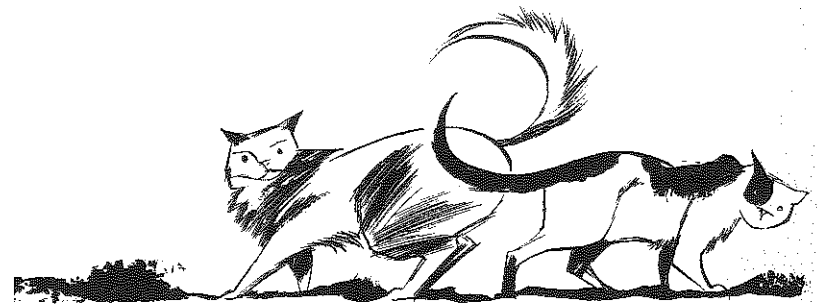
'Hey!' Varjak heard the gravelly voice as if from a great distance. 'Hey, you! Poor Jack, or whatever your name is! Wake up!'

He opened his eyes. Once again, the dream was over. He was back in the soggy timber hut, in the middle of the park. He was cold. Wet. And hungry.

'Did you say something about breakfast?' he groaned. He heaved himself up and scratched his ear. A trail of dirty water trickled out.

'Breakfast?' said another voice. Varjak looked to the door. It was open. A comfortable-looking cat with shaggy, chocolate-brown fur sat there. 'I haven't heard that word for a long time,' she said. 'Remember breakfast, Holly?'

The spiky black-and-white cat called Holly shook her head. 'Did you find anything?' she asked.



'Not a sausage – but looks like you have.' The new cat winked at Varjak. 'Where'd you dig him up?'

'Mind your own business,' said Holly. She turned to Varjak. 'The storm's over. It's time to go.'

He peered through the door. It was night again. It looked freezing out there. He had a memory flash: the sky bellowing with thunder. He couldn't stand to be alone so soon.

'Have a heart, Holly,' said the chocolate-brown cat. 'Look at him, he's obviously not dangerous.' She smiled at Varjak. 'My name's Tam. Don't you mind Holly here. She's in a bad mood right now, but her bark's worse than her bite.'

'That's enough,' snapped Holly. Varjak looked into her eyes. They were a sharp mustard colour.

'So, are you going to help me find a dog?' he asked.

'A dog?' said Tam. Her eyes were wide and round, like saucers. 'Why?'

'I need to talk to one.'

'Talk to a dog?' Tam whispered.

'I know it's difficult—'

Her shaggy coat shuddered. 'It's worse than that! Do you have any idea what you're saying?'

'Don't listen to him, Tam,' said Holly. 'He doesn't know anything.'

'Yes I do!' said Varjak.

'Go on, tell Tam what your name is.' She smiled.

'I'm Varjak Paw,' he said, with all the dignity he could muster. 'It's a noble name; I'm a Mesopotamian Blue.'

There was hush for a moment, and then Tam started to giggle. Holly grinned.

'Messsuppa what?' said Tam.

'Mesopotamia. It's where my family's from.'

'Sounds weird,' said Tam. 'Where is it?'

Varjak scratched his head. 'I don't exactly know,' he admitted, 'but—'

'Haven't you been there?'

'I've only ever dreamed about it.'

They both laughed this time. The strange thing was, Varjak didn't mind. It wasn't like being bullied by Julius. These cats were so different from his family. He enjoyed the way they talked, even when they teased him. He grinned with them, and just for a moment, he felt the invisible barrier between them drop.

'Well then,' Tam said, 'if you're not from there, you're from here. You're one of us.'

'He's not from here,' Holly told her. 'He's a pet. Says he lives on the hill, got lost in the storm.'

'I'm here to save my family,' said Varjak.

'You are?' breathed Tam. 'From who?'

'A Gentleman. He's got these scary black cats – even their eyes are black. And they walk all strange.' Varjak paused. He knew he was sounding odd. 'Like

this,' he said, and tried to walk like the black cats, but found he couldn't really do it on his own. Tam and Holly cracked up laughing again.

'I like him,' said Tam. 'He reminds me of Luka.'

The warm laughter died away all of a sudden, and the hut became very silent. Varjak looked over at Holly. There was a sad look in her mustard eyes.

'Luka's a friend of ours,' said Tam. 'He used to be. He looked like me, but he sounded like you; he could always make us laugh. Anyway, he ended up joining a gang. It was when the food started to run out – the gangs were taking everything. We were so hungry.'

'I told him it was a bad idea,' said Holly, quietly, 'but he joined one anyway. And then he Vanished. Some friend.'

'He left you?' asked Varjak.

'Not left,' said Holly. 'Vanished. It happens all the time in this city.' She glanced at the door. Her invisible barrier was definitely up again. 'But that's just what friends do. They're not worth having.'

'Why not?' Varjak thought he'd give anything and do anything for a friend. Nothing could be worth more.

'Because they let you down. They leave you in the end. It's best to be alone.'

'Don't worry, Varjak,' said Tam. 'She doesn't mean it. Holly tries to act all hard, but she's the

best friend you could have. And she likes you really – I can tell.'

'That's enough!' shouted Holly. She looked hurt. 'If you two are such good friends now, why don't you just go off together?'

She stalked away, out of the hut, into the park. She was going. Varjak followed her. He had a strange feeling, like something important was slipping through his paws.

'Wait—' he said.

'Don't follow me,' she growled as she padded off, tail held up, spiky and solitary. An unapproachable cat.

'Oh, no,' said Tam, hurrying after her. 'I shouldn't have mentioned Luka. I ruined it. Holly, wait for me!' She scuttled away into the night.

And Varjak Paw was alone once again.