

Chapter Twelve

Varjak walked in the other direction. He shivered as he walked. The grass felt wet and clammy cold beneath his paws. The sky was clear after the storm, but it looked hollow and black, as though the rain had washed even the moon and stars away.

It was much worse being alone now that he'd had a moment with Holly and Tam. It made him realize how alone he'd been before, and how lonely he was again now. Still, he had to get on with his mission: find a dog, take it home, beat the Gentleman and his cats.

The city loomed up ahead. From the hill he'd seen it all, and how it fitted together. But on ground level, he couldn't see further than the nearest building. Even the smallest of them blocked his way. Their thick brick walls reared up before him, higher than the Contessa's house.

The night was full of strange sounds too. Things were rumbling, bells ringing, sirens wailing. What

did it all mean? How was he going to find his way through it? He badly needed help. Holly and Tam seemed to know what they were doing – but they were gone, and they weren't coming back.

Varjak walked through a gate at the park's edge. Beyond it was a narrow pavement and a wide black road, lined by orange street lamps. They looked like spiny iron trees, with clusters of light on their branches. Instead of the sweet scent of fruit, they smelled sharp and electric, buzzing nervously above him.

He felt exposed in their glare. Further down the pavement, he could hear people, groups of them. Some were talking, others were laughing or shouting at each other. His fur prickled, remembering the men who came to the Contessa's house that night.

He didn't want to be seen; it felt too risky out here on his own. Across the road, there was a quiet-looking alleyway between the brick houses. It looked a safer place to be.

Varjak stepped onto the pavement – and froze in his tracks. Before him, lined up on the edge of the road, was a whole column of shiny metal monsters. They stood in single file, stock still. They weren't moving, or making any sound. Their eyes were dull and lightless, their round black wheels at rest.

But they were dogs – and this was Varjak's chance to talk to them.

'Excuse me,' he said.

They didn't react; not even a flicker in the eyes. Perhaps they were sleeping. He took a deep breath, and crept closer to them, ready to run if they suddenly awoke. He slunk onto the road, stretched out a paw, and gingerly touched a monster's smooth metal flank.

It was cold. Not asleep, but dead. Varjak shivered at the thought.

Far away, but closing in, something shrieked. Something roared. Varjak's heart thudded in his chest as he turned to face it. The shrieking, roaring noise grew louder. It was a pack of dogs, live ones, and they were coming down the road towards him.

He'd forgotten how fast and wild they were. In motion, they blurred beneath the street lights. Their yellow eyes were open, so round and bright they seemed to pierce his skull. He couldn't meet their gaze.

He had to look away. No wonder people were scared of them!

Varjak quaked as the monsters roared past, one after another after another. They were massive, mighty, unstoppable. In their wake came that foul, choking smell. It made him cough and cough and cough.

He cowered in the lethal wind; watched the red eyes at the back recede into the distance.

What should I do, Jalal?

Awareness, the Second Skill: *before you do anything, you must know what you are dealing with. Assume nothing; be sure of the facts.*

All right. The fact was, these dogs wouldn't notice him if he just sat there and called out to them. They wouldn't even hear him. He had to make one of them stop. That came first.

There was only one way to do it, and Varjak's stomach tightened as he realized what it meant. He was going to have to stand in front of them, in the middle of the road, as they sped towards him. Then they'd see him and would have no choice but to stop.

It would take courage, but he could do it. He could do it. He was sure he could.

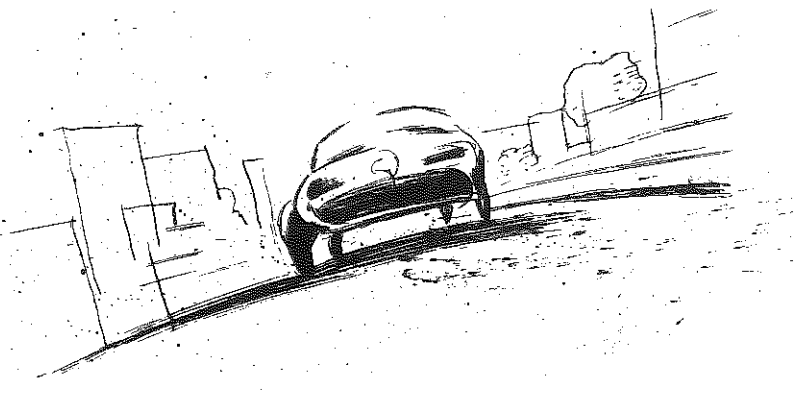
Deep inside him, something shrugged its shoulders and walked away. Absolutely not, it said. I'm not Jalal. I'm not even Julius. The dogs are never going to stop for me. Even if they see me, they'll just run me over. They'll kill me. Look at them! They're huge, heartless monsters. They don't slow down for anything. It's pointless even to try.

But he had to try. The Elder Paw gave his life so he could try: him and no one else. That sacrifice would mean nothing unless Varjak was prepared to risk his own life too. And hadn't he always wanted a chance to prove himself a proper Mesopotamian Blue?

Varjak closed his eyes. Took a deep breath. And strode out into the road, to the very centre of the dogs' path.

Another pair of yellow eyes appeared in the distance. He could smell the foul breath from here. He could hear the deafening roar. The tales were right: these monsters filled his heart with fear. It clawed at his insides as they came towards him.

'Stop!' he called.



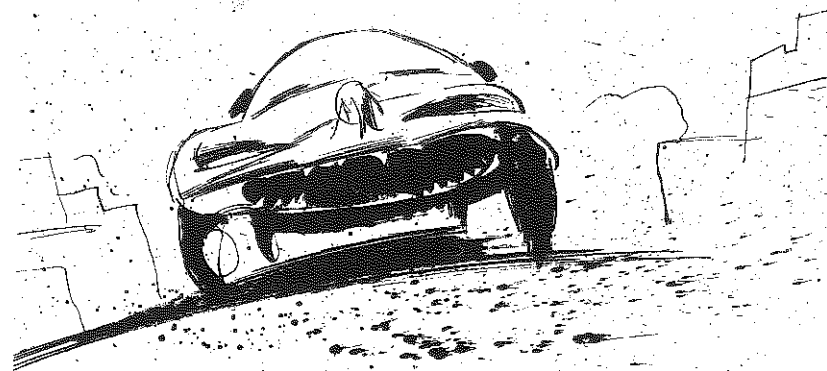
The eyes were big and dazzling. Varjak looked straight into them. He ignored the piercing pain they made in his head. He ignored his muscles, screaming at him to run from this oncoming beast. He stood his ground.

He remembered the Elder Paw, in the garden, facing up to the Gentleman's black cats. So brave. That was what he needed now.

'Please stop!' he shouted. 'I have to talk to you!'

The eyes grew bigger. And bigger. The monster was coming closer, and closer. And behind it, he could see others of its kind: a whole pack of them. Good. He was smack in front of them. They couldn't get past without going through him.

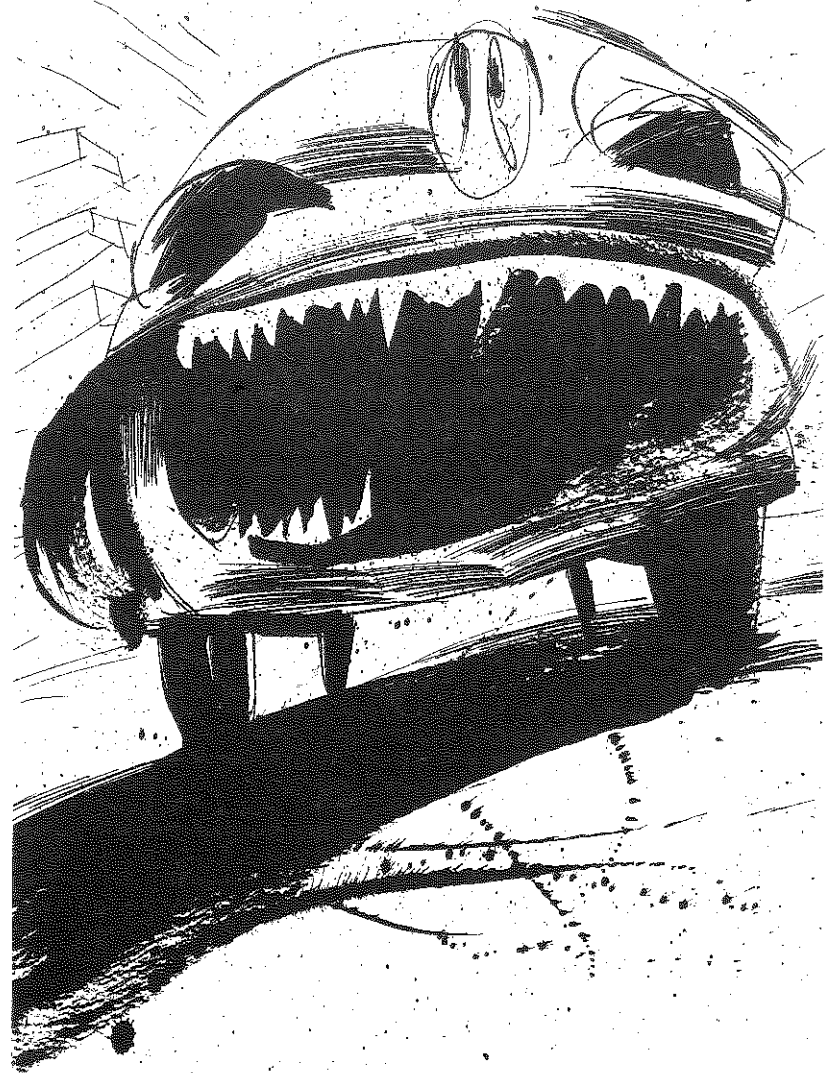
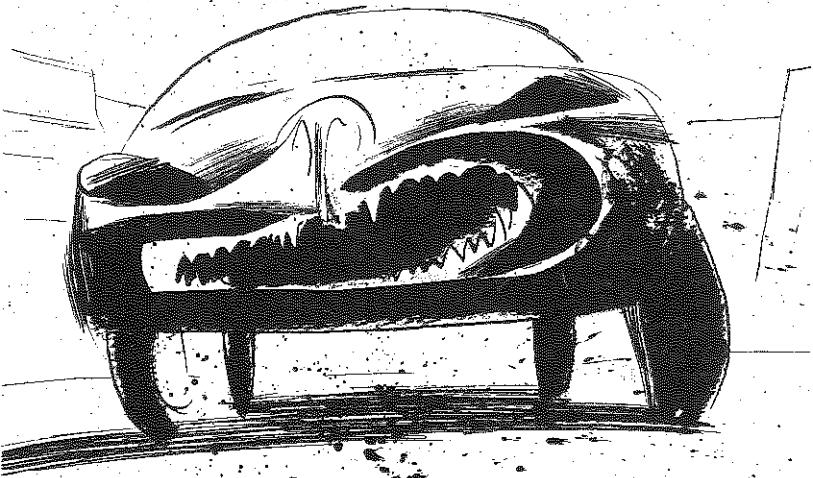
Jalal could do this. I can do it too.

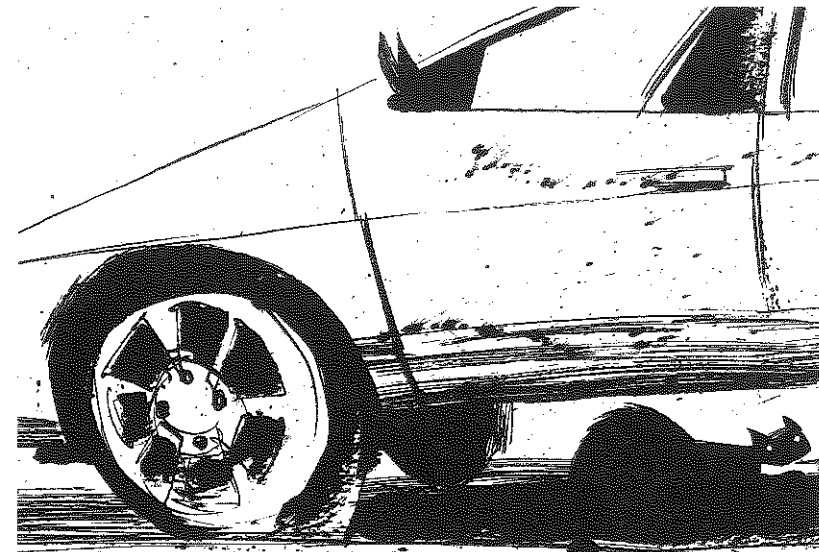


The monsters kept coming. And still he stood his ground, though he had to dig claws into tarmac to stop himself running.

'I need your help!' he yelled. 'Please! Please! Please!'

But the monsters weren't slowing. They were speeding. They were shrieking, roaring, bearing down on him. Huge, deadly. Stand your ground, stand your . . .





BRAAAAAP!

fur

fluttered

fur

flattened.

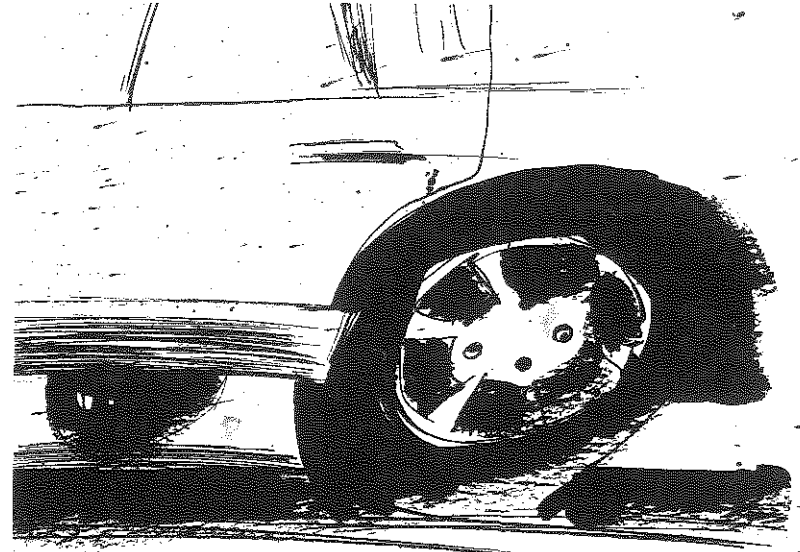
Monsters roared over his head –

– to his left –

– to his right –

– to his left –

– and were gone.



Varjak stayed flat on the ground, cowering, crushing himself into the tarmac, even though the dogs were gone, and all his hopes of saving the family with them.

He crawled across the hard black road to the other side, still not daring to stand up straight. His body shook with shock. If he'd moved, if he'd even breathed as they passed over him, they would have destroyed him.

He'd come within a whisker of death. He knew that. But that wasn't the worst of it.

The worst of it was that he'd failed.