

Chapter Thirteen

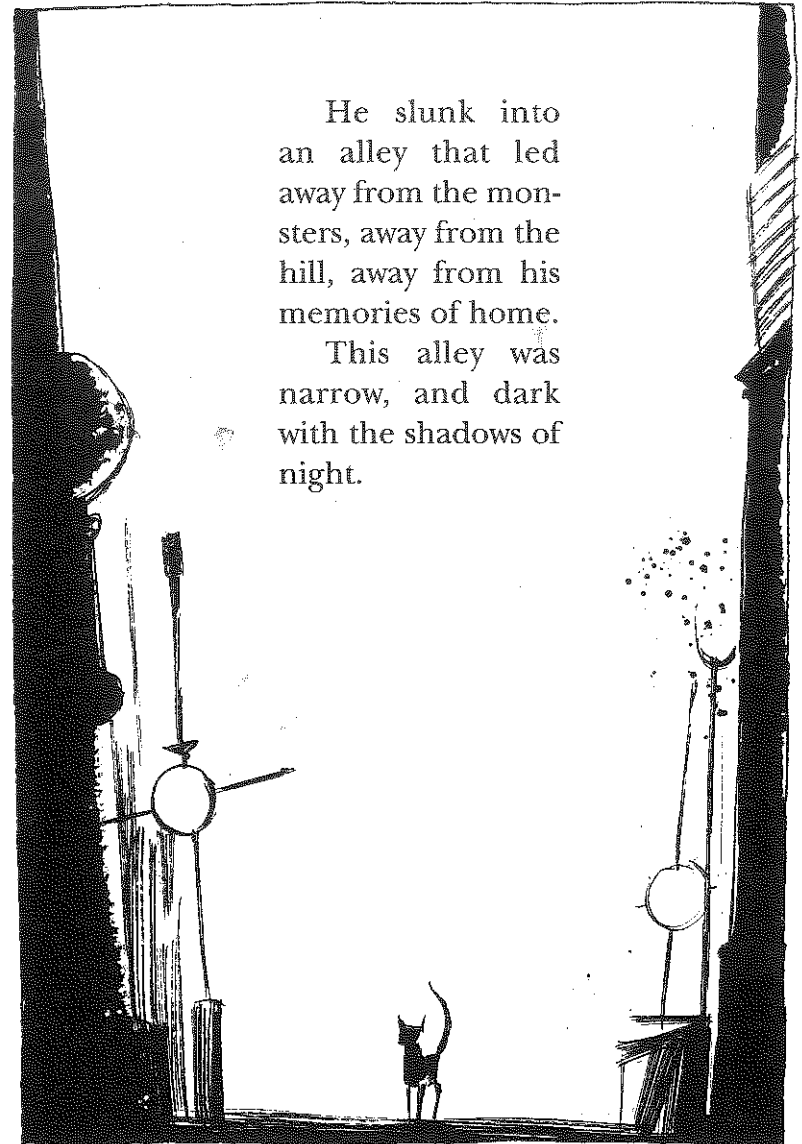
Varjak's head hung low.

He could hear more monsters in the distance, coming closer. He couldn't face looking at them. What was the point? He knew now that they'd never stop and help him, not in a million years.

He'd failed to do the one and only thing he'd ever been trusted with. What good was he to anyone? Julius was right. He was no Mesopotamian Blue, and never would be. He was an insect. Worse than an insect, he was a disgrace to the name of Jalal.

He'd failed.

Varjak glanced up at the hill, far away on the other side of the park. There was no way he could go back there, not without a dog. That meant he might never see his home again. The kitchen full of china bowls, the Contessa's red velvet armchair, even the new toy mouse: never again.



He slunk into an alley that led away from the monsters, away from the hill, away from his memories of home.

This alley was narrow, and dark with the shadows of night.

It was empty except for a swarm of black plastic rubbish bags, so full that they'd split open. Ruined food seeped out of the bags like blood from a wound. The ground was slippery with scraps: soggy bread, slimy fruit, discarded and decaying in the dirt.

Somewhere in the distance, almost buried by these smells, was the tang of meat. Varjak's stomach grumbled. It had been so long since he'd eaten. He remembered insisting to Mother and Father that he wanted to hunt, like Jalal. He laughed bitterly at the memory. It was easy to talk about hunting, but to actually do it? Him, the coward who couldn't even stop a dog? Varjak, who'd disgraced his whole family, a hunter like his famous ancestor? No: an old scrap of meat was all he was good for, all he could get.

Varjak followed the scent. His Awareness led him along the alley and over a wall. He came down into the most desolate place he'd seen.

It was an enclosed courtyard. The sky was hidden here – he'd lost the moon and stars. He could see nothing but big concrete tower blocks, looming all around. Every door and window was shut, as if the people inside were trying to keep something out.

This place made him nervous. The blocks would be impossible to climb: their walls were smooth and sheer. If something went wrong, if there was trouble, he could easily be trapped. The only way out was the

way he'd come in. Still, at least it was shadowy. There were plenty of places to hide. And it was quiet; all he could hear was the muffled rumbling of the city in the distance.

The smell of meat was potent in this barren place. With grim precision, Varjak tracked it to a metal bin that clanked in the corner, helpless on its side in a murky pool of rain.

Something brushed against his shoulder.

Varjak gasped, ducked, swung around. What was it? No one there. Just a rustling sound. A plastic bag, caught by the wind, was circling him as if it was the hunter and he was the prey.

He let out his breath, told himself not to be so nervous, and turned back to the bin.

The smell of meat wasn't quite so nice close up. It was rancid, rotten: that was why he'd picked it up from so far away. His nose wrinkled. This wasn't how he'd imagined life Outside. If only he could have a bowl of the Gentleman's caviare now! But this was all he deserved.

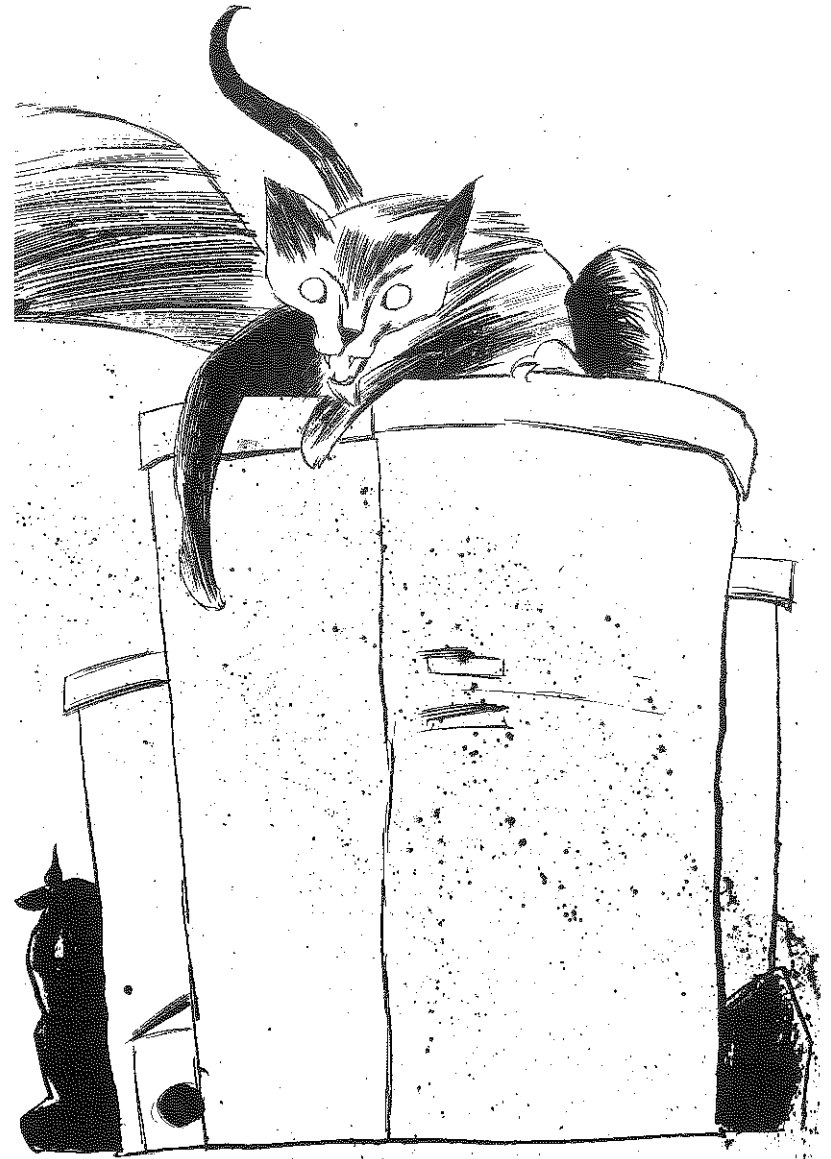
Varjak moved towards the bin – and the world erupted into violence. Out of the shadows, those perfect hiding places, five fully grown tomcats sprang. Not one of them wore a collar.

Varjak put up his paws to defend himself. They were too fast. In a vicious blur of speed, they slammed him to the ground and pinned him there.



The biggest, a massive, muscly ginger tom, towered over him. It ripped his cheek with claws as sharp and white as lightning. Varjak howled with pain.

'THESE ARE OUR BINS SONNY!' yelled the ginger. 'AND DON'T FORGET IT!'



Varjak wrenched a paw free and lashed back. He caught the ginger full in the face. It didn't budge; didn't even flinch. It just opened its jaws and spat at him. The other cats poured down on him, a deadly rain of claws and teeth. Varjak screamed. It was agony.

'What do you know about the Vanishings?' demanded the ginger. It was as big as the Gentleman's cats.

'What Vanishings?' gasped Varjak.

'Don't pretend.' Claws raked across Varjak's side. Bony paws pummelled his head. He clenched his eyes tight, and curled into a ball. Off in the distance, he could hear a siren wailing.

This was it. This was the end. He was going to die alone in this lifeless concrete place, and no one would ever know. A sense of relief washed through him. He was glad it was over. He didn't want to live any more. He didn't deserve to live, not after he'd let everyone down.

Already it seemed very far away, like it was happening to someone else. His body felt cold and weightless. As if from a great height, through a curtain of pain, he could hear voices talking. He wondered vaguely whose they were.

'Leave him alone, Ginger.' A gravelly voice.

'Well, look who it is! Friend of yours, is he, Holly?'

'Leave him. He doesn't know anything.'

'Ha! He'll learn.'

Something crunched into Varjak's ribs. Purple pain seared through his body—

... and faded into black.

