

Chapter Fourteen

Down in the darkness, Varjak dreamed.

He was walking by the river in Mesopotamia.



Date palms swayed in the warm breeze. The night air smelled of cinnamon. Jalal walked beside him.

'Jalal! I thought I'd never see you again—'

'Why cinnamon?' said Jalal, as if he hadn't heard.

'Cinnamon?'

'Perhaps you have noticed the smell, all around us? Now follow me and be silent.'

Jalal led him down the river bank towards a group of men. They were sitting around a camp fire, cooking food in a sizzling pan. The most wonderful smell in the world came out of that pan. It was toasty



warm and cinnamony, and it drove Varjak wild. His nostrils twitched. His mouth drooled. He was starving.

A couple of fat, sluggish cats circled the fire. One of the men tossed them something from the pan. Varjak beamed at Jalal. Obviously they were going to join them. He was going to get some of that delicious-smelling food.

Jalal shook his head. 'Those are not true cats. They have forgotten how to hunt. They are scavengers, trapped here by their own greed. They have become slaves to the people. They might as well be dead already.'

Varjak blushed with shame, remembering that scrap of rancid meat he'd wanted so badly in the city. 'But what if you're hungry and there's nothing else?' he said.

Jalal's eyes blazed amber like the rising sun. 'A cat is an idea of freedom made flesh,' he said fiercely. 'It cannot be tied down. To be truly alive it must be free, and a free cat hunts. It never scavenges or depends on the kindness of people. It depends only on itself.'

Varjak looked down at the ground. He wished it would swallow him up. 'I've failed, Jalal. I've failed you. I've failed everyone.'

'It is no failure to make a mistake, my son. What matters is whether you can learn from it.'

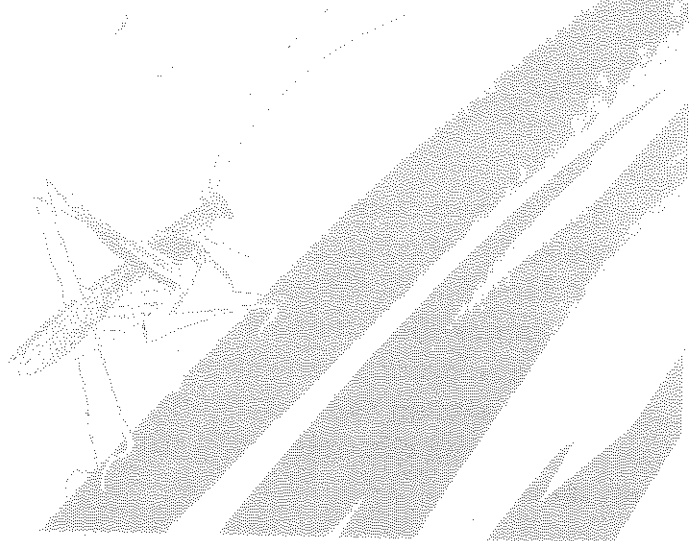
Varjak looked up. The old cat was smiling at him. It was like a ray of sunlight in the night.

'I want to learn how to hunt, Jalal.'

'Then learn you shall. I will restore the knowledge that has been lost. I will teach you Hunting, for it is the Third Skill. Now, show me your Awareness: track down that chirping noise you heard when last you were here.'

Varjak pricked up his ears, determined not to fail again. The noise came from the river bank. With his sensitive whiskers, he probed the air currents that carried the sound until he'd pinned down its source precisely.

'Crickets,' he said. 'Four. Hidden behind that clump of reeds.'

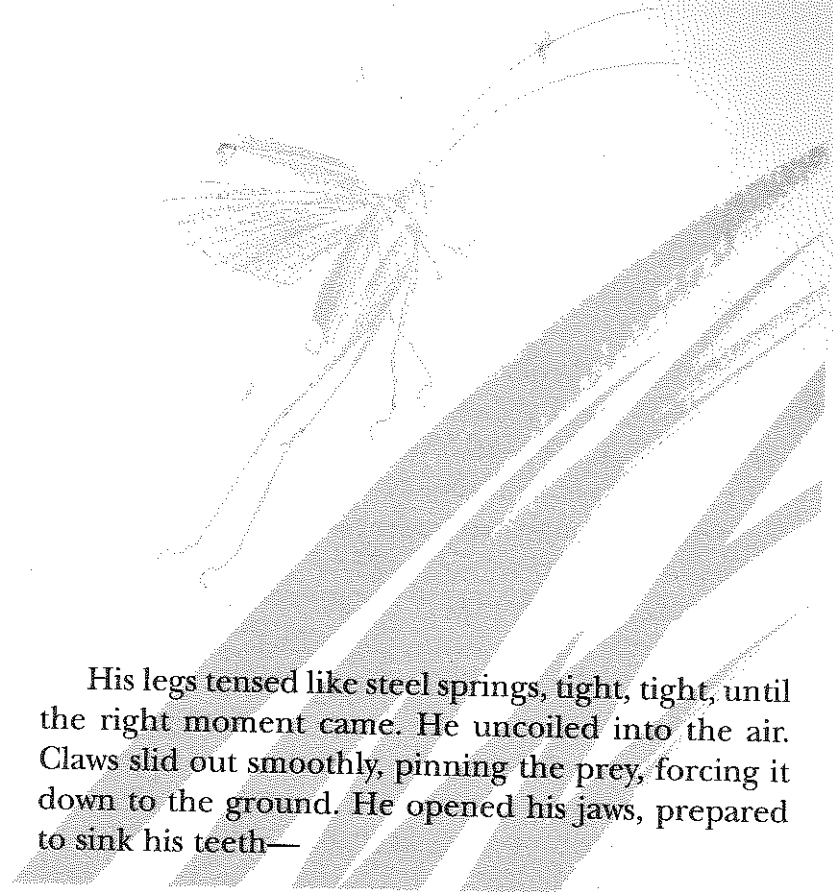


'Correct.' Jalal glided towards the reeds. Varjak marvelled at the way he moved. He was stealth itself. 'When you stalk your prey,' whispered Jalal, 'you become your prey. You make it a part of yourself. Breathe like it breathes. Think like it thinks. When you and the prey are one, you will know its every movement – and then, you will move first. This is the secret of the Third Skill and why it is done best alone. Try it.'



The crickets chirped on behind the long reeds as Varjak and Jalal crept up to them. Varjak selected his target. He sat stock still, waiting, watching, letting all his Awareness flow into the cricket. Every time it shifted, his senses went with it, tracking its speed, trajectory, vectors. He took it all in, as if there was nothing else in the world, as if even he didn't exist any more.

The crickets stirred; they sensed they were being watched. They were about to move – Varjak knew it with absolute certainty.



His legs tensed like steel springs, tight, tight, until the right moment came. He uncoiled into the air. Claws slid out smoothly, pinning the prey, forcing it down to the ground. He opened his jaws, prepared to sink his teeth—

'ENOUGH! ENOUGH!' Jalal was shouting. Varjak released the stunned cricket. What had he done wrong now?

Jalal took a deep breath. 'It was a splendid attack; you have the Third Skill. But this is only practice. You were going to kill it.'

'It's just a cricket!'

'And we are just cats. Remember: you may cause harm only when there is no alternative, only when your life is at stake. You take enough, and no more. That is the way the world is made.'

'I'm sorry, Jalal,' said Varjak, tail between his legs. 'I didn't know.'

'And why did you settle for one cricket? It wouldn't feed a mouse.'

'No one could catch more than one at a time.'

'Oh no?' Jalal grinned. Varjak looked down at his ancestor's paws. The other three crickets were right there, wriggling on the ground.

'Now pay attention,' said Jalal. 'This is how it is done.'

Chapter Fifteen

A tongue the texture of gravel licked Varjak's face, calling him up from the dream.

