

'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.'

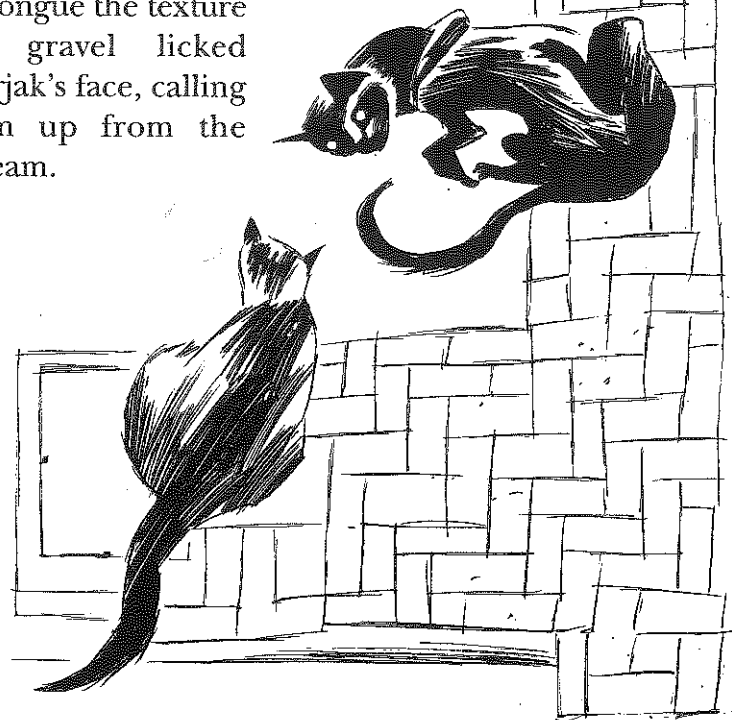
'Oh no?' Jalal grinned. Varjak looked down at his ancestor's paws. The other three crickets were right there, wriggling on the ground.

'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.



It scraped a tender spot on his cheek. Blinding colours burst out in his head. He opened his eyes a crack. A black-and-white blur swam into view.

'Hold still,' commanded a gravelly voice. 'I know it hurts, but it has to be done.' Varjak closed his eyes and thought of Mesopotamia, of Jalal, of that delicious cinnamon food he hadn't eaten. Anything, even hunger, was better than this pain.

'There,' she said at last. 'You'll never win a cat show, but you'll live. You'd better live.'

Varjak opened his eyes again. Holly stood above him, Tam behind her.

They were in a narrow, cobbled alleyway, a quiet path along the backs of city buildings. Iron fire escapes led up to sooty windows, far above. Drainpipes snaked down, through grilles in the ground, to sewers below. Varjak thought he could see something glimmering, moving about beneath the streets – but it was night in the alley and he couldn't be sure.

In the distance, he could hear those fearsome metal monsters roaring along the roads. He could taste their poison smoke in the air. He could hear, too, the hisses and growls of street cats as they went about their business. But in this alley the three of them were alone. There was no sign of the ginger tom who had nearly killed him.

He stretched out. Cold, wet cobblestones dug

into his ribs. His body was a pulp of pain. Yet strangely, he didn't feel too bad inside. He was glad he was still alive; glad this cat with the gravelly voice had rescued him.

'You all right, Varjak?' said Holly. 'You've been out for ages.'

'I thought you didn't want friends,' he said.

'We're not friends,' she snapped. 'Tam just made me feel bad about leaving you.'

'Me?' laughed Tam. 'As if I could make her do anything.'

'Anyway, Ginger's gang went too far,' said Holly.

Varjak stood up, unsteadily. 'You stopped them, didn't you? I think you saved my life.'

'All right, all right.' Holly sounded embarrassed; she wouldn't look him in the eye. With one leap, she pounced onto a brick ledge high on the wall, and started to stalk away, spiky as ever.

Varjak wasn't about to lose her again. Without a second thought, he went after her. One moment he was down on the cobbles, the next he was on the ledge. His body seemed to know what to do: he only had to follow Holly. Tam came behind him.

He padded between them to the edge of the wall, where Holly stopped to look up at the sky. Varjak followed her gaze. A white wedge of moon glimmered there. It had grown since he last saw it: it was changing, becoming bigger and brighter.

Varjak looked down from the sky. 'Where are we, exactly?'

'We're in the centre of the city,' said Holly. 'No one else knows about these alleys. You're safe here.'

'Safe from what?'

'From the gangs, stupid. On this side of the park, only the centre is neutral ground. Ginger's gang runs the East. Sally Bones is Boss of the West. Whatever you do, don't try and fight her like you did with Ginger. I don't think anyone could help you if you did that. Ginger's rough, but deep down he's still one of us. Sally Bones – she's something else.'

'Ssh!' hissed Tam. 'She'll hear you!'

'Don't be stupid,' said Holly.

'She's everywhere,' whispered Tam.

'No one's everywhere. It doesn't make sense.'

'Then how else do you explain it?' said Tam. 'You said it yourself – she's not one of us. She's something else.'

Varjak wondered what she meant. 'Not one of us' – that was what his own family used to tell him. 'What's so bad about that?' he said.

Tam's eyes widened as she spoke. '*She's . . . all . . . white.*'

Holly snorted. 'Big deal. You're all brown. So what?'

'She can do things no cat can do,' said Tam darkly.

'What sort of things?' said Varjak.

Tam shuddered. 'It's dangerous to even think about it!'

Holly rolled her eyes. Varjak smiled. Tam was always so dramatic.

'I won't tell anyone,' he promised. 'I can keep a secret.'

'Well—' Tam glanced around nervously. 'All right. One thing. She can become invisible. She'll just appear out of thin air, and you don't see her coming till it's too late. That's why no one can beat her in a fight.'

'That's just tales,' said Holly, 'and I don't believe them. But she's the toughest cat in the city, no question. Even Ginger fears Sally Bones—'

'Please!' begged Tam. 'Don't say her name!'

'Her gang's cornering all the food, too,' continued Holly. 'Which is why we need to keep these places secret.' She jumped down from the wall. Varjak and Tam followed her. They shimmied under a low, iron railing into another alley. It would have kept him out if he hadn't seen Holly sneak through first.

'They're moving in on Ginger's turf now. That's why he was so rough when you went for his bins,' she said.

'Which reminds me,' said Tam. 'What are we eating? I'm hungry.'

'Me too,' said Varjak.

Holly shrugged. 'There's nothing here, I've checked already. We could search the park. Or we could go hunting.'

'Hunting means splitting up and going it alone,' said Tam. 'I want to do something all together.' She looked down. 'Besides, hunting's difficult,' she muttered.

'It's not so hard,' said Varjak.

'You?' said Holly, squaring up to him. 'You know how to hunt?'

He wasn't sure. He felt like he did, but he'd only ever hunted in a dream. 'I think so.'

Holly laughed. 'You either can or you can't. And I've never met a pet who could.' She stared at Tam. 'Plenty of street cats can't.'

'Just because you know a lot,' said Tam, 'doesn't mean you're great. I'd rather everyone loved me than be some boring know-it-all.'

'But I do love you, Tam,' grinned Holly. Her mustard eyes sparkled with mischief.

'You do?' said Tam suspiciously.

'Of course I do.' Holly sounded very sincere. Tam relaxed and smiled. 'Everyone does,' continued Holly. Tam's smile grew wider. 'And you know who loves you most of all?'

'Who?' said Tam. 'Who, Holly? Tell me, who?'

'SALLY BONES!' shouted Holly.

Tam leaped back, startled. Holly laughed at the shocked expression on her face. Varjak chuckled. Behind her mustard eyes, Holly had a sense of humour. But poor Tam hadn't seen it coming, and her shaggy brown coat was standing on end.

'That's not very funny,' said Tam as her fur slowly settled.

'Come on,' smiled Holly. 'Let's see what we can find in the park.'