

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.

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 . . .

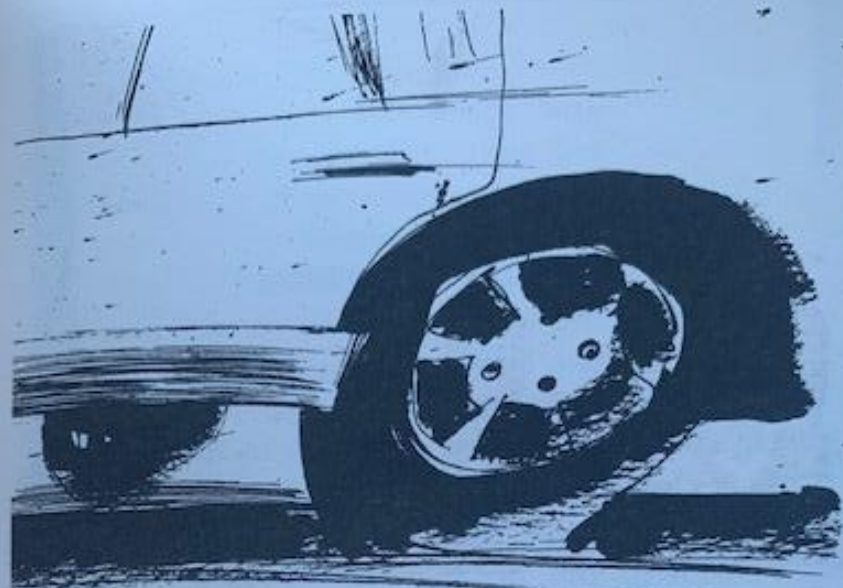




BRAAAAAAP!

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.

