is Open Mind, and you have just found its secret. For only when you admit that you know nothing, can you truly know anything.'

Varjak's eyes widened as the words sank in. 'Who are you?'

'Do you still not know me, my son?'

'Jalal?'

'Jalal the Paw, that am I.' He winked. 'Believe none of the tales.'

Chapter Eight

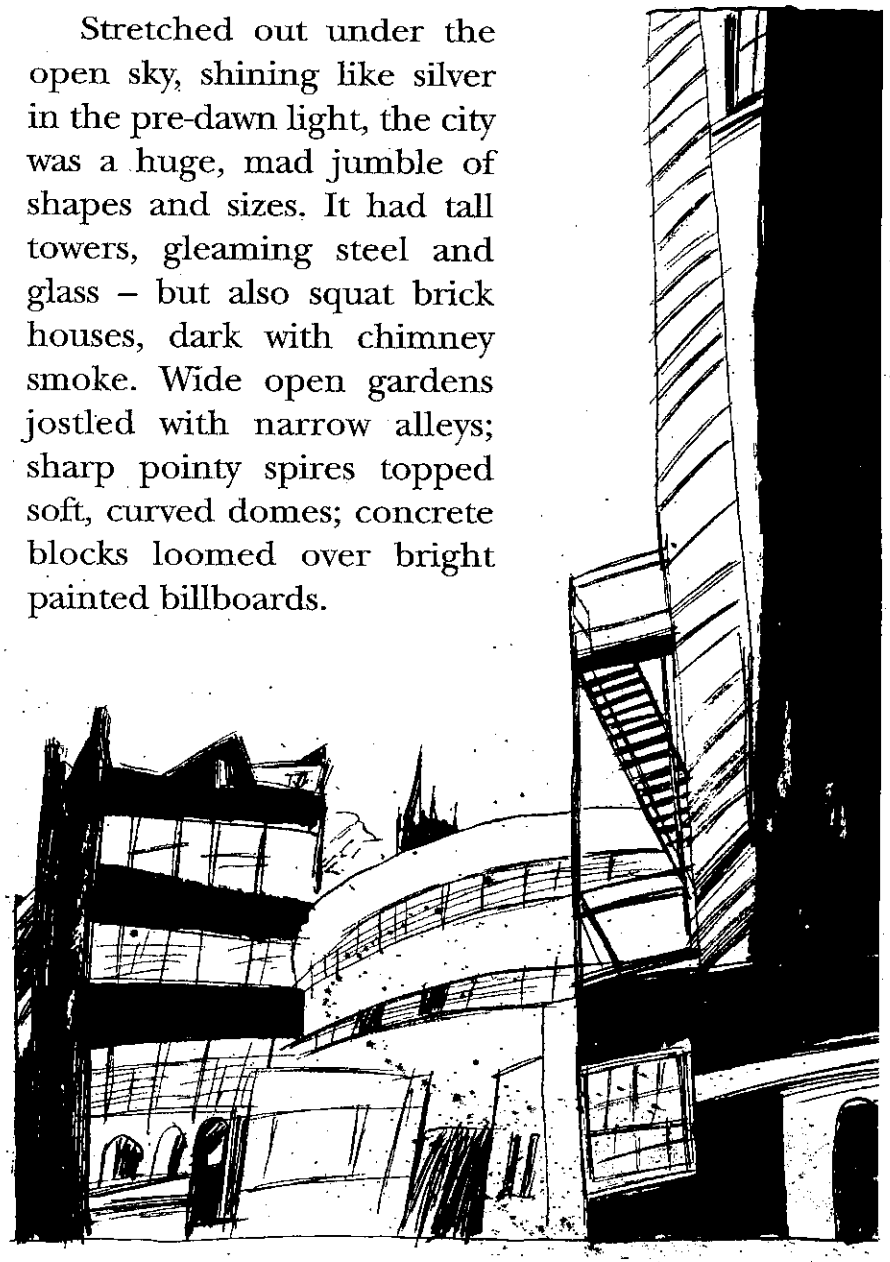
Varjak awoke at the foot of the wall. His head was pounding, his paws aching. It wasn't quite light yet, but the night was almost over. The fall from the tree must have knocked him out. What a dream! He wondered if he'd ever have another like it.

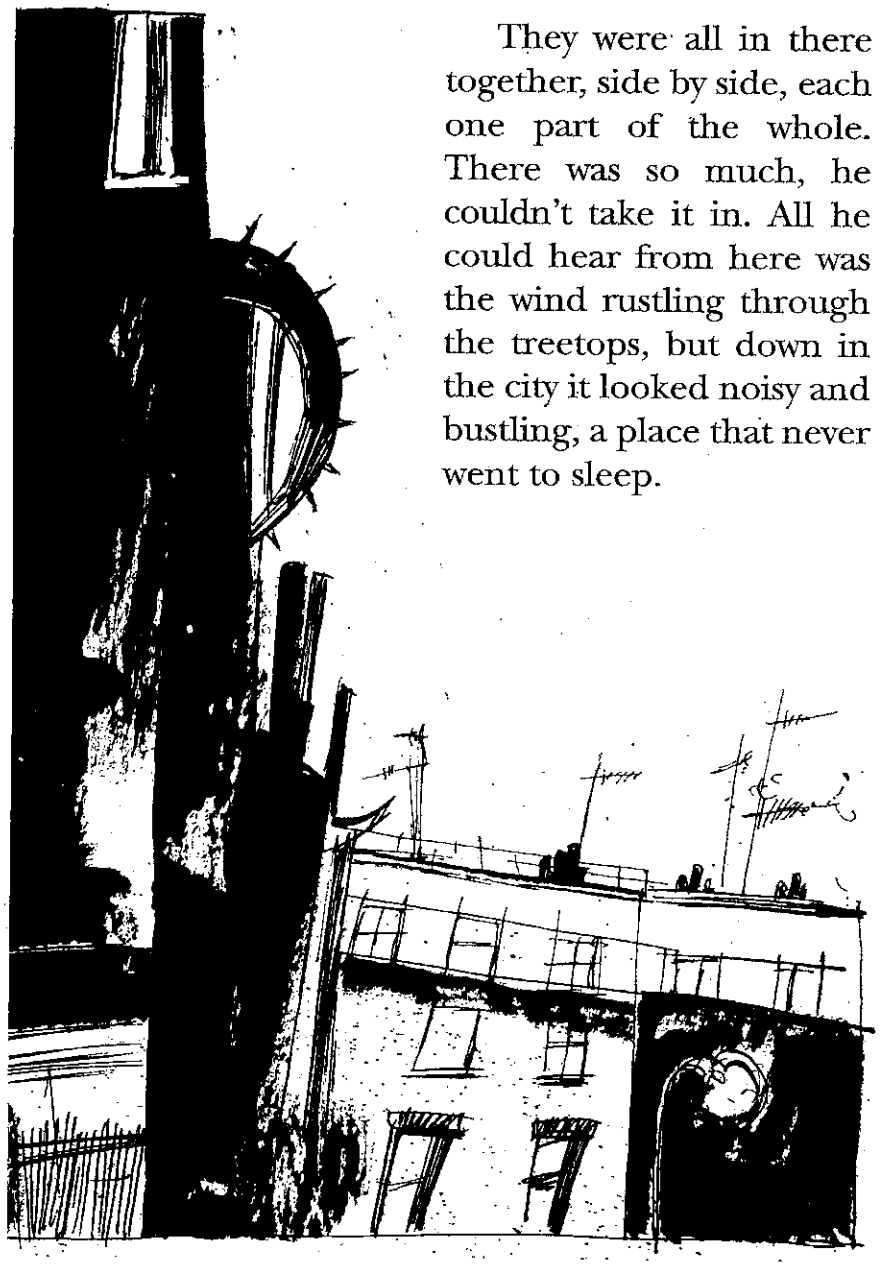
He shivered. It was cold out in the open, and the grass beneath his body was wet. He stood up, shook the moisture from his fur, and looked around.

The view cleared his head instantly. Outside was like nothing he'd seen, or even dreamed of.

The Contessa's house stood on top of a high hill. Beneath it was a broad, green park. Beyond it, away in the distance, was a city.

Stretched out under the open sky, shining like silver in the pre-dawn light, the city was a huge, mad jumble of shapes and sizes. It had tall towers, gleaming steel and glass – but also squat brick houses, dark with chimney smoke. Wide open gardens jostled with narrow alleys; sharp pointy spires topped soft, curved domes; concrete blocks loomed over bright painted billboards.





They were all in there together, side by side, each one part of the whole. There was so much, he couldn't take it in. All he could hear from here was the wind rustling through the treetops, but down in the city it looked noisy and bustling, a place that never went to sleep.

His whiskers twitched with a mix of energy, excitement, danger. His heart beat faster, just looking at it. It seemed like a city where anything could happen, and probably did. A place you could do whatever you liked, and no one would stop you. Where you'd be able to find everything you wanted – even a dog.

The terror of the night before, the fight with the Gentleman's cats: it seemed a long time ago, and very far away. There was sadness in his heart for the Elder Paw, deep sadness, but his grandfather had trusted him with a mission. It was his duty as a Blue to save the family, and Varjak intended to see it through.

He ventured down the hill. It was steeper than it looked, and soon he found himself running, almost rolling down the slope. But it was joy to stretch out in the open. A splash of sunshine lit the horizon. He'd never seen a sunrise before, and the sky Outside was alive with streaks of amber light.

The sky flashed past his eyes as he sped up, sprinted to the bottom. He bounded over a fence at the foot of the hill and into the park.

Around this time, back in the Contessa's house, the family would be waking up and licking each other clean. Varjak grinned. He hated washing, and already there was a satisfying build-up of mud between his claws.

Next, the family would obediently munch their food out of china bowls. It would be the Gentleman's vile-smelling caviare today. But now that he was Outside, he wouldn't have to eat anything he didn't like. He could choose what to eat and when to eat.

After eating, the family would go to their litter trays. Ha! Varjak crouched by a tree. No litter tray for him today. It felt good; it felt natural. It felt, he thought, like it ought to feel.

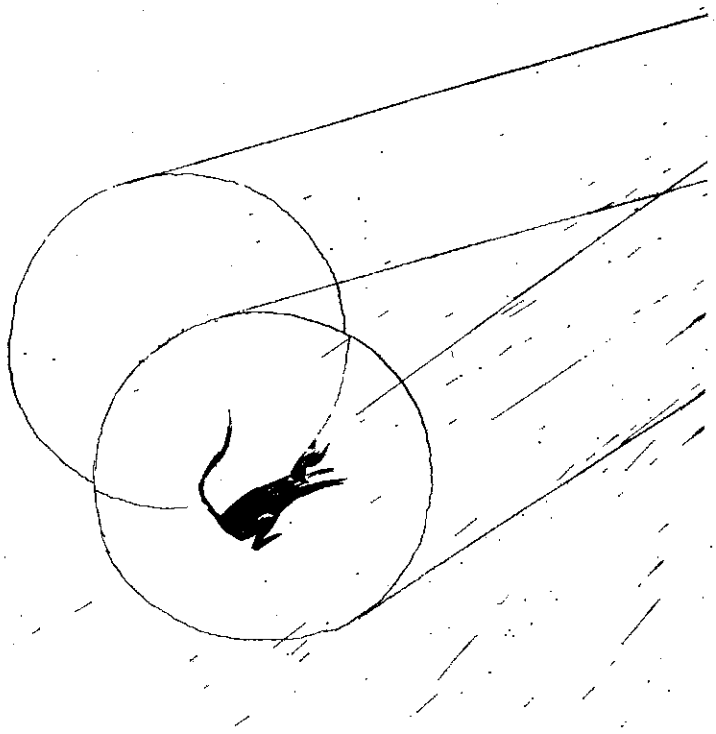
This was how it would be in the future. It was going to be the best time of his life. He'd return from the city with a dog (whatever a dog was) and defeat the Gentleman and his strange black cats. Then he'd lead his family out of that stuffy old house into this wonderful new world. They'd all say he was a proper Mesopotamian Blue, a true son of Jalal. They'd offer him every kind of honour and reward, but he'd turn them down. 'I did it for the glory of the family,' he'd say humbly, and they would cheer him even more.

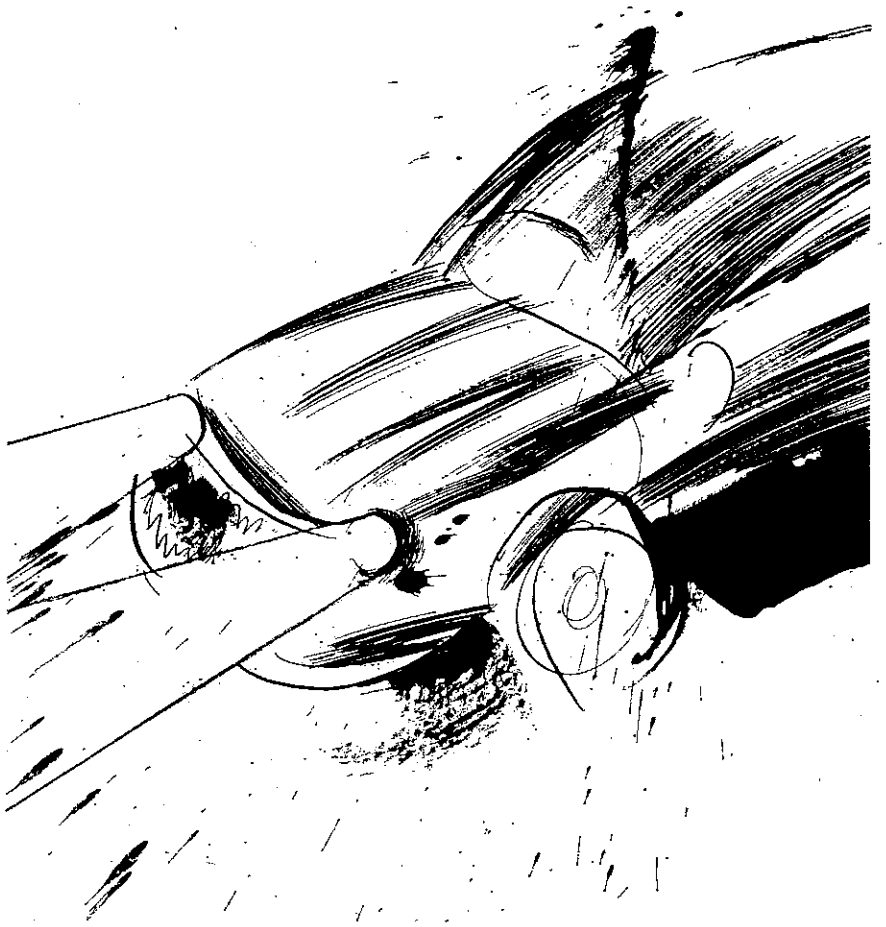
Varjak wandered further and further in his happy daze. He barely noticed the fiery shades of sunrise burn out, leaving a sky the colour of cold ashes.

A violent sound cut through his thoughts. It was like shrieking and roaring at the same time, and it scared him. The sound came from a black road that circled the park in the distance. He crept towards it, ears pressed against his skull. And then he saw them.

It was a column of fearsome monsters. They were rolling down the road, roaring at each other and everything around them. Huge monsters made of metal with sharp edges all around. They had yellow eyes at the front and red eyes at the back. They moved on round black wheels which turned so fast it made Varjak dizzy, and they belched a trail of choking smoke behind them on the wind.

Could these be dogs?



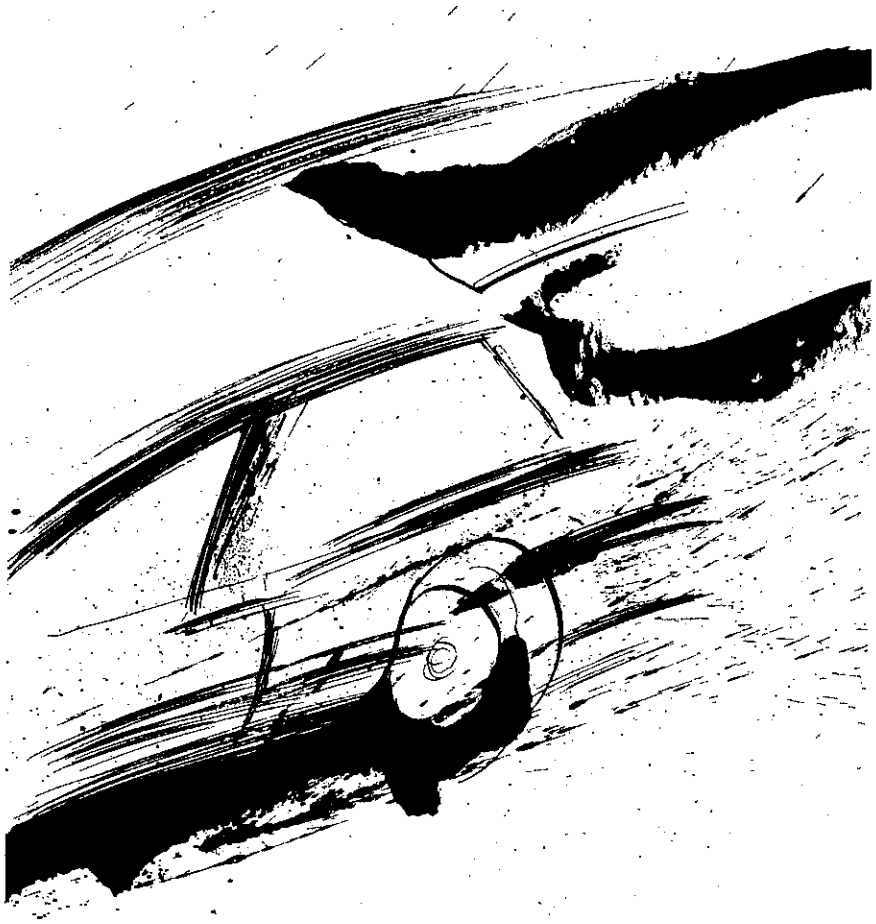


What were the Elder Paw's words? These monsters were big enough to kill a man. Their breath was foul; their sound was deafening. And they filled his heart with fear.

This was it. He was sure they were dogs. He'd found them.

A hard, tight ball of terror formed in Varjak's stomach. How was he supposed to talk to these monsters? They didn't look as if they'd stop for anyone, let alone a kitten. As he edged closer to the procession of metal beasts, all his happy thoughts about the future faded like a false sunrise.

Slow-Time. Moving Circles. Shadow-Walking.



He shook his head. How were those words supposed to help? Why had the Elder Paw trusted him with such an impossible mission? Why hadn't he chosen someone older and stronger, someone like Julius? Julius might know what to do with a dog; Varjak did not.

The quest was too hard. It was impossible. The ball of terror in his stomach turned into a heavy lump of despair.

A drop of rain splattered on his shoulder. Varjak grimaced. He hated water on his fur. At home, he would rush in through the cat door as soon as the weather changed. If only he could do that now. He glanced at the high hill behind him. He couldn't see the house from here.

A gust of wind sliced across his face. The sky darkened. A storm was coming: he could feel it.

Shelter. That was what he needed. Once he was safe from the storm, he could think about the dogs. But there was no shelter in this wide open park. There were only trees, solitary trees with no leaves, swaying in the wind. They wouldn't keep him warm and dry.

The sky darkened. The wind cut through his coat. Varjak could clearly see each blade of grass, each fallen leaf, trembling alone before the storm. Shelter. He had to find shelter, and fast.

Rain came down from the darkening sky: thick, wet rain that dripped into his fur, weighing him down with water. He tried to shake it off, but once it started, the rain kept coming. His family were right. Outside was no place for a cat. It was no place at all.

In the distance, behind the naked, shivering trees, he glimpsed something that he'd missed before. A small, wooden hut. A shelter!

He fought his way towards it. The rain whipped into his eyes. The wind pushed him back one step

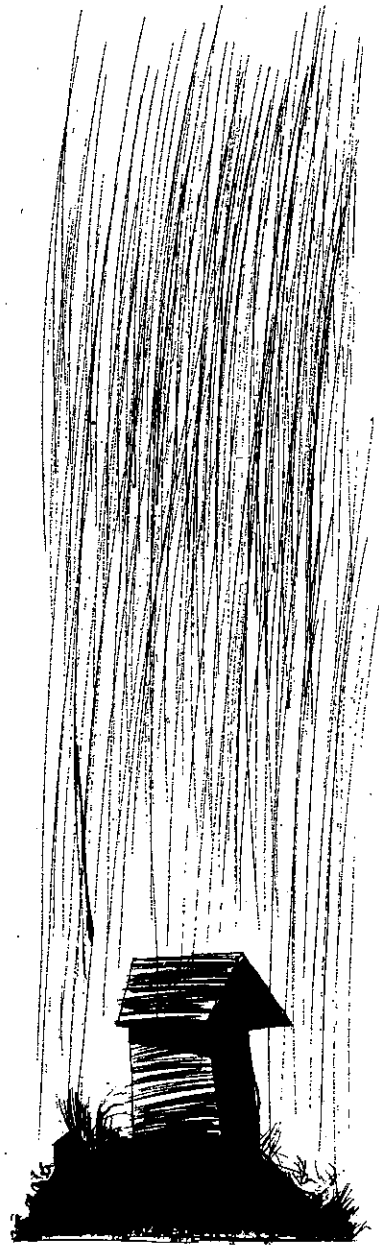
for every two he took. The ground was turning into a churning sea of mud. His paws slipped and sloshed wildly.

SPLASH! Varjak fell into a pool of oozing mud. Dark, dirty water seeped out of his mouth. He was covered in brown and green slime. He could feel it squelching all around him, soaking into his skin. The wind howled at him like a wounded animal. *Too far,* it howled, *you've gone too far.*

A claw of white light slashed the belly of the sky. There was a moment of horrible silence, and then the earth juddered with thunder, shaking beneath him as if it would break in two.

'Help me, Jalal!' he cried. But only the sky answered, bellowing again with angry thunder, making him wish he hadn't spoken.

Varjak wiped the slime from his eyes and dragged himself to the hut. It smelled of soggy timber and had no windows, only a door. The door was closed. He pushed. It moved, but only a crack. Desperate, he flung himself at the flimsy wood that stood between him and shelter from the storm – and the door swung open.



Chapter Nine

It was dark as midnight in the hut. It felt close and damp, but at least inside was drier than Outside. Varjak was safe at last. He relaxed. And then a low growl ripped the air.

The door slammed shut behind him.

'Don't move a muscle,' said a gravelly voice. 'You're surrounded.'

Varjak's claws slid out, ready to fight. 'Put those claws away,' commanded the voice.

Varjak opened his eyes wide. It was another cat! She had spiky black-and-white fur and mustard-coloured eyes. She looked about the same

age as him; younger than Jasmine or Julius, but harder, as if she'd seen too much of the world already.

'I'm not looking for a fight,' she said, 'but if you don't put the claws away, I'll rip you to shreds.' Something in her gravelly voice left Varjak in no doubt that she meant it.

'I'm not looking for a fight either,' he said, and put away his claws. The rain thudded on the roof of the hut like a nervous heartbeat.

'OK,' she said. 'This is my hut, my shelter. Everyone knows that. What are you doing here?'

Varjak glanced at the door. 'It's raining.'

'And?'

'And this was the only shelter I could find.'

'Can't you see it's taken?' she growled.

'Isn't it big enough for both of us?'

'There's only room for one.'

That certainly wasn't true, but Varjak didn't think she'd appreciate him saying it. He stared silently at the soggy timber floor. A puddle had already formed around him. He couldn't face going out again. Besides, she was the only cat he'd met since leaving home. She was nothing like a Mesopotamian Blue, but she wasn't like the Gentleman's cats either. There was nothing strange or scary about her – though you wouldn't want her for an enemy.

Varjak tried to smile through the dark at her.

She glared back.

'What's your name?' she said gruffly. 'I haven't seen you round here before.'

'It's Varjak Paw.'

'Varjak Paw?' she said. 'Varjak Paw? What kind of a name is that?'

What was wrong with his name? 'What's yours?'

'None of your business. Whose gang are you with? Who's your Boss? Are you running from the Vanishings?'

Varjak hesitated. What did all these questions mean? He didn't know – but he had to say something.

He blurted out the first thing that came to mind: something he didn't even believe himself. 'I'm a pure-bred Mesopotamian Blue.'

'A what?'

'A Mesopotamian Blue. We're very rare. Special cats.'

'*Special?*' she spluttered. 'I don't care how pure-bred you are, or where you think you're from. The only thing that counts is what you do.'

A blast of thunder rattled the hut. Varjak frowned. He'd never heard anyone talk like that before.

'What kind of cat are you?' he asked.

'I'm asking the questions, Special Cat,' she said. She sounded disgusted. 'Now tell me what you *really*

do. Are you one of Ginger's gang? Or are you with Sally Bones?'

Keep talking, that was the best thing. 'I told you, I'm a Mesopotamian Blue. We live on the hill.'

She sighed, and tapped her claws on the floor. 'Everyone knows there's no food up there. Even the gangs don't bother with it. Come on, tell the truth. You must be with a gang, or a little cat like you'd be starving by now.'

Her words sent a shiver down Varjak's spine. How could she not know about the Contessa's house? This world Outside and the world he came from seemed completely cut off from each other.

'Listen,' she said, 'if you're so high and mighty, how come you're out in the park in a storm?'

'I'm Outside because I need to talk to a dog,' he said. She stared at him as if she didn't understand. 'Dogs are huge, noisy monsters,' he explained.

'I know what a dog is,' she snapped.

Then maybe she could help. 'Do you know how to talk to them?'

She scowled, like she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

'I know it sounds strange,' said Varjak. 'But I've got to do it, to save my family. They're in a lot of danger.'

The black-and-white cat laughed out loud. 'He thinks he can talk to a dog!' Even her laugh sounded like the crunch of gravel. Varjak scratched an itch

under his collar. It felt uncomfortable.

'What's that you're scratching?' she said.

'My collar?'

'Collar . . .' A strange expression crossed her face; and then she seemed to relax. 'Isn't that what pets wear?'

Varjak peered at her own neck. She wore no collar.

'Yes, now it makes sense,' she said. 'You're just a pet cat who's got lost in the storm, aren't you? You're not in a gang. You don't know about the Vanishings. You don't know anything about this city at all, do you?'

Varjak almost denied it. Then he remembered his dream. Open Mind, the First Skill: *only when you admit that you know nothing, can you truly know anything.*

'All I know is that I need your help,' he said quietly. 'I need a place to stay until the storm's over, and then I've got to find a dog.'

She looked into his eyes for a long time. The rain

beat down, relentless. 'All right, pet cat,' she said at last. 'You can stay. Just till the rain stops, and then you go. Understand?'

Varjak smiled. 'Thanks.'

'Just don't talk to me about dogs, that's all,' she muttered.

They sat together in the darkness. Varjak was bursting with questions. Were there many other cats Outside? What were these gangs and Vanishings she kept talking about? And how, exactly, *did* you talk to a dog?

There were so many new things to understand. But the black-and-white cat was curled up into a spiky ball. Any more words would breach the invisible barrier she'd made between them.

The rain went on. Varjak shivered. He was cold and tired. His eyelids drooped. He tried to force them open, but they kept closing by themselves. It would be madness to fall asleep in a strange place with a strange cat, but he couldn't help it.

He slept in his corner of the hut, still shivering as the rainwater and slime dripped from his muddy fur.