Chapter Twenty-one

Varjak's wounds healed as the moon grew bigger in the sky. He slept most days in Holly's alleys, or hunted and foraged for food with her. By night, they searched the city for Tam. He was worried about her, but he liked learning about hidden ways and secret paths that no one else knew.

Together, he and Holly walked the city's walls, its window-ledges, its shadowy back streets. They always kept clear of people, though they could often hear them close by. They stayed away from the wide main roads; and they never approached or even mentioned those shrieking, roaring metal monsters that prowled up and down them.

Everywhere they went they asked about Tam. No one had seen her. Neither Varjak nor Holly said the word aloud, but it was beginning to look like Tam had Vanished.

'Now,' said Holly, 'there's one part of the city we haven't searched yet, and it's time we did.'

'Sally Bones's territory?'

'It's dangerous – but we've got to try it.'

Varjak didn't say anything. He didn't think they'd find Tam there – they were nowhere near it the last time they saw her – and he didn't want to run into Razor again so soon. But he was curious about the tales of Sally Bones, the cat who was white and could appear out of thin air.

Holly led the way through the streets, out of their familiar ground and into parts of the city Varjak hadn't been in before, though he'd glimpsed them from the hill long ago.

The streets became bigger the further they went. So did the buildings. One of them was almost high as a hill, and its outline sparkled with lights. It had a glass front: windows instead of walls. Each showed something different inside.

Varjak peered into a window. There were animals in there, ranged out and displayed on glass shelves. Little furry mice, fluffy rabbits, colourful birds. Their eyes were open, but they were silent and still. It was as if they were stuck in the moment, frozen in time, forever about to move but never quite making it.

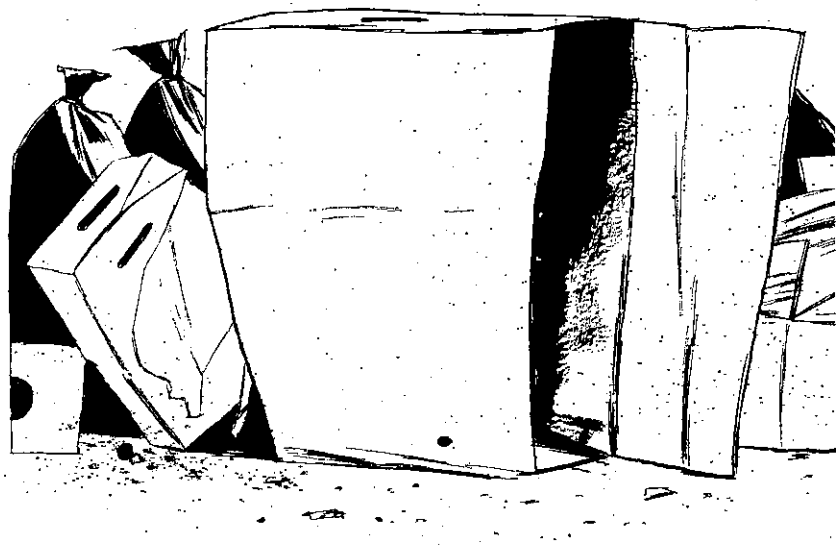
'Stop staring, Mr Paw,' said Holly. 'Never seen a toy shop before?'

'What are they?'

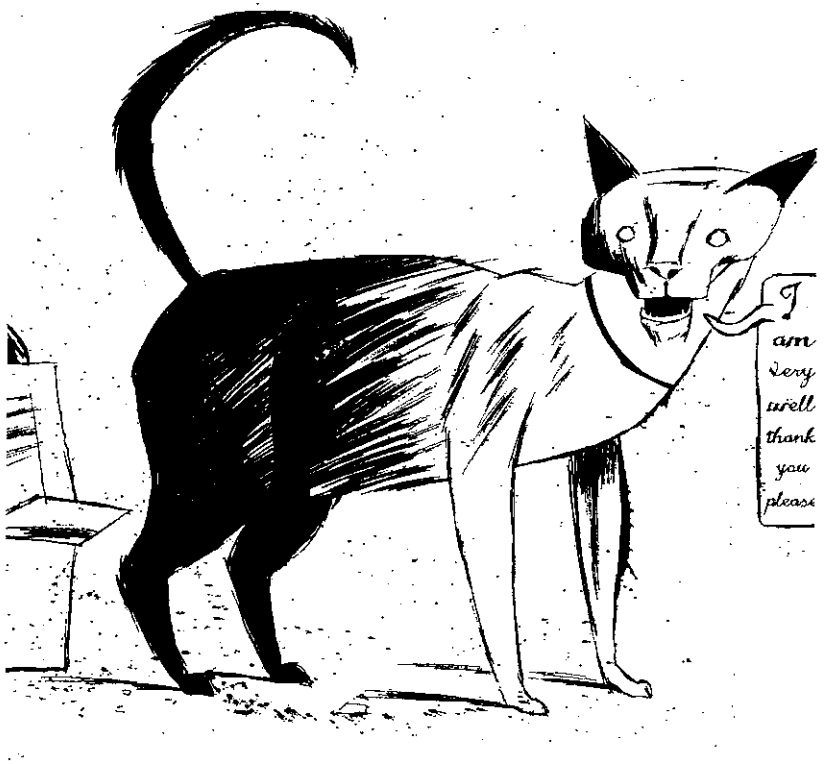
'The toys? They're nothing. Children play with

them.' She moved off down the pavement. 'Come on, we can't hang about on Sally Bones's territory.' Varjak tore his eyes away from the frozen scene and followed her, but he was getting the strangest feeling. It was like in the alley, before the mouse hunt. A cold sensation: being watched by something not quite alive, not quite dead.

He let his Awareness flow out again, and found the source. It was coming from a stack of boxes by the toy shop door. One box had fallen on its side and split open. The flap hung loose and limp.



'I am very well thank you please,' said a tinn little voice from inside the box. It rustled, and ou came a cat.



Varjak's first thought was that it looked like Tam, or a cruel joke about Tam. It had her shaggy chocolate-brown fur and comfortable look, but everything else was horribly wrong. Like the animals in the window, it didn't seem real. Its eyes were wide open, but they were glassy, expressionless. It was smiling, but the smile was weirdly empty. It talked, but back to front, nonsense.

'Tam?' said Varjak. 'Tam?'

'Happy, happy, happy,' said the cat.

Varjak's fur stood on end. 'It's Tam!' he cried. 'Look, Holly – what's happened to her?'

'Don't be stupid,' said Holly. 'It's a toy.' She peered closer at the cat. Its head nodded, bobbing up and down cheerfully. 'It's a good one, very realistic. Look at the detail – the fur's perfect.'

'But it's Tam's fur—'

'Tam's fur was never so neat.' Holly sniffed it. 'Doesn't smell like a cat, does it? And listen to it. That's not how any cat talks.'

'I be your friend forever!' said the toy, in its strange, hollow voice.

'Oh, Holly, it's horrible . . . I'm sure it's Tam!'

Holly wheeled about and faced him, mustard eyes on fire. 'Of course it's not Tam!' she yelled. 'Get it through your head! Tam's gone, see? She's Vanished.' There was a moment of silence. Even the toy cat seemed to be hanging on her words.

'There, I said it. She's Vanished. She was a gree idiot, and now she's Vanished, another fine frie who's left me. She's not coming back. Ev Understand?'

Varjak had never seen her so upset. He kn Holly missed her friend, of course, but she was spiky and cool, she'd never shown it before. 'Are going to keep looking for her?' he said softly.

'Here's your pretty kittycat!' said the toy.

Holly closed her eyes. 'No. She's not here. Sh not anywhere. She's Vanished.' She shook her hea 'I'm sorry I shouted at you. It's just – that's not Tar

Varjak peered again at the toy cat. She was rig Tam had Vanished, but this wasn't her. It looked li her, but that was all. It wasn't even alive. Wasn't ev dead.

A cat which was not quite a cat. And behind there were more just the same, shuffling around the broken box.

'I am very well thank you please,' they said.

He shivered. 'I don't like them,' he said. 'W would anyone want one of those when they cou have a real cat?'

'People like toy cats better than real cats,' sa Holly. 'No looking after. They do what you wa They're always nice and cute. Not like us.' S grinned. 'Not like you, anyway. You couldn't get a t cat to stink if you tried.' He had to smile. 'Come o

she said. 'Let's get out of here before we run into Sally Bones. Let's go home.'

Varjak's mind whirled as they sped back through the city. He didn't like these toy cats, not one bit. But then he remembered that toy mouse, back in the Contessa's house: how real it had seemed, and how much he'd wanted to play with it.

The Contessa's house. He hadn't thought about it often, with all that was happening, but the idea brought pictures to his mind. An empty armchair. An antique fireplace. A row of china bowls. The pictures were hard to hold on to. They kept changing into other pictures. The harder he tried to hold on to them, the harder it became. Even the garden that night: the Gentleman's lips: the way his cats moved – it was all fading.

At that moment, Varjak felt he would give anything to be with his family again. Away in the distance, he heard the muffled roar of a metal monster. A great wave of sadness washed up from his stomach.

'Let's stop here, Mr Paw,' said Holly suddenly, snapping him out of his thoughts. She pointed at a covered alley. 'We're still on Sally's turf, but it's more dangerous to walk through her streets now than to sleep here for the day.' She smiled at him. He tried to smile back. Couldn't. 'Hey, what's wrong?' she said.

'I want to go home.'

'I told you, it's safer to stay here.'

'Not that home. My old home, on the hill.'

'Still thinking about that?' She shrugged. 'What' stopping you?'

'I can't. I was supposed to go back with a dog, t save my family from the Gentleman and his cats. tried to get one, Holly. I stood there, in front c those monsters, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn even get them to talk.' He closed his eyes, the sham still stinging like a new-cut wound. 'I failed.'

'It's not your fault,' she said gently. 'Dogs ar scary. Stupid, too. I've never heard of a cat wh could talk to them.'

Varjak sighed. Jalal could do it, he knew that. Bu he was no Jalal. He wasn't even a prope Mesopotamian Blue. 'All I know is I've let everyon down. I can never, ever go back. Without a dog I don't have a home any more.'

'That's not true. The whole world's your hom now. Even Sally Bones's territory.' She winked mustard eye at him. 'Let's get some sleep. It'll seer better tomorrow. You never know what's around th corner.'

They settled down, side by side, in the shadows c the alley. There was no invisible barrier betwee them any more. There hadn't been for quite a while

Chapter Twenty-two

Varjak dreamed.

He dreamed he was walking by the Tigris. Zigzag palms swayed in the cinnamon breeze. The sky was vivid with stars.

Jalal walked beside him, shimmering in Slow-Time. Varjak breathed in–two–three–four, and slowed himself down, until he felt the energy pulsing inside him. Only then could he clearly see how Jalal was moving.

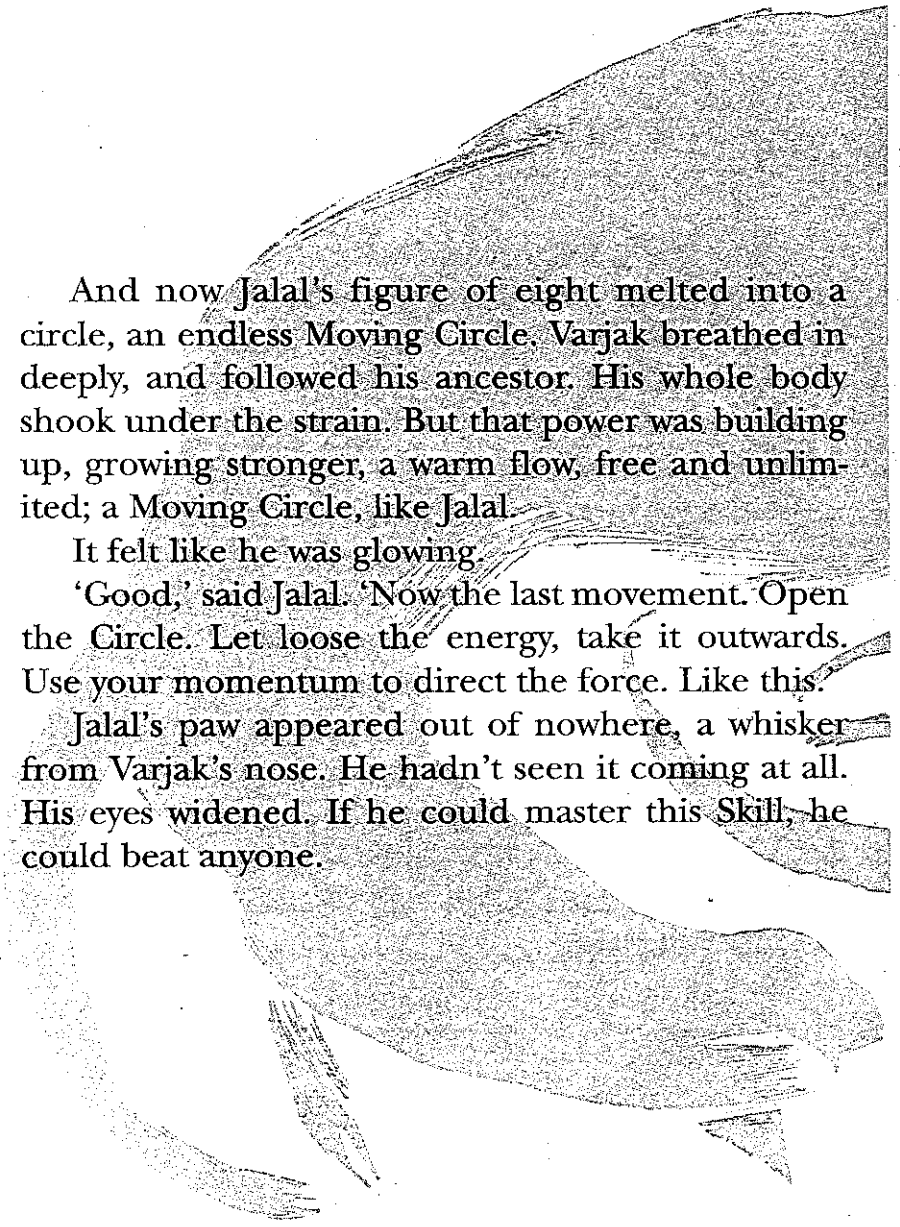
It was different to anything he'd ever imagined. All cats are graceful, but Jalal was a river of energy, like the Tigris, flowing and changing itself at will.

'Your body,' said Jalal, 'is but a part of you. You are more than your body. You can make it do anything, if you know how. You can dodge any blow, you can strike any enemy, you can win any fight. I will show you how – for that is the Fifth Skill, and we call it Moving Circles.'

His silver-blue frame started to twist into shapes as strange as those stars above.

First, he made a soft velvet arch of himself. Varjak copied him. He stretched his spine as far as it would go – and then a bit further.

Next, Jalal's arch curved round on itself, became a fluid figure of eight. Varjak followed him, made the move. It was a giant stretch. He felt pain – hot white pain – but he felt something else as well. The energy that pulsed in his belly was changing into a new kind of power.

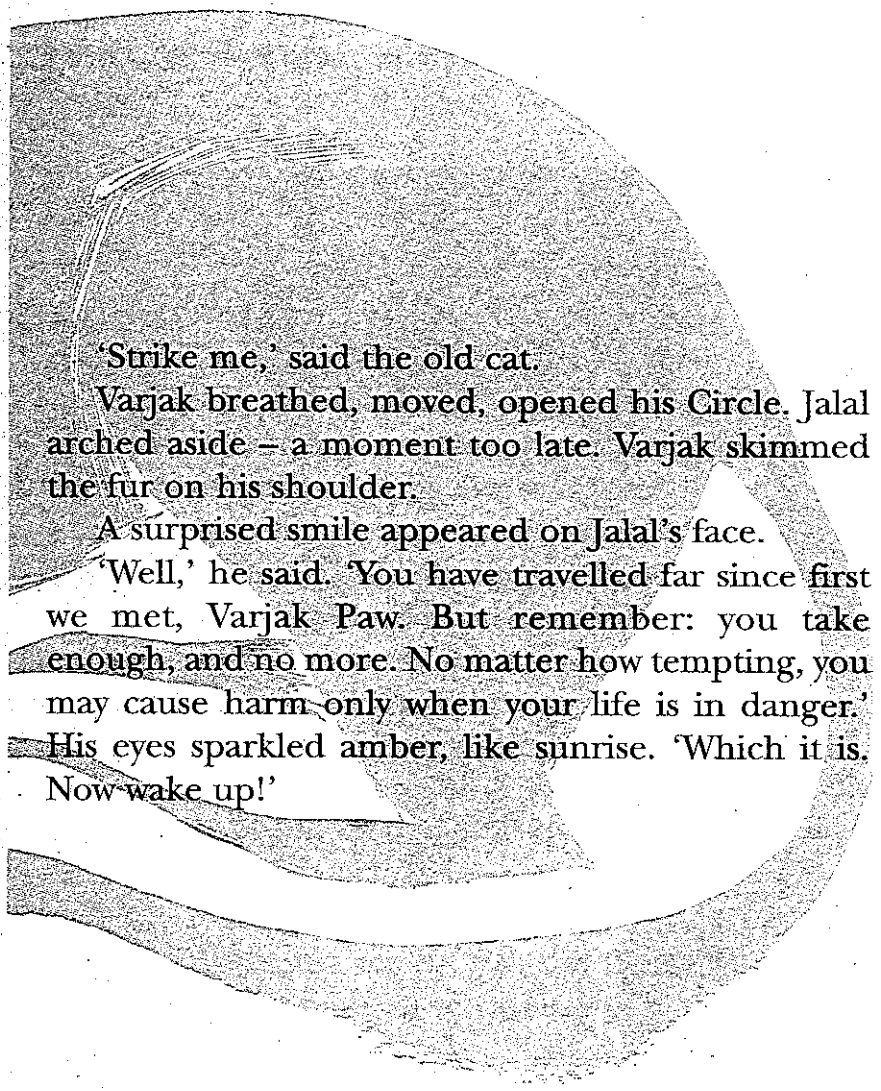


And now Jalal's figure of eight melted into a circle, an endless Moving Circle. Varjak breathed in deeply, and followed his ancestor. His whole body shook under the strain. But that power was building up, growing stronger, a warm flow, free and unlimited; a Moving Circle, like Jalal.

It felt like he was glowing.

'Good,' said Jalal. 'Now the last movement. Open the Circle. Let loose the energy, take it outwards. Use your momentum to direct the force. Like this.'

Jalal's paw appeared out of nowhere, a whisker from Varjak's nose. He hadn't seen it coming at all. His eyes widened. If he could master this Skill, he could beat anyone.



'Strike me,' said the old cat.

Varjak breathed, moved, opened his Circle. Jalal arched aside – a moment too late. Varjak skimmed the fur on his shoulder.

A surprised smile appeared on Jalal's face.

'Well,' he said. 'You have travelled far since first we met, Varjak Paw. But remember: you take enough, and no more. No matter how tempting, you may cause harm only when your life is in danger.' His eyes sparkled amber, like sunrise. 'Which it is. Now wake up!'

Chapter Twenty-three

Varjak woke from his dream in the alley.

It was night time again; he and Holly had slept through the day. A street light buzzed on and off behind him. A full moon, round and white as a saucer of milk, shone comfortingly up above, but it was quickly smothered by street-black clouds.

He needed to go to the litter tray. Holly was fast asleep, and they were still on Sally Bones's territory. Well, it was all Outside, wasn't it? The whole world was his litter tray. He could go wherever he pleased.

He slouched out of the shadows and did his business by a heap of rubbish. What a relief it was.

His Awareness tingled. The fur on the back of his neck prickled. It felt like he was being watched. He swivelled to face the top of the alley – and immediately wished he hadn't.

A thin white cat sat there. She was licking her claws, watching him with one ice blue eye. Where the other eye should've been was an empty socket.

Her fur was spotless clean, but around her was t smell of darkness, of dank and deadly things a places.

By her side prowled a dozen street cats, thick-necked and bristling, grimy as the city itself. They were bigger than the white cat, but somehow they looked like soft little kittens beside her.

'Good, was it, sonny?' she asked. Varjak couldı answer. He kept staring at her, unable to speak. Sl was all muscle and bone. He could see her ribs. Th jutted out as if they were trying to escape from he

'Now, this isn't your territory,' she said, flexi her bone-white claws. 'And you shouldn't ever what you've just done all over someone else's ter tory. Especially if that someone is me.'

She smiled a crooked smile, but her single e stayed cold and hard. He had no doubt who he w looking at. No wonder poor Tam was terrified Sally Bones.

'Speak when the Boss talks to you,' growled stripy tom with slash marks all over his face. Varj recognized him: Razor.

Holly stood up beside Varjak. 'He didn't mean i she said. 'He's new here.' Her legs quivered, but h voice was steady.

'New, is he?' said the thin white cat. Her t swished angrily. She nodded at the stripy to 'Razor. Why wasn't I told about this?'

The tom began to shake. 'I didn't think it w important, Boss. He's just a pet—'

The air seemed to shimmer for a moment – a then Razor howled and clutched his face. There w a fresh, new slash mark across one side. And t white cat's claws were tipped with blood.

'It's not your job to think, Razor,' she hissed. 'I

your job to tell me everything. And if you can't do your job, I'll find someone else who can. Understand?'

Razor nodded, still clutching his face. In that moment of quiet, Varjak could hear his own heart, thumping in his throat.

'Now get some information out of this new cat,' spat Sally Bones. 'I have a feeling he's something to do with the Vanishings. Luger and Wes: you two watch his little friend.'

Razor and the other two cats came towards Varjak and Holly. Holly's ears twitched nervously.

'Why couldn't you wait till we got home?' she whispered. 'We've had it now.'

'We could make it over those walls,' said Varjak, searching for a way out.

'They'd only catch us. At least Razor's doing it, not her.' Holly shivered. 'Just don't tell them about my alleys, OK?'

Razor marched up to them, eyes slitted, claws glinting. The slash on his face was red and raw.

'What's your name, trouble-maker?' he snarled.

'Varjak Paw.'

'Where are you from?'

'Mesopotamia.'

Razor's scarred face twisted into a scowl. 'Very funny. Where are you really from? Where do you sleep?'

Varjak glanced at Holly. What could he do? Anything he said could give her secret away. He could only keep it by staying silent.

'Are you going to open up?' said Razor. His mouth curled back, baring his teeth. 'Or do I have to open you up?'

There was no sound at all in the alley except the street light's buzz. Varjak kept his mouth shut. They all stared at him: Razor, Sally Bones, her gang: all staring at him. Varjak felt boxed in and alone. The pressure mounted in his head. But he stared straight back at Razor without a word. He was determined not to look away.

'Well?' demanded Razor. The tom's eyes burned into him, but Varjak hung on. Don't look away. Don't let him win. Hang on. Hang on. *Hang on.*

Somewhere in the distance, a monster roared.

Razor blinked and looked away. Varjak relaxed. And in that instant, something slashed his cheek.

Razor's claws. Varjak reeled back, stunned. His head was on fire.

'I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget,' growled Razor. He came forward. Varjak lashed out. The street cat dodged easily, and jabbed his jaw in return. Blood sprayed from Varjak's face in a thick red fountain.

Another hit to the face. Varjak's legs felt weak. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Holly start to

move – but Luger and Wes moved faster, blocking her off. It was just him and Razor.

'Not so tough, are you?' spat Razor. 'I can finish you any time. I'm going easy on you. Now talk!' He slammed Varjak's ribs, knocking him off balance. Varjak staggered into the rubbish heap. It squelched around him. He was still standing, but he couldn't take another hit.

Moving Circles, the Fifth Skill: *You can dodge any blow, you can strike any enemy.* It was his only chance.

Varjak breathed as Razor came up for the kill.

In–two–three–four. Energy pulsed in Varjak's belly. Out–two–three–four. Time slowed down.

In–two–three–four. Razor struck in slow motion. Out–two–three–four. Varjak made a Moving Circle.

In–two–three–four. Razor missed. Out–two–three–four. This is good, thought Varjak Paw.

He could see the others, staring at him. Holly's mouth hung open in surprise.

Razor bared his teeth, came in again, moving as if through mud. Varjak opened his Circle, let loose the energy – and hit Razor with everything he had, right between the eyes.

Chapter Twenty-four

Razor's head jerked back. Varjak had struck his target!

But the big tom was strong. It was only enough to daze him. He stepped out of Varjak's reach, and shook his head, as if he couldn't believe he'd been hit.

'Enough!' Sally Bones shouted. Varjak looked to the top of the alley – but she wasn't there.

'Where did you learn that?' her voice demanded from behind him. He wheeled about. There was the faintest shimmer of white, but she was gone again.

'Who taught you?' she hissed, from somewhere inside his head. And before Varjak knew what was happening, she had him pinned flat on the ground, white bones above him, single blue eye burning into him. He lost the rhythm of his breath – and everything sped up again. He was out of Slow-Time. 'Answer me!' she said. 'Who taught you?'

He couldn't move; he couldn't hide. 'Jalal!' he cried, helpless.

Sally Bones's one eye glittered like the moon. 'Jalal?' she said. 'Jalal the Paw? He's been dead a hundred years! What could you know of Jalal? What do you know?'

'Slow-Time,' gasped Varjak. 'Moving Circles—'

'You?' Sally Bones blinked. Something that might have been fear flashed across her face. 'Is it you?'

Before Varjak could answer, a long, low growl filled the air. Everyone turned to face it.

At the top of the alley, blocking the way out, was a new kind of monster. It was black and bristly, almost as big as a man. Its mouth was full of pointed yellow teeth which dripped with drool. It barked loudly, and took a step towards the cats.

Terror ripped through Sally Bones's gang. Razor, Luger, Wes: they all bolted. They scrambled up the fire escapes and over the walls, away from the monster, away from the alley.

'Come back!' screamed Sally Bones. 'Cowards – we can beat it if we fight together!'

But they weren't listening. Her gang scurried to safety as fast as they could. The thin white cat shook her head with contempt. She stood up reluctantly, letting Varjak go free.

'We'll finish this another time, Varjak Paw,' she said. There was a shimmer of white – and she was gone.

In a single heartbeat, Varjak and Holly were alone with the monster. It looked confused. It barked at the walls, but didn't try to follow the cats up.

'So those Sally Bones stories are true,' breathed Holly. She shook her head. 'I don't know what was going on back there, but I'd swear you had them worried.'

Varjak's head was whirling. Sally Bones knew about Jalal. She knew about the Way, much more than he did. She wasn't even scared of this monster.

'Thanks for keeping quiet about the alleys,' said Holly. 'Come on, let's get out of here, before it gets us,' she urged.

The monster began to lumber towards them. Its

big blunt claws clacked on the pavement as it cam It was incredibly powerful. Even its tail looked as if could knock them senseless.

Varjak focused. What would Jalal do? Secon Skill: Awareness. He looked into its eyes. They wei cloudy black. There was pain in those eyes – an there was fear, almost terror, in its scent.

It barked again, a deafening sound. Varjak didn flinch: he just kept looking into its eyes. If he hadn once stood before a roaring dog, he would have ru away. But compared to those metal monsters, th frightened, barking animal was friendly.

'What are you doing?' hissed Holly. 'Let's go!'

Varjak looked up. He could probably make over a wall or onto a window ledge, like Sally Bones gang. He gambled instead and trusted his instinct This time, he wasn't going to run, he wasn't going t panic. He was going to stand his ground and face down.

'Don't be afraid,' he said to the monster, in th calmest voice he could manage. It opened its jaw They were big enough to swallow him whole. 'Don be afraid,' he whispered.

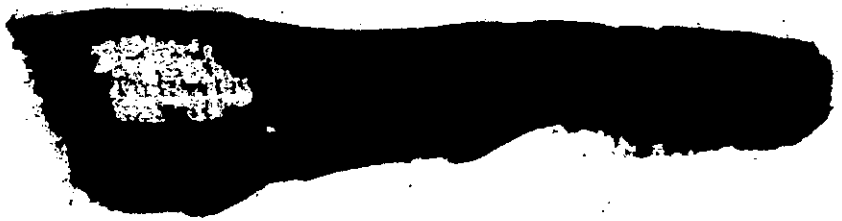
And then it sprang at him . . .

Slow-Time!
. . . and Holly leaped for cover . . .

Moving Circles!
. . . but Varjak stood his ground . . .

Shadow-Walking?
. . . wrong.

The monster smashed into him. The world turned upside down – and everything went black again.

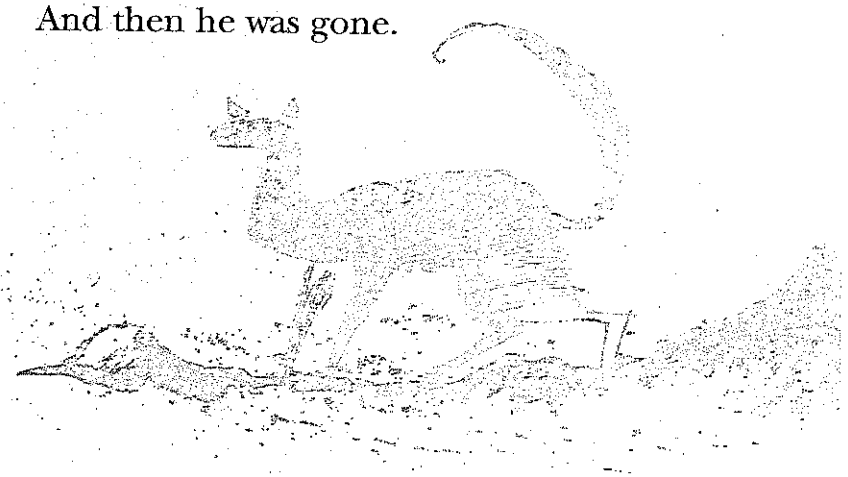


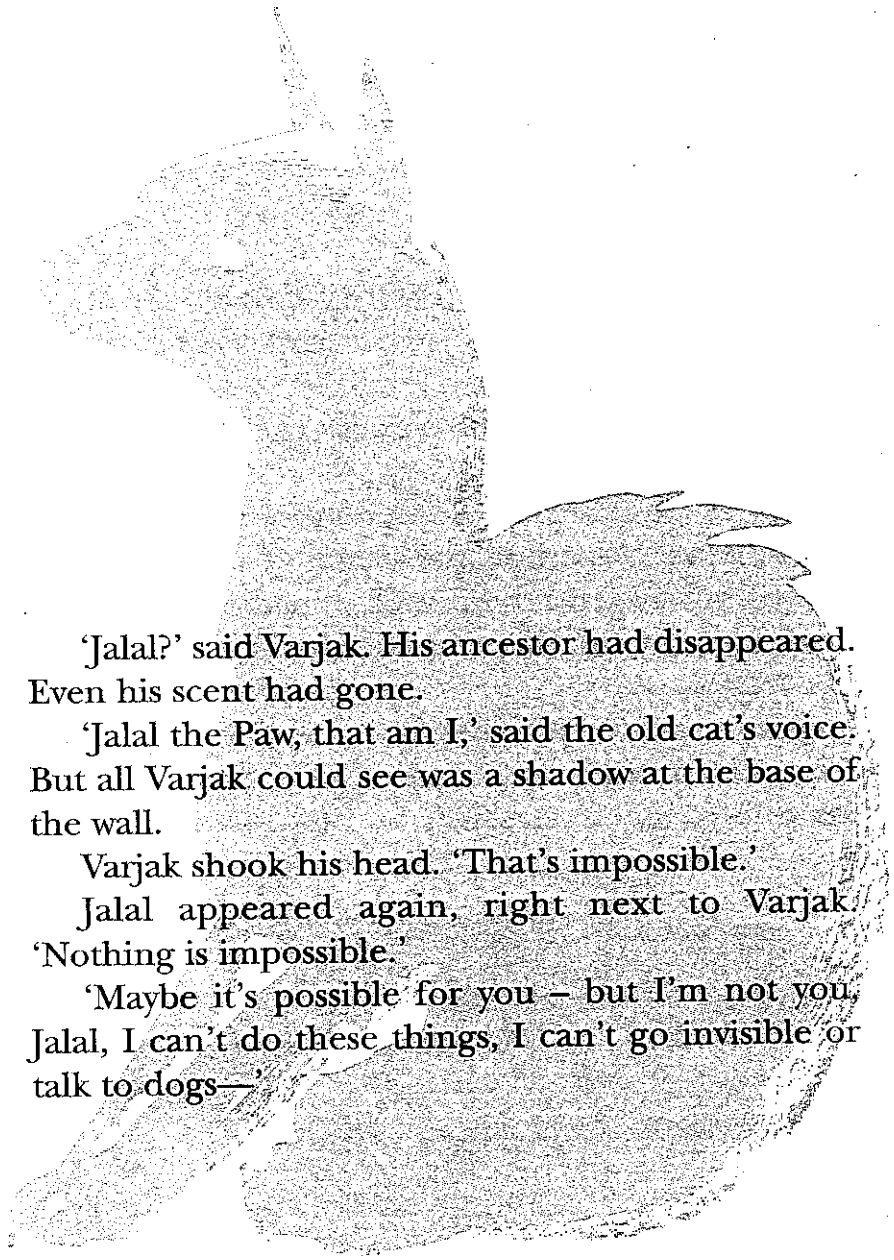
Chapter Twenty-five

'There are times when it is useful to disappear,' sai Jalal.

Varjak was back in Mesopotamia, where the ai smelled like cinnamon and tasted of ripe dates. H smiled. It was good to be back. Whatever happene in the real world, there was always Mesopotamia i his dreams.

Jalal stood beside him in the shadow of a wal And then he was gone.





'Jalal?' said Varjak. His ancestor had disappeared. Even his scent had gone.

'Jalal the Paw, that am I,' said the old cat's voice. But all Varjak could see was a shadow at the base of the wall.

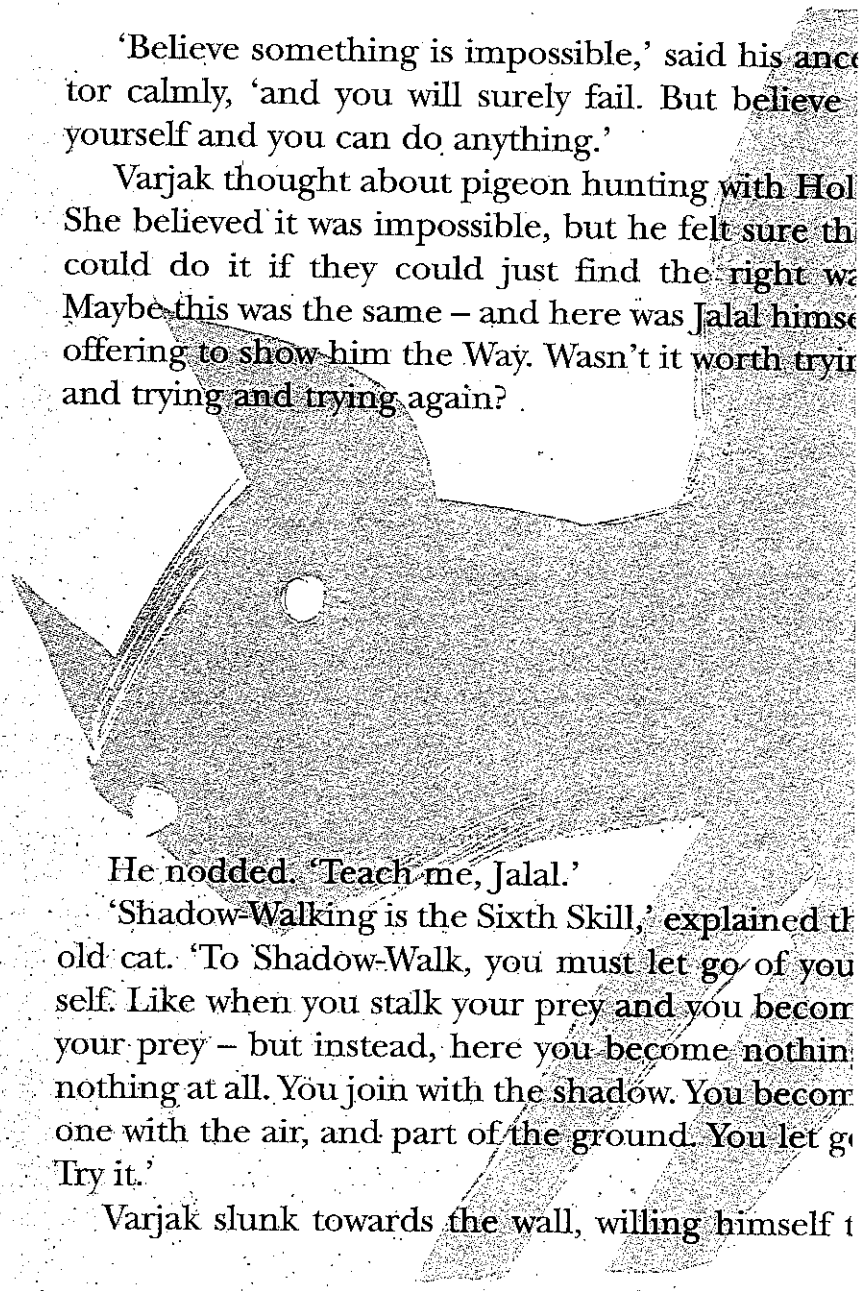
Varjak shook his head. 'That's impossible.'

Jalal appeared again, right next to Varjak. 'Nothing is impossible.'

'Maybe it's possible for you – but I'm not you, Jalal, I can't do these things, I can't go invisible or talk to dogs—'

'Believe something is impossible,' said his ance tor calmly, 'and you will surely fail. But believe yourself and you can do anything.'

Varjak thought about pigeon hunting with Hol She believed it was impossible, but he felt sure th could do it if they could just find the right wa Maybe this was the same – and here was Jalal himse offering to show him the Way. Wasn't it worth tryir and trying and trying again?



He nodded. 'Teach me, Jalal.'

'Shadow-Walking is the Sixth Skill,' explained th old cat. 'To Shadow-Walk, you must let go of you self. Like when you stalk your prey and you becom your prey – but instead, here you become nothin nothing at all. You join with the shadow. You becom one with the air, and part of the ground. You let g Try it.'

Varjak slunk towards the wall, willing himself t

disappear. I'm a shadow, he told himself. No one can see me. I'm invisible.

'You are thinking too hard,' said Jalal. 'Shadow-Walking is not done by thinking. Shadows cannot think, after all. Think about nothing. Empty your mind of thoughts.'

Varjak tried to think about nothing; but found himself thinking about thinking about nothing. He tried to empty his mind, but his mind was full of images of emptiness.

'Now you are trying too hard,' said Jalal. 'Perhaps it is too soon. You must know yourself, be sure of yourself, before you can let go of yourself. Do you know who you are?'

Varjak frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Think about it, Varjak Paw.' Jalal disappeared into the shadow. 'Think hard. For your life depends upon it.'

Chapter Twenty-six

Varjak awoke. He was sprawled on the ground in t alley. His shoulder screamed with pain. Holly w gone.

The bristly, barking monster towered above hi its foul breath in his face. Its big red tongue loll out, glistening hungrily. It looked like it was getti ready to eat him. He was wrong to trust his instinc this creature was worse than a dog. It was the mo terrifying monster in the world.

He had to do something! Shadow-Walking, t Sixth Skill: *Think about nothing. Empty your mind thoughts.*

Varjak concentrated. Nothing. Nothing. Nothir

But it wasn't that easy. The pain in his should filled his mind. He couldn't do it. He couldn Shadow-Walk.

Varjak looked up desperately at the narrow bri walls of the alley. It felt as if they were closing in o him. If only he could get to the ledge. He tried

stand up, but it hurt too much.

There was no escape now. It was all over. The monster's drooling mouth opened wide . . .

'Cludge,' it said, in a deep, deep voice. Varjak stared, helpless. It blinked those cloudy eyes. Then it licked itself, once. 'Cludge,' it repeated.

Varjak scratched his ears, not quite sure what he was hearing. 'Is that your name?' he said. 'Cludge?'

It panted. A shy smile appeared at the corner of its mouth. 'Cludge,' it affirmed.

Varjak smiled back. Maybe Cludge wasn't going to eat him, after all. 'Varjak,' he said. 'I'm Varjak.'

'Var Jak? Var . . . Varjak. Varjak!'

'That's right, Cludge. I'm Varjak.'

'VARJAK! VARJAK! VARJAK!' barked Cludge.

'You've got it.'

'VARJAK!'

Varjak gingerly shifted his weight onto his fro paws. His shoulder twinged, though not as badly before, and he flopped back onto the ground.

Cludge reached down to lick the wounded shoulder. His big black eyes were cloudy with worry.

'Sorry, Varjak,' he sighed. 'Didn't mean. To hurt.'

'That's OK. I should've run, like the other cats.'

'Cludge was scared. Varjak not scared?'

'No,' he smiled. He was beginning to like this great big creature. Cludge looked fierce, but he seemed gentle inside.

'Cludge alone,' he sniffed. 'Everyone run from Cludge. No friends.'

Varjak looked into Cludge's eyes again. He could see it all in there; he recognized it: his pain, his fear, his loneliness.

'It's all right, Cludge,' he said quietly. 'You're not alone. We'll be friends, you and me.'

'Friends?' panted Cludge. 'Varjak, Cludge, friends?'

Varjak grinned. 'Friends,' he said. He tried to stand up again. This time, his shoulder took the weight.

'Friends!' barked Cludge. He wagged his tail. 'Varjak, Cludge, friends! FRIENDS! FRIENDS!'

'Varjak Paw,' said a gravelly voice, 'this is a first. I've seen a lot of things in this city – I've even seen you hit Razor – but this is truly something else.' Holly jumped down from the wall. 'You did it. You talked to a dog.' She shook her head. 'It's incredible. It's unbelievable. It's—'

'A dog?' said Varjak. Cludge barked.

'Yes, a dog,' said Holly, keeping a safe distanc from Cludge. 'What do you *think* it is?'

'But he's not like the other dogs.'

'What other dogs?'

'You know. The metal ones.'

Holly looked baffled. 'I've never seen a dog lik that.'

In the distance, a monster shrieked and roared

'Those ones!' said Varjak. 'The dogs that mak that noise!'

Holly shook her head. 'That's not a dog. That's car.'

'A what?'

'Car!' barked Cludge. 'Cars are fun. Cludg chase cars.'

'So they weren't dogs?' said Varjak.

'Let me get this straight,' said Holly. 'All the tim you thought you were talking to dogs, what you wer really doing was talking to *cars*?'

Varjak frowned. He was confused. The met monsters were dogs – he was sure they were! But ha anyone else ever called them dogs? No. Now h thought about it, he'd never known for certain wh they were. He'd just assumed they were dog because they fitted the Elder Paw's description fro the tales. They filled his heart with fear; they ha foul breath and a deafening sound; and they looke

strong enough to kill a man.

But, he had to admit, so did Cludge.

Awareness, the Second Skill: *before you do anything, you must know what you are dealing with. Assume nothing; be sure of the facts.*

That was exactly what he'd failed to do. He'd almost killed himself trying to talk to a car. A beginner's mistake. Not the kind of mistake a cat who knew the Way would make. He wouldn't make it now. And he was sure Sally Bones wouldn't, either.

Holly giggled.

'What's so funny?' Varjak demanded.

She pulled herself together, but only just. 'You,' she said. 'Cars aren't even alive, you moron. You can't talk to a car!'

'You didn't think I could talk to Cludge, either,' reasoned Varjak.

'Cludge only talk to friends,' said the big dog.

'See?' said Varjak. 'Maybe cars only talk to their friends, too.'

Holly couldn't control herself any longer. Her whiskers started to twitch, her body began to shake, and then she cracked up completely. Laughter streamed out of her and flew around the alley like a flock of birds. It was everywhere, it was contagious. Cludge rolled about on the ground, yelping and panting helplessly, and then Varjak found himself

laughing too. He couldn't help it; he had to join i with them. It was a good feeling, light and fre He saw it all now, how he'd got it wrong. Of *cour* cars weren't dogs: Cludge was a dog!

Cludge was a dog?

Varjak stopped laughing. *Cludge was a dog.* With dog, he could still save his family from th Gentleman and his cats – if only there was tim 'Cludge, I need your help. I need you to scare a ma Can you do that?'

Cludge stopped yelping and became very seriou He drew himself up to his full height and bared h yellow teeth. Holly's laughter tailed away at the sigh 'Cludge scare everyone,' the great dog said in h deep voice. 'Except Varjak.'

'Then let's go. There's no time to waste.' Varja turned to Holly. 'Coming?'

'Where?'

'Up the hill. The three of us. We're going to sa my family.'

'This is mad,' said Holly. 'But no one messes wit Sally Bones and gets away with it – we're not safe i this city any more.' She stood up. 'So all right, M Paw, lead the way. Where you go, I go.'

Something in Varjak soared at that moment.

'Thank you,' he said, 'my friends.'