

The adventures of Varjak Paw

A shrill shriek pierced the silent night. Varjak stopped dead in his tracks. Shuddering, his ears vibrated then flattened out against his matted fur. He knew that scream. A distant memory tried to surface. Blocking all thoughts, he padded across the glossy road, which reflected the dim yellow street-lights lining the path Varjak should take. Reaching an old, derelict building, he sprang stealthily onto a tall, arched window. The empty, gaping window frame seemed to swallow his slender body.

Miaaaaaooooowww. There it was again. Hanging on the air like an alarm, the cry was more frantic now, desperate even. A shudder ran through his body: from the end of his whiskers to the tip of his tail. Varjak edged closer to the alley's entrance, balancing like an acrobat on a tightrope, arching his body towards the noise, which was coming from deep, down in the darkness. Heart racing, Varjak sprang into the rotting rubbish and broken glass beneath him. Treading carefully, he let his awareness flow out: reaching into the darkness beyond him becoming his eyes. As his breathing slowed, his body shimmered in the moonlight. Shadow Walking: Jalal's third skill. Varjak smiled to himself as he remembered how hard it had been to master. Breathing, concentration, belief- there were so many things to remember to be an effective shadow-walker. Before he'd learnt The Way- The Way of Jalal- he had been such an unsuccessful shadow-walker (now, however, this was his greatest strength.)

Under the invisibility cloak of darkness, Varjak moved quickly forwards into the endless void of the alley. Nobody would be able to see him whilst he walked in the shadows. Just at that moment, his heightened senses detected a smell: a rancid, putrid smell like nothing he'd ever smelt before. His whiskers shook as he sucked in the air lined with this foul stench. Being unable to see, he could only use his awareness now. The light from the street lights behind him was not much more than a twinkle and the moonless sky had long been covered by the buildings, which loomed up high above him.

CRASH! In the darkness, Varjak hadn't seen the rubbish bags camouflaged by the lightless alley. *The smell must be coming from these bags!* Pulling and tearing, scratching and ripping, Varjak dug his claws deep into the soft, black material. The bags released their contents over his rear paws: food scraps, empty containers and an illuminous green slime melted into the floor around him. Digging, he held his breath and continued to search deep down into the depths of the sacks. Varjak froze. A cold, metallic object brushed his paw. There they lay: the bodies of the Gentleman's Cats. Their fur was knotted with a lime green liquid, gushing from a large, mangled hole where an ear once sat. Their limbs were twisted into unnatural positions and their eyes....their eyes were like something Varjak could not forget. Two marble blue eyes, stuck staring right into his soul- with a look of horror glazed across them. *How could they be scared?* Varjak scoffed to himself. They weren't even alive. Their bodies had been, once. They'd been stolen during the vanishings and turned into machines: killing machines. Varjak shivered as he remembered, his fur stood on end and he felt a sharp pain shoot across his forehead. He'd learnt the hard way just how well trained these Cats

were. If Varjak hadn't known The Way, he'd never have been able to face these monsters alone.

Flexing his claws, he dug his nails deep into the two carcasses and began to drag them into the alleyway so he could take a closer look. *Why had they been left for dead? Where was the Gentleman? was he near? gone? dead?*

BANG! A door slammed open further up the alley. Blood pumping, mind reeling, senses spinning – Varjak stumbled backwards into the gloom. His awareness tingled as he regained control of his sense. Breathe, in one, two, out one, two. Exhaling deeply, Varjak cleared his mind to a blank canvas. He allowed his instinct to take over. Back amongst the shadows-in between what can be seen and what can't be seen- Varjak headed towards the open door. Reflected in the dim light of the distant street, a figure was silhouetted against the crumbling walls. The Gentleman! Under each arm he held two boxes like loaded guns ready to fire. Carefully lowering them to the ground, he closed the huge metal door with a slam. He turned the key in the lock, slid a blot across the top and finally forced a huge, sturdy slab of metal across the whole door.

Security conscious! Varjak thought to himself.

In one swift movement, the Gentleman snatched up the boxes and opened the boot of his car, depositing both boxes neatly inside. Bemused, Varjak watched from his hiding place. Just at that moment, the man stood still. Varjak held his breath. *Had the Gentleman heard him?* Patting his pocket, the old man snorted with disgust. Grumbling to himself, he walked heavily towards the locked door. After what seemed like an eternity, he banged the door open again.

This was Varjak's chance! Like a thief in the night he sprang into action. Swiftly, he leapt onto the car's plastic bumper- landing with precision and without a sound. Moving quickly into the boot, he felt the rough, bedraggled carpet beneath his paws. Knife like claws dug into the soft cardboard, pulling the lid towards him and revealing the contents. There lay a doll, which was so accurately crafted; it could almost have been a real child. Two snow boots adorned its feet; a pink gilet hugged its small body and two baby pink mittens hung from the limp arms. But the eyes haunted Varjak. Frozen in a look of disbelief they gazed at him. A sudden horror filled him. It tore up from his stomach and grabbed at his throat. He struggled to breathe.

Slam! The boot of the car slammed shut above him, trapping him like a prisoner. Everything went in slow motion, a buzzing rang in his ears and the air around him seemed to become thick and suffocating, like he had fallen under water. Through the fuzziness a high pitched noise erupted. It seemed to be coming from the doll. It was a frequency so high pitched only a cat's ears could hear it. Varjak couldn't make out the noise; it sounded like the noises the human's make to each other. 'HEEEEELLLLLLLP!' The sound echoed in his ears.

Varjak didn't know what the word meant, but he knew the tone. That tone meant he was in danger- imminent danger.