Varjak Paw – Chapters 19 and 20

**P140**

Varjak and Holly talked through the night by the giant bronze lions. There was nothing to distract them but the fountain’s trickle and the birds’ trilling.

 It was strange at first. No one else had ever wanted to talk about hunting before. Varjak could still barely believe that someone his own age was interested in it, and not senseless kitten games like Jay, Jethro and Jerome. But it was true. Holly was easy to talk to because she was like him. She liked the same things. Her mind worked in the same way.

 Sometimes it was hard to keep up with her. Whenever he thought he had the answer to something, she asked another difficult question: why like this, not that? And she had ideas he would never have thought up. But he had a few of his own, too; and together they worked out their plan.

**P141**

 That night, Varjak felt something he’d never felt before. Or rather, he didn’t feel something. He didn’t feel alone any more.

 They woke Tam just before dawn and explained the plan to her. Her eyes grew round with fear.

 ‘Me?’ she said. ‘You want *me* to do *that*? Why me?’

 ‘Can you do my part of the plan?’ said Holly. ‘Or Varjak’s?’

 ‘Well, no – but – ‘

 ‘You’ve got to do it, Tam,’ said Varjak. ‘It’s impossible without you.’

 ‘It is?’ she said.

 ‘Of course it is, ‘ said Holly. ‘And if you do it, I promise I won’t say *her* name any more.’

 ‘Well then,’ said Tam cheerfully, ‘what are we waiting for?’

 They took up their positions as the first rays of sunshine splashed onto the white buildings, filling the square with light. Everything began to glow: the ground, the sky, even the water in the fountain. Varjak crept up on the pigeons from one corner of the square. Holly crept up from another. Tam stood in front of them, on the far side of the flock.

 At Holly’s signal, Tam sprang at the pigeons. A hundred birds beat their wings, fierce and dangerous in their flock. Tam kept going, never slowing, just aiming for the other side in a blur of speed they couldn’t stop – and Varjak and Holly flew out of the morning sun behind them.

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It should have been easy. The birds were distracted by Tam and didn’t see them coming in the haze of brilliant light. That was the plan.

 But even as Varjak dived in, the thrill of the hunt in his veins, it started to go wrong. Tam was clear through, but there were still too many pigeons in a mass. He and Holly were on the edge of the flock, but couldn’t get close enough to any single bird to strike.

 The birds turned on Holly, wings flapping savagely, claws curving out. She didn’t run. She stood there bravely, trying hard, but now they were surrounding her, pecking at her with shrill, sharp beaks.

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 Holly was in trouble. She was trapped and she couldn’t get out. They were tearing, scratching, ripping at her. Varjak could see panic mounting in her face. Tam was helpless on the other side. Quick - he had to do something quick!

 Slow-Time, the Fourth Skill: *everything will seem to slow down around you. But you will be fast. You will be faster than anything.*

 Would it work in the real world? He breathed in-two-three-four. Out-two-three-four.

 And the wings….slowed….down.

 Varjak could see each beat, each claw, as if in slow motion. He dived after Holly into the mass of birds, moving smoothly through the chaos, making them fly apart for just a moment.

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 ‘Holly!’ he called. She looked up. It was enough to break the rising terror in her eyes. She darted through the gap he’d made, away from the flock and towards Tam, to safety.

 Out of danger now, Varjak breathed normally - and switched out of Slow-Time. It worked! The Fourth Skill really worked!

 ‘Did they hurt you?’ he panted as he caught up with her.

 ‘Nothing wrong with me,’ said Holly, though she was trembling. ‘Thanks for getting me out,’ she added, much more quietly.

 ‘No problem.’

 ‘He saved you, Holly!’ bubbled Tam.

 ‘I guess we’re even now,’ she muttered now.

‘I didn’t do it for that,’ said Varjak.

Holly didn’t meet his eyes, but just for a second, Varjak thought he sawa smile flicker on her face.

‘Come on, she said, sidling away from the square. ‘We’ve got to hurry. I don’t want to be here in broad daylight. It’s too dangerous.’

 ‘You don’t want another fo? said Varjak. He knew she was shaken - her fur was still ruffled - but maybe it would help to try again.

 ‘Why bother?’ she said, padding back through the city. ‘The plan didn’t work. It was a stupid idea.’

 ‘No it wasn’t,’ said Varjak, keeping pace with her, ahead of Tam. ‘And you did everything you could-’

 ‘How about me?’ said Tam. ‘Did I do all right, Varjak?

 ‘You were great. You were both really brave.’

 ‘I was great,’ beamed Tam.

 ‘There were just too many of them, this time,’ said Varjak. ‘But that doesn’t mean it’s impossible.’

 ‘Maybe,’ said Holly, picking up the pace. ‘Maybe if we tried it another way-’

 They started on a new plan as they headed back. The city was beginning to rumble with life once more. Familiar streets flashed past as they went by.

 ‘I’m still hungry,’ said Tam. Her nostrils twitched. ‘Wait you two! It’s that fishy smell again,’ She stopped by a turning off a side street, the same turning where Varjak had caught the mouse. Even in daylight it curved away into darkness, into shadows.

 ‘Come on, Tam,’ said Holly, over her shoulder.

 ‘But it’s that lovely smell again,’ said Tam. ‘And there wasn’t any food in the park, and the hunting didn’t work, and I am still hungry.’

 ‘We’re not stopping here,’ said Holly. ‘If you go, you’re on your own.’ She turned back to Varjak, and carried on talking. They walked away, planning their next hunt together. Tam stayed behind at the turning.

 ‘It’s your loss,’ called Tam. ‘I’ll see you back in our alleys.’

**CHAPTER 20**

**P146**

Tam didn’t return that day.

 At first Holly laughed it off - ‘She’s probably still stuffing her face!’ - but when Tam didn’t show up by nightfall, or the next morning either, she began to look worried.

 ‘It was the same street where you caught the mouse, wasn’t it?’ said Holly. ‘I had a bad feeling about that place.’

 Varjak thought back to the strange sensation he’d had in the turning. Maybe there was something else out there, after all. ‘You know I had a bad feeling too.’

 ‘Let’s go and find her,’ said Holly, as the rain began to fall.

 They started in the very place where Tam left them. They followed the turning she’d gone down, into the shadows, but it just led out onto another alleyway. There was no sign of Tam. Nothing: not even with Varjak’s Awareness. It was just an ordinary street.

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 They ranged wider, across the centre of the city, where the street cats who weren’t in either of the gangs lived. None of them had seen Tam.

 They tried Ginger’s territory next. Near the concrete blocks where Holly had saved Varjak, they found some cats from Ginger’s gang, sheltering from the rain.

 ‘I’m looking for Tam,’ said Holly. ‘Any of you seen her?’ They said they hadn’t.

 ‘Do you believe them?’ asked Varjak, as they headed for the park.

 ‘Ginger’s gang are rough but they’re honest,’ said Holly. ‘If Tam ran into them, if there’d been any trouble, they’d tell us.’

 Tam wasn’t in the park either. They searched till twilight. They found a few scraps of food, but not a sign of Tam among the wet, dead leaves.

 Tired and soaked from the hard rain that fell through the day, they headed back to Holly’s alleys. On their way, they met a big stripy tom, prowling in a covered, cobbled passage. Varjak recognised him at one by the slash marks on his face. He didn’t look friendly - Varjak’s dripping fur prickled at the sight of him - but he smiled at Holly, showing a set of sharp white teeth.

 ‘Razor,’ said Holly.

 ‘Holly,’ nodded the stripy tom. ‘Good to see you. Where’s that shaggy cat you’re always with?’

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‘Tam. She’s - I don’t know where she is. Have you seen her?’

 Razor shook his head. ‘No. But she hasn’t been near Sally Bones’s territory, I’m sure of that.’

 ‘How do you know?’

 ‘It’s my job.’ He licked his paws proudly. ‘Who’s this you’ve got with you?’ He flicked his tail in Varjak’s direction, but he didn’t look at him, as if he wasn’t worth wasting time over.

 ‘I’m Varjak Paw,’ said Varjak.

 The tom’s tail twitched with contempt. ‘I wasn’t talking to you,’ he said. Varjak fell silent.

 ‘Nothing to worry about,’ said Holly quickly. ‘He’s one of us. Just a pet who got lost.’

 Razor sniffed. ‘Why waste your time with a pet? Come and join our gang. You know Sally Bones’ll win in the end. This city is hers.’

 Holly smiled, but didn’t say anything.

 ‘You’ll be safe from the Vanishings,’ said Razor. ‘Sally looks after her own.’

 ‘Thank you, Razor,’ said Holly, ‘but you know I’ve never wanted to be in a gang, and I’ve got to look for Tam now.’ She began to move away. Razor stepped in front of her muscles rippling.

 ‘Come one, Holly,’ he said. ‘I’ve always liked you.’ Holly was still smiling, but Varjak could see her trying to edge away. ‘You could be somebody, in a gang,’ said Razor, moving closer, following her.

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‘You could be important. I could make you important.’

 ‘I don’t want -’

 Come on,’ insisted Razor. ‘I’ll take you to meet the Boss. I’m one of thr top cats now.’ There was a flash of fear in Holly’s mustard eyes. Varjak saw it.

 ‘She told you, she doesn’t want to,’ he said, without thinking.

 Razor turned to him. The scars on his face writhed like snakes.

 ‘I warned you already,’ he growled.

 SLAM!

 A rock-hard paw smashed into Varjak’s face. Varjak reeled, stunned, and sank to the ground in a pool of rain. He wanted to get up, to fight back, but his legs were like soggy paper and the world was spinning around him.

 ‘Don’t get in my way again,’ snarled Razor. His words twirled above Varjak’s head like stars. One hit. That was all it took. And he didn’t even see it coming.

 The brawny tom turned back to Holly. ‘When you’ve had enough of wasting your time with weak little losers, and you want to see what it’s like being a real cat - come and find me.’

 He padded away, tail held here.

 ‘Varjak?’ said Holly, when he was gone. ‘Are you all right?’

**P 151**

 Varjak shook his head. Blood trickled out of his mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his paw. It matted on his fur.

 ‘It was brave, standing up to him,’ she said, ‘but it was stupid. You can’t win a fight with Razor.’

 ‘I’ll beat him one day,’ said Varjak.

 ‘You’re crazy,’ she sighed. ‘You’ve got to learn to use your brain. There’s no point fighting cats like that. The best you can do is keep out of their way.’

 ‘I will beat him,’ Varjak voed. Whoever had left those scars on Razor’s face had managed it. He could do it too.

 ‘You’re not going to beat anyone today, Mr Paw,’ said Holly. ‘Come on. Let’s keep looking for Tam.’

QUESTIONS

Underline or write down all the words or phrases used to describe Razor. What image do they present?

Look at the beginning of Chapter 19. Why do you think the cat’s plan is kept from us?

What are your first impressions of Razor? Can you use 3 adjectives to describe him?

Read to the end of Chapter 19. What do you think happened to Tam? What do you think the fishy smell is?

Do you think Tam looks up to and respects Varjak? Why do you think this might be?

Is Tam right to leave her friends and follow the fishy smell?

Was Varjak right to challenge Razor?

Why skill does Varjak use to save Holly from the pigeons?

Varjak and Holly meet Sally Bones when they are looking for Tam. True or false?

Do you think Holly should join Sally Bones’ gang to keep herself safe?