

P 130

‘I’m starving,’ grumbled Tam, late the next night, back in their alleys. The three of them sat on a high brick wall together, thinking about food. ‘My belly’s shrinking. I can feel it.’

‘Me too,’ said Varjak. ‘That mouse was good, but it was only a mouse.’

‘You’re right,’ said Holly. ‘This is getting serious. It’s time for drastic action, and I’ve got a plan.’ She looked Varjak up and down. ‘First of all, though, you’ve got to look normal. Tell me, Mr Paw, are you ever planning to clean yourself?’

Varjak shook his head. He was Outside; he didn’t have to wash. ‘At home, Mother was always washing me. I hated it.’

‘You’re not at home now.’

‘Here she goes,’ sighed Tam.

‘I don’t have to do anything I don’t like,’ said Varjak.

P131

‘You can do what you want,’ agreed Holly, ‘but look at you! The people will notice. They’ll think you’re wild and will take you away.’

Varjak inspected his coat. She was right: he was filthy. The fine silver-blue fur was completely completely caked with grime.

‘I like it,’ he said, rather pleased with himself.

‘Plus,’ she added, ‘you stink.’ He didn’t respond. ‘I’m sorry, but you really do.’ Varjak looked to Tam, but even she was silent this time.

‘OK, OK,’ he grumbled, reluctantly licking his paws. ‘You sound just like Mother sometimes.’ He stopped after a few licks. ‘Is that better?’

Holly looked him calmly in the eye. ‘I’m not saying it because it’s dangerous to look so dirty. You’ll draw attention to us all, and you’ll ruin my plan. Now do it properly or I’m off.’ Varjak snorted, but resumed his cleaning. ‘If you’re a Blue whatever-it-is, you should be proud of how you look,’ she coaxed.

‘We are the noblest of cats,’ he muttered through a mouthful of mud. But the old boast rang hollow in the city. Would any of his family rescue a stranger? The Elder Paw, perhaps; not the rest. So who was more noble: the Blue, or this spiky street cat who’d saved his life?

The question bothered him. It turned everything he believed on his head. So he pushed it out of his mind and concentrated on his cleaning.

P132

‘All right,’ said Holly at last. ‘That’ll do.’ Varjak’s fur was a dull grey colour. It looked very ordinary. It didn’t look like the coat of a Mesopotamian Blue any more - and he liked it that way.

‘Now the collar,’ she said. ‘You can’t be a street cat with a collar. Come here.’

That was more like it. He’d always hated that thing around his neck. Holly gnawed at the collar. He was vulnerable, balanced on top of a wall, with her sharp teeth just a bite away from his throat. But he trusted Holly. She’d rescued him. She was his friend.

‘There.’ She moved back. Varjak wiggled his shoulders, and the hated collar fluttered down. It fell through the bars of a metal grille, and disappeared into the sewers beneath the city. Now he was just another street cat with no ties, no family, and no home.

‘Good,’ said Holly. ‘You’re one of us. If we run into them, that’s what you say.’

‘Run into who?’ said Varjak, though he knew the answer already. He grinned. ‘Not that big, bad, Sal-’

‘Please!’ cried Tam. ‘You don’t know what you’re saying!’

‘This isn’t a joke,’ said Holly. She sounded serious. Varjak stopped grinning. ‘We have to pass near her territory to get where we’re going. Remember what Ginger did to you? These cats are worse. *Much worse.*’

P133

They set off silently, each in their own thoughts. Holly led them through the back streets, always taking the ways that were quiet and hidden. But the light and noise grew stronger the further they went. The rumbling of the city

was louder, harsher. Soon they couldn't avoid the dirty orange glare of street lights. They were in the open now, coming up to a crossroads.

Holly's fur prickled up fast. 'Hide!' she hissed.

They pressed themselves back into the alley, just in time to see a column of cats patrolling the other side of the crossroads. Varjak's insides knotted as he saw them, and his cheek burned where Ginger had slashed him. Holly was right. They looked much worse than the cat who'd nearly killed him.

There were seven of them. They swaggered and strutted on the sidewalk as if they owned the whole world. Other cats got out of their way, scurrying aside as they approached. At the head of the column was a brawny tom with stripy fur. Varjak caught a glimpse of his face. It was covered in scars.

'That's Razor,' whispered Tam. 'One of *her* lieutenants.'

The three of them crouched silently in their hiding place, watching, waiting, until the patrol had passed.

'OK,' said Holly at last. 'It's clear now. Let's move before they come back.'

P134

'The crossroads is the boundary,' Tam told Varjak as they left the safety of the alley. 'Don't ever cross it.'

'I won't,' he said.

There were no shadowy alleys where Holly took them. Instead, there were tall, white buildings, arranged in a square. In its centre was a water fountain, and a huge stone column pointing up at the sky.

Around the column's base there were four statues, one at each corner. There were statues of lions, made of gleaming bronze. They were giants. Each paw was the size of a man. They had shaggy, wild manes around their heads; proud, free, fearless, faces.

They were so powerful, so magnificent, so sure of themselves.

'That's what we should be,' whispered Tam.

'What we *could* be,' said Varjak. 'They're great.'

They sat there for a while, just looking at the statues.

‘We can only come here late at night,’ said Holly. ‘During the day it’s too crowded: people, cars, dogs. But at least it’s neutral ground; the gangs leave it alone. Which means they also leave those birds alone.’

Varjak looked again. He was so thrilled by the statues, he’d hardly noticed that the square was swarming with pigeons. Dozens of them strutted about beneath the moonlight, and more were coming all the time. The air pulsed with their trilling and cooing.

P136

‘So tell me, Mr Paw,’ said Holly. ‘How exactly would you hunt one?’

‘What do you mean?’ said Varjak, suddenly suspicious. Was she making fun of him again? He’d never tried to hunt a bird; it seemed too difficult.

‘I mean, go and get one of those pigeons.’

It sounded like a challenge. He searched her mustard eyes. She didn’t look like she was making fun of him. She meant it.

P137

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I will.’

‘Holly!’ said Tam. ‘That’s not fair. Don’t take any notice of her, Varjak. She’s being mean again.’

‘I want to do it,’ he said, still looking into Holly’s eyes. She smiled.

Varjak slunk into the square. He selected a bird and turned all his Awareness onto it. He observed it with his eyes, ears, whiskers. Nothing it did could surprise him now: he and it were one.

P138

He crept towards the pigeon, stealthy as Jalal himself. In the whole world, there was nothing but him and his prey. Varjak sprang - and a hundred wings came at him; a hundred claws curved out; a hundred beaks cawed in chaos.

Panic! Varjak fled from the flock. He hadn’t expected anything so fierce. His fur ruffled and his nail trembled. He hid behind Holly and Tam, and watched the birds settle down from a safe distance.

‘Varjak!’ cried Tam. ‘Are you ok?’ He shook his head. ‘I told you, Holly, no one could do that!’

‘Exactly,’ said Holly. ‘That’s exactly what happens to me every time. That’s why even the gangs don’t bother with this place. But I always think, if we could just work out how to catch the birds, we’d never go hungry again.’

P139

‘It’s impossible,’ panted Varjak. His pulse was still pounding. ‘Impossible!’

‘For one cat, yes,’ said Holly. ‘And yes, we usually hunt alone. But imagine the three of us -’

‘-hunting together-’

‘-it could just work. Well that’s the plan. What do you think?’

‘Yes,’ said Varjak Paw.

‘I don’t like the sound of this,’ said Tam. She buried her head in her paws, and curled up to sleep. ‘Wake me up when it’s time to go home.’

Questions:

P133 What do the verbs ‘swaggered’ and ‘strutted’ tell you about the cats on patrol?

P132 What might Varjak be thinking and feeling when his collar is removed?

Do you think Tam is a coward? Why? Why not?

How do you think the cats will work together to hunt the pigeons?

Who is Razor? What is his face covered in? Why do you think this might be?

P134 What do you think the lion statues might represent to Varjak?

P130/1 Why does Holly tell Varjak that he needs to clean himself?

P136 What challenge does Holly set Varjak when they reach the fountain?

Summarise all the evidence there is to suggest that Tam, Holly and Varjak are starting to work together.