

He let out the tension, and grinned. That must have been it all along. Nothing more than a real, live, and very breakfast-sized mouse.

So this is it, he told himself. Your big moment. Your first prey. This is not a toy. This is not a dream. It's real, and it's happening now.

Don't move, not till it's in range. Don't even breathe. Here . . . here it comes. It thinks it's safe.

Hunting, the Third Skill: *When you stalk your prey, you become your prey.*

Varyak's senses went out to it, tracing its tiniest movements, merging with it in his mind. The mouse came closer . . . closer . . .

*CRACK!* His paws shot out, slapped the mouse's head, hard. Stunned it. Held it down. Jaws closed around its neck. Teeth sank in: the lethal bite.

Varyak gasped. He had killed for real. And it was like killing a part of himself.

I'm sorry, he thought, beginning to shake. I'm sorry. But I have to eat.

*Enough and no more. That is the way the world is made.*

He stooped and gently picked up the body. His first kill. He gave silent thanks, and crunched into his breakfast.

It was strange. On the outside, it looked and even smelled like that toy mouse back in the Contessa's house. But as soon as he bit into it, he knew this was

something new. It tasted so different to anything he'd eaten before. Real food, fresh and warm. It satisfied him completely.

'Did you see that?' said Tam. 'Did you see the way he did it, Holly? *Bam!* It never had a chance!'

'I saw it,' said Holly.

'Wasn't it something?' beamed Tam. 'Where did you learn to do that, Varyak? Will you teach me?'

'Actually,' he admitted, 'that was the first time.'

Holly nodded. 'I thought it might be. Still, I've seen worse. A lot worse.' She winked. 'Maybe you're not as useless as you look, Mr Paw.'

Varyak smiled. He'd never have to rely on people again. He was a hunter now. He had the Third Skill.

Tam's nostrils twitched. 'What's that smell?' she said. Varyak and Holly sniffed the air. The alley curved away into complete darkness, and that salty, fishy tang was coming from a place they couldn't see, further down. The scent reminded Varyak of the Gentleman's caviare - another thing he'd never have to eat.

'It smells great,' said Tam. 'I'm going after it.'

'I wouldn't,' warned Holly. 'We're too near Ginger's turf. You don't want to risk it. Wait for the park.'

Tam licked her chops. 'At least it's not *her* territory. And it smells so good, Holly. There's no one else around, it'll be OK. Come on, Varyak, let's eat!'