

J. M. O'REILLY

CAT CITY

Published by Lulu.com 2006

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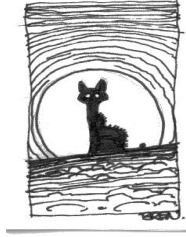
ISBN 978-1-84728-243-9

Thanks a million to Marie Keane, punctual as ever.

Thanks to the cats of Cat City.

Illustrations by Brendan Smyth.

Dedicated to Giuseppe, Giuli and Luke.



Prologue

Everybody knows that the great city of Rome is also called the Eternal city and that within the Eternal city there is another great city called the Vatican City. But there is another significant city within the mighty empire and this is the city that people do not know about. It is situated in the heart of Rome in a place called 'The sacred area of Largo Argentina'. There, among the ancient ruins of Imperial Rome is the complex city called CAT CITY. Like all cities in all places, Cat City has a social structure and (as with all social frameworks) there are rules. Sometimes those who keep and obey the rules suffer whilst those who fail to observe the law seem to triumph above all. The law was simple enough in Cat City; live freely and in harmony with all others.

Chapter I

City of Mystery

Luke rolled over and stretched and yawned and groaned all at the same time. The air was hot and it smelt of a million good things. He decided to go and look for Giuli. She usually spent the early evening sleeping in her favorite place, a niche in the wall at the back of the Grand Temple. When he got there, Giuli was already awake sitting on an old column under a pine tree licking one of her front paws. She never changed her cleaning routine, front paws and face and whiskers always came first. Giuli was, to say the least, a cat set in her ways and her washing pattern never altered.

-Where's Bird? Luke said.

-Where he always is, up a tree, she replied.

Luke climbed the wall of the city to search for Bird. He, like Giuli, had a few favourite places where he liked to laze in the evening. The trouble was that they were all up trees and Luke was not as good at scaling trees as Bird was. Nobody was able to climb trees like Bird. Luke spotted Bird; well actually, he first saw four paws and a long tail hanging from a branch. This was Bird's usual way of dozing. He said that it let the air circulate around him better; which was a very good thing considering Cat City was a very hot place. Bird knew a lot of smart things. He knew more about the city than any other cat Luke had ever met and spending most of his time in trees was one of the cleverest things Bird could do. Luke said that he would like to live in the trees but when he had fallen out of the same tree ten times on the same day, Bird had told him that a cat who keeps falling to the ground was meant to stay on the ground. This too, Luke thought, was very wise advice and from that day he only climbed like all other cats and left the expert stuff to Bird.

-Bird, hey Bird wake up, Bird, come down, hey Bird get up, started Luke

-Up down up down, Bird said, what's it to be? Wait, wait, wait, he continued.

-Sorry Bird, said Luke. But it's a beautiful evening and

Giuli's up and it's tonight, isn't it? Tonight's the night, isn't it? he continued almost falling off the wall. Luke heard Bird stretch and scratch at the tree trunk before he swiftly left the tree and landed on the wall beside him.

-Luke, said Bird. You know that you can't go to the sacred council meeting. You certainly know that you shouldn't even know about the sacred council meeting. And, I'm sure you know that if you were anywhere near the sacred council meeting that you would rue the day you ever heard of the mystique that governs the city. And, Luke, please, please try to keep your voice down. Luke...Sometimes...you...Bird just sighed and turned to go.

-I know, I know, but I can't help thinking about what you told Giuli and me in the secret chamber, and...

-Stop right there, interrupted Bird. Come with me and we'll find Giuli, then we shall talk. And Luke, hush. Now, climb down the wall, hurry.

So they both went down into the city to find Giuli.

Luke was a very skinny cat. He wasn't undernourished; he was always very thin. He was black. Sooty black, but his whiskers were as white as milk and they were as bright as cotton in a field. He was young, foolish and extremely inquisitive. In fact, it was often this inquisitiveness that got him into trouble. Like the time when he fell into the great river that leads to Nowhere. He had been warned a thousand times not to go anywhere near it because of the stories about the cats who had fallen in and had been swept away to Nowhere. It was as if by miracle Bird was there just in time to scoop him out. Another time he almost killed himself when he jumped from high up on the city wall and tried to land on a pillar nearly four metres away, he was trying to impress some friends. It was a very sore Bird who broke his fall.

Naturally, each time Luke got into trouble, Bird, who was forever warning him about the dangers of the city, sternly ticked him off and just as he was scolded he was always deeply sorry for what he had done. Luke knew that the city was not really dangerous and that Bird was just a little bit over cautious and protective. For a day or so Bird would stay angry at Luke and during this time, Luke would mope around feeling sorry for himself. But, in the end, Bird always forgave

him, for he loved him dearly. The minute Luke was pardoned he would be off gallivanting again, happy as a kitten. It was one of these so-called misadventures that led Luke to accidentally discover the greatest mystery of Cat City.

It was one very late dark night and Luke was extremely restless, so he decided to go in search of Bird. Just as he got to Bird's favorite tree and was about to call his name he saw Bird descend from the tree swiftly. It was quite amazing to see and even Luke, who had seen Bird come down out of trees hundreds of times, was stunned. Bird had gone from tree to city wall to the ground in a flash. Luke was just about to call out when he decided to try and sneak up on Bird to surprise him. But just as he started he saw Bird crouch down low, belly to the ground, and move off in no time very snakelike. As quickly and quietly as he could, Luke hurried after him. It was difficult to keep up and he almost lost him. It was a particularly dark night and for some strange reason the city seemed unusually silent. Suddenly Bird stopped and stood on the altar in front of the ancient Grand Temple. Looking towards the six great columns, he waited. Luke hid behind some boulders and watched with curiosity and fear; his heart was pounding partly from running and partly from his apprehension.

Luke watched Bird and for a few moments, Bird just stood there, head bowed, and looked as if he were praying. The silence in the city made Luke anxious. Then suddenly the hairs on Luke's back stood on end, and he could not believe his eyes. The clouds behind the great temple columns began to open, and in the magnificent light of the full moon, sitting divinely on top of the tallest column was the most beautiful cat Luke had ever seen. He could not remove his eyes from the sacred creature; he was mesmerized. Although he could clearly see the splendid being before him the cat did not seem to have any particular form. It was like it was there, but it was not there.

Finally, Luke turned to see Bird. He was now sitting courtly, with his eyes fixed on the vision. He was neither moving nor speaking but seemed to be in touch with the beautiful cat. After some moments, as swiftly as they had opened, the clouds began to close and as they closed the mysterious figure began to vanish. In a moment the city was as dark as before

and when Luke looked for Bird he had gone too. Luke sat still trying to make sense of what he had just seen. He felt cold, even though it was a hot night. He was afraid to move. He knew that he had just seen something that he should not have seen. He also knew that Bird would be extremely angry with him. Should he tell Bird? Could he dare? Giuli! He would talk to her. She would know what to do. Then he noticed, as if by magic, that the city was no longer deserted and there were cats everywhere about their usual business. *How odd.* He ran to find Giuli.

It took him a long time to find Giuli. She was in one of the city's popular spots with some other cats she sometimes spent time with.

-Hey, little one, said Giuli, happy to see him as always. What's up?

-Giuli, said Luke panting. Giuli...I...he said trying to catch his breath.

-Luke, Luke hold on, calm down, what's wrong?

-I need to talk to you, in private, he said with such a look of worry and pity that Giuli immediately parted her company and Luke followed her.

Giuli took him to a quiet place on a ledge half way up the city wall. It was in the north east part of the city, their favorite part. He was shaking and he hung his head. He felt embarrassed and guilty.

-Okay, she started, take your time and relax. Whatever it is, tell me in your own time.

Luke looked up at her and almost smiled, in his heart he was content to be with her and he felt a little safer now. Then as he looked at her patient face he realized that he did not know how to tell her about what he had seen. Would she believe him? Maybe she would think that he was mad and never talk to him again. Then he became scared again.

-Okay little one, tell me everything and don't worry, I'm here, I'm always here, she said in a calming voice and Luke believed her. But he also felt very tired and Giuli sensed it. He lay down as if he was exhausted and Giuli curled up beside him.

-Sleep little one, sleep, she said but he was already in a deep sleep.

Giuli was a small blue-grey cat with two white paws, in front. She had short ears and a round face, which only added to the fact that she was a bit nervous and she did not trust many. She did not have any credence in complete strangers and out of her very small social circle Luke was the only one she really loved. In her own way she loved Bird too but she never fully understood him and that shadow cast some doubt. It was the suspicion that kept her a little standoffish. She knew he looked out for Luke and that is what she liked about him most.

Giuli was not born in Cat City. She was born in another place with ancient ruins but unlike Cat City this place had no social system. This was a cruel place to live and you had to fight every day to survive. She never knew her father but she will never forget her poor mother. Giuli was born in a dark place below the ruins and for many weeks she could only see the light up above through the small entrance where her mother would come and go. She noticed that her mother would always return anxious and breathing heavily. As a young kitten she never felt completely relaxed and safe, as all young should feel when snuggled by their mother, for the simple fact that her mother was always disquieted and weary. Poor Giuli sensed everything from her mother and in time, she herself could not relax.

As the weeks passed, Giuli grew and became very restless. She wanted to explore the world above. Each time she asked her mother to take her with her she would reply:

Not yet little one, when the time is right I'll get you out, don't you worry. Giuli never really understood, and began to think she was stuck in the den.

One day Giuli's mother woke her and said,

-Listen to me carefully my little one, what I have to say is very important. Giuli felt scared. The reason I've kept you inside since you were born is because this place is far too dangerous. Every night I have to scratch and scrounge to find some food and there are gangs, gangs in every angle.

-Let's go somewhere else, replied Giuli.

Giuli's mother looked down at her, eyes filled with tears and answered.

-I'm afraid, my precious little one, that it's not that simple but how I wish it were. You see, your mother can't run; she

can hardly walk my dearest. I love you little one, my Giuli, with all my heart and with all my life I vow to help you, to save you. Giuli started to panic. It is true she had never seen her mother walk because she had only ever seen her crawl, stomach to the floor, in and out of the den, but what was she saying? How could this be?

Her mother held her close to soothe her and continued.

-We don't have much time darling so you need to listen carefully. There is a place far from here, not too far don't worry, called Cat City and it's the most beautiful place in the world. You can live there in peace with many others and never fear. My dear, I'm too crippled to make it, it's going to be difficult to get you out, but I promise I will even if it takes my last breath.

-But mother, we can go slowly and we'll get there together, said Giuli.

-I'm afraid it's a little more complicated than that. There is someone, Giuli noticed her mother shudder when she said this

-He's mad and... she stopped.

-We don't have time for this, you don't need to know all this my little innocent one, and we have to go tonight. Giuli had wanted to leave the den for so long but now she was so scared and she certainly did not want to leave her mother and who was this *someone* she had referred to? She began to cry. Her mother continued to hold her tight and she sang till Giuli fell asleep.

When Giuli woke her mother was sitting at the entrance to the den, watching. She thought she had dreamt the whole thing and she began to lick her front paw.

Without warning her mother descended.

-Now my little one it's time to go, she whispered. Then Giuli realized that it was no dream.

-Follow me sweetheart and stay very close to me and what ever you see or hear, do exactly what I say. Remember, you are my heart and I'll always be with you.

Giuli was terrified but as her mother moved off she obeyed and followed closely. Then for the first time since she was born, almost three months before, Giuli stepped out into the world. Her mother was lying low.

-Now little one, be very quiet and take a moment to stretch and build your strength. Giuli did exactly as she was bid but

she also took time to look at her surroundings. It was a dark place full of great big boulders and columns. It smelt bad too. Giuli had always assumed that the bad smell in the air was because of the den but here she found it worse. She wanted to return to the calm of the den but her mother started to move. Then, for the first time, Giuli understood the severity of what her mother had said. She watched as her poor mother crawled along, her two back legs all twisted and barely able to function. As the tears filled her eyes she called out to her mother but her mother turned her head sharply and hushed her severely. Giuli continued to follow afraid, confused and full of love for her mother who must have surely suffered a great deal in this horrible place.

When they came to a small opening in the rocks, Giuli observed that they were quite high up and that the den must have been difficult to find, when she turned to see it she had discovered that she could not trace it.

Then her mother spoke in a very low whisper.

-Giuli, she said, as she indicated to a place quite some way off below them. That's where we must get to, it's the only safe way out but it's not easy so be alert!

Giuli's mother moved at a slow pace through the columns, she seemed to have a route planned, and Giuli got the impression that she was going slowly on purpose not because she had to. She stopped abruptly as did Giuli crouching as close to her mother as possible. She was scared and she sensed the fear in her mother too. Then she heard something, voices. She moved to see but her mother's head, yet again, turned with such a look of dread that she became paralyzed on the spot. Then she saw that the shadows beyond the ruins, they were of cats, so why were they afraid of other cats? Then, the last shadow Giuli saw was strange, cat-like but big, very big, and it moved in a strange way. Shifted. After they had gone her mother moved, more swiftly than before and she looked like she was in agony. Giuli wanted to say something but she remembered the last time she had tried and so she kept quiet. When they finally neared the place where Giuli's mother had indicated Giuli began to feel some relief. She started to forget about the fearful journey through the dreadful dilapidated place and she started to think about the wonderful place called Cat City. She looked at her mother and knew that she would be fine. She

was going to make it after all. Just as they approached the place Giuli could see that it was some kind of gate and it was open. In her sheer delight and relief she called out to her mother.

-Oh mother look, it's all okay! But she had no sooner spoken when she saw her mother spin round and the look on her face made Giuli's blood go cold. Such fright she had never experienced.

As her mother's glare turned from Giuli to something else, she screamed.

-Hurry Giuli, hurry. Run for the gate and don't stop. Don't turn, whatever happens go through the gate. Giuli started to run and as she ran she felt a huge presence, like a dark shadow fill the air. Then she saw her mother, using all the strength in her body, lunge forward.

All the time she was shouting.

-The gate Giuli, the gate.

Screams of desperation then turned to screams of agony and the sound of a horrible voice raging.

-Catch her, don't let her out.

Giuli reached the gate and ran through but just as soon as she was through she stopped, breathless and desperate she knew that she could not outrun whatever it was pursuing her. She wanted her mother. Then as she looked back she saw her, enfolded in some huge monster and some big cats running towards her. She did not care any more, her mother was gone and now they could have her. Giuli sat with her eyes closed soaked in tears and waited for the end but as the huge cats reached the gate they stopped as if they could not cross. She heard an enormous wail come from the monster inside.

The last thing she heard was the soothing voice of her mother,

-You're free my little one, free. Go to Cat City, I love you my little one. Remember, you are my heart.

She wandered for days and days trying to remember the way her mother had told her when she had been back in the den but she was exhausted. She collapsed.

When she woke up she heard a soothing voice,

-Welcome to Cat City little one.

The sun was high in the sky when Luke woke up. Giuli was still there doing her ritual ablutions, which distracted Luke for

the moment; he always found it amusing to watch.

-You feeling OK? she asked.

-I'm very worried Giuli. I saw something last night that I shouldn't have seen.

He continued to narrate all that he had seen the previous night and Giuli listened while she finished her grooming.

-Well, do you think I'm crazy? he asked.

-There are many mad cats in this great city little one, she replied, but you certainly are not one of them. Look, I know you're scared to talk to Bird, but you appear to have no other choice. You can't pretend that nothing has happened, she went on, he'll notice something. Besides you know how he feels about you, he treats you like a son. Come on!

-Will you come with me? he asked her.

-Yes, don't worry. She answered.

They both left the ledge and went in search of Bird. Luke's heart started to pound in anticipation.

Bird was busy lounging in the afternoon heat. He was high up in a tree at the back of the Grand Temple. Luke felt a little strange looking over at the tall column, where he had seen the exquisite cat the night before. The tree was much too difficult for either Giuli or Luke to scale so after he got the courage Luke called him.

When Bird looked down and saw that Giuli was there with Luke he came down immediately. It was unusual to see Giuli about at this time, she, like most, slept until evening and it certainly was not her habit to look for him.

-Well, well, there must be some grand occasion or something of real importance I've forgotten, started Bird. Let me see, a birthday? No. New kittens somewhere? Don't think so. What could it be?

Bird's joking manner only made Luke worse and when Bird looked at him he realised that something was wrong. He knew Luke too well and he had seen that, *I've done something wrong*, look a million times before.

-I saw something last night Bird, began Luke.

-Stop! exclaimed Bird. Follow me now!

With that he took off in the direction heading towards Public Square. They followed. At the back of the square Bird went into a small entrance, it was just one of the city's usual entrances into the underground level. Here too they followed

and when they got inside and followed the stairwell about halfway down they stopped. They were in a small area just off the stairway. Both Luke and Giuli were feeling on edge now. Bird waited, looking up and down the stairs. After a few moments, when he was absolutely sure that it was clear, he touched the wall with his paw and a door opened.

-Go in, quickly, Bird said

Luke and Giuli, too astonished to say anything, entered. They had both passed this way hundreds of times before but never would they have guessed there was a door in the wall. As soon as they had all entered, the door closed quickly and quietly. On the inside they found themselves standing in a small chamber with beautiful markings on the walls and the floor was so smooth. It was white and cool. There were no windows but it was light. The brightness seemed to emanate from the floor.

-Why did you bring us here Bird? asked Giuli, with all her senses on guard.

-Because, if Luke is going to talk about what I *think* he is, then nobody must hear, answered Bird, I hope I'm wrong and then the only damage done is that you've both seen this secret place, but now Luke, speak.

Luke could do nothing now but speak the truth so with a deep breath and a step closer to Giuli for support, he told his story again.

When he finished, he looked at Bird. He expected to see a very angry face but instead Bird was smiling at him with such love, for the first time since he had seen the vision he felt relaxed.

-I'm sorry Bird, offered Luke, I'm sorry for following you and for any harm I've caused.

-No Luke, It's I who am sorry. I am to blame here, it's my fault you saw one of our wise protectors. I should have guessed that it could happen.

-But what does it all mean? asked Giuli.

-Patience my good friend. We need time to decide what's best, answered Bird.

Giuli did not know exactly what he meant but she was very happy he had called her friend.

They sat in the secret place for a long time. Bird just sat with his eyes closed while the others waited for him to speak.

Eventually he opened his eyes and spoke.

-What you saw last night Luke was me at council with one of the great Spirit Guardians. There are six in total and they govern our great city and keep the peace. Apart from my good self and the other servers of the council, you are the only other cat who has ever seen one. Whenever there are one or more guardians at council the citizens of the city are put into a state of sleep, so nobody even knows about the mystery that keeps the city. That's all I will tell you. You must never ever talk about this, never even mention it again. Some things are just too great to understand. I warn you both, forget what you know and carry on as you would normally.

When Bird had finished he moved to where the entrance was, even though it was not clearly visible to Giuli and Luke.

-But how was I able to see Bird? started Luke, Why didn't I fall asleep like all the others? And will I see again?

At this Bird stopped suddenly.

-Luke, when the next big moon shines over the Grand Sacred Temple, there will be a full assembly. You, my over inquisitive one will be nowhere in the vicinity. Do I make myself clear? Bird snapped, in such voice that told Luke enough was enough.

Giuli bowed her head elegantly in acknowledgement. She knew when to keep her nose out. Bird understood and felt assured. If only he could have the same assurance from Luke. He sighed when he looked at his little troublemaker. They left the secret chamber.

When Bird and Luke came upon Giuli she was just finishing the tip of her tail. She felt a little embarrassed when she saw Bird because she knew that he knew what she was thinking about. She felt a little vulnerable and she did not like it.

-Good evening Giuli, said Bird.

She nodded a smile in return. Luke was about to say something when Bird intervened.

-Not one word from you young one. he said, Let's go.

Giuli and Luke both knew where they were going and they followed faithfully till they were all inside the secret chamber again.

Since the first visit, Luke had tried many times, when Bird was out of sight, to find the entrance but try as he may it was

impossible. Having just watched Bird open it again, he realised that Bird's paw print acted as some kind of key. Now, inside again he took more time to observe the chamber, since he was not as nervous as the last time. The markings on the walls looked like some kind of story. There was some kind of battle and a river. But just as he was about to ask Bird what they meant, Bird spoke.

-You know the reason I've brought you here is to talk about tonight. It's safe to talk here. Giuli, first I'd like to thank you for keeping quiet about what you've learned about the city, second... he paused, well, you need not concern yourself about tonight, you, like the rest of the residents, will sleep as long as the council is in session. It will be as it has always been for you. She understood and he was content. Then he turned and looked at Luke.

Luke knew exactly what he was thinking and he gave him a mischievous look. He did not want to press his luck so he tried an innocent face.

-What's it to be Luke? asked Bird.

-Can't I just..? started Luke.

-No, no, no, please Luke, don't even think about what you're thinking about. I beg you to listen.

-Tell me how it's possible for me to see the council all of a sudden, implored Luke. Tell me why I shouldn't go. Please tell me what's happening?

But Bird just looked at him solemnly.

-All I can say is that you can't be anywhere near the temple tonight and I'm asking you for your word that you'll stay away. I'll take you to a part of the city and you must promise to stay there till I return. Will you do this for me Luke? finished Bird. Luke felt the graveness in Bird's voice and he nodded yes in agreement.

But Bird knew Luke all too well.

-Don't underestimate the seriousness of tonight my little friend, he added. There is a force, far beyond your knowledge, at work here and you need not to know what's happening.

Bird had said all he could say and so they left the secret room yet again. Bird whispered to Giuli to go about her usual business and not to worry.

She held Luke for a moment.

-Do what's asked of you my little one, she whispered. Stay

away! Then she hurried away into the night.

Bird took Luke to the far north east corner of the city. The evening was still young and there were cats going about their everyday business. He took him down one of the city's passages and they crossed into the immense market area. The market area is where you came if you wanted food. The cats who brought it were big strong workers who served the city with pleasure. They brought the fish from the river or they collected spices for every one. Cats love scents and there were many delicious gourmet foods. Whatever the residents of the city needed, *they* supplied. Every cat got an equal share of whatever he or she needed. There was a huge maze of workers who ran the market and it was the backbone of the city. It was a place full of character and full of characters. There were old cats telling young cats stories of old and stories of the ancient city. The market area was always on the go and there was always something to see or do there. Everyone, at one time or another, passed through the market.

-You'll stay in the market till I return, said Bird. Promise me!

-I promise. said Luke.

-Do this for me Luke, this one thing I ask. Bird said. With one final grave look, he left.

As Bird walked away, Luke felt like his life was about to change. He had made a promise to Bird and he loved Bird but deep inside he felt disturbed. He looked around the market, a place he loved so much, but he felt like he was somewhere else, or at least he should be.

Chapter II

City of Light

Cat City is a beautiful place. It has different levels but the most important is the top outdoor space and the most prestigious place of all is the Grand Sacred Temple, which is sited right in the centre of the entire city. In the far northern part of the city you can find the great Public Square, which is another important place. The huge walls that surround the city are filled with wonderful caverns. The tall trees that grow along the east, north and west of the city cast much needed shade over the city's many passages and places of rest. The ancient stone, which makes up the city, hosts thousands of nooks and crannies, places where the residents rest or gather to socialise. In the south west corner you will find some very popular spots where the cats get together to spend long nights in celebration. There's always something to commemorate and the cats of Cat City really know how to have a good time. The south east corner is always busy with some sort of coming or going. The underground river that leads to Nowhere flows along this boundary and it is the source of much life for the city.

The social network functions perfectly in the city. Everyone seems to just fit in to his or her place remarkably well. The cats who work in the market area do so simply because they take to it. They seem to have been born to do it and they love it. Likewise, for the cats who bring fish from the river or those who carry food to the sick or old. Life in the city runs smoothly. No one really knows how, it just does. Everyone has somewhere to sleep, the city provides enough places and every cat or family of cats has a home.

The homes are situated all over the place, in the great walls, around Public Square or even at the back of the Grand Temple.

During the day the city is very hot and most cats like to find a shady spot to lounge around in. You can see mostly kittens playing together in the heat of the day. All in all, the entire city is pretty calm during the day. The evening and night-

times are a completely different story. At night the city comes alive and all the cats are out and about meeting each other. They love to have fun. They love games. If you go to the northwest corner of the city and take one of the tunnels going west, you will eventually come to the great games' arena. The theatre is a huge circular arena where, sometimes, the whole city gathers to watch the games.

The games include racing, jumping, and a special game called the High Drop where the contestants are held upside-down from certain heights and have to perform a perfect landing on all fours. (The current champion is a cat called Leon; he is renowned for his great mid-air spin. He holds a record of 4m 72cm). The most important game of all is a game called Pouncing.

There are many Pouncing teams in the city. Each team consists of five players and these are known as pouncers. The entire centre of the game's arena is the Pouncing pitch. It is a huge circle and so, when there is a Pouncing tournament, all other games come to a stop. The pitch is divided into four sections because in every game of Pouncing there are four teams. The markings on the pitch are as follows; white lines in the shape of a huge cross separate the four sections. At the tip of each line there is a large blue circle and at the centre of the cross there is a big black square. The four teams each take a section and the umpire stands on a raised column in the centre. The object of the game is that each pouncer has to, leave his zone, successfully pass through the other three zones, and return home safely.

If a pouncer is pounced upon, he or she is eliminated and they must go to the black square.

The game begins when the umpire gives the signal; a pouncer from each team then has to leave his home zone to make his way safely around the pitch. When a pouncer leaves his zone his team-mates must then concentrate on capturing the entering opponent. At this point, each square is filled with pandemonium and the spectators go wild. When a pouncer is out of his area he may use the blue circles as safety zones. If any pouncer should succeed to complete the course in one go without stopping in a blue zone or being pounced upon (the most difficult thing to do) then his team automatically wins. There are five rounds in each game, one for each player to

take his turn. The winning team is the one that has the most survivors at the end of five rounds. If two or more teams tie, then they play-off until the first pouncer is caught.

The Pouncing championships are a joy for all and the community spirit is always high when the games are on. The annual championships were to start very soon. No matter what team a cat supported, he or she always accepted the outcome with graciousness. There is great honour among the cats and the games are always given the respect they deserved. The citizens of Cat City are a peaceful race and they live in harmony. So, with the coming of the games, there was a great deal of excitement in the air.

The nightclub area, in the southwest, starts on the top level where the cats gather on walls and steps. They love singing and their choric renditions can be heard all round. From here, the tunnels bring you to the lower level where you can find the most amazing clubs, the most famous being Lilli's Pad. It is situated on the top of a huge cliff rock, which marks the city boundaries, overlooking the river that leads to Nowhere. The whole thing is illuminated by the light that bounces off the water; the effect is striking. The wondrous thing about the lower level of the city is the light; it seems to just radiate from the white rock in the walls or in the great columns that make up the city. Lilli's is always full, there is music, singing and dancing, three things cats are extremely fond of. The cats always come to the nightclub area late at night and there is always a magical feeling in the air.

Public Square is a raised plaza with steps on the east side leading up to it. The two sides are lined with great columns and at the other end is the civic building. This is where the public come together to hear the news of the city. There is a group of elder cats who sit in the building while the cats all assemble in the square.

They talk about new arrivals to the city, if there are any. They tell of new births and of any deceased. The economy in the market place is always on the agenda. How the river that leads to Nowhere yielded great catches. News of the forthcoming games is discussed with great enthusiasm.

The Elders would also listen to any queries put to them and answer with great diligence. They are respected by all. If a member of the elder group passes on then a new member is

selected, from the public, by the other members. This is the way it has always been since the beginning.

The Grand Sacred Temple is *the* most sacred place in Cat City. All the cats, at some stage during the day, pay a visit. Stories about the ancient wise spirits who kept the city are told by all the storytellers in the great market. Mothers tell their young these tales at an early age. So, every single citizen passes through to pray and give thanks for all they have. Situated at the heart of the city the temple is the most beautiful of all the structures in Cat City, a joy to all who lay eyes on it. The construction is a big circle with the back half dominated by six huge columns. The lower part of five columns is connected by a wall, diverse in height, and the sixth and tallest column stands alone. To the front there are stairs and at the bottom of these, there is an altar. The altar is where the prayers are offered to the wise ones. When the cats pass through the temple they always feel joy and a great sense of spirituality. It is revered and venerated by all. On one side there are the remains of three ancient columns. Nobody knows why or how they fell, it is a mystery. A lot of the city's history is shadowed in mystery; hence the great storytellers in the market place.

The entire city is a maze of intricate tunnels, each leading to one place or another. It usually takes the cats many years to find their way around and completely know where everything is. Problems are insignificant, if any, the cats live side by side in a peaceful manner. Arguments end peacefully. Disagreements are usually resolved in a friendly manner. Life in Cat City is a good one and all who reside there consider themselves to be lucky. The air smells good and the cats feel good and when they feel good they act accordingly. This is how it is in Cat City every day and night; this is how it has always been, as far as anyone can remember.

Luke wandered around the market with his head in the clouds, passing through the stalls and kiosks without paying any particular attention to them. The wonderful aromas coming from the various delicacies, made by the gourmets of the market, which normally drove him mad, went unnoticed. He stopped to listen to a storyteller. She was an old cat he knew called Granny who was just about to narrate something to a

group of young cats. He sat down beside a friend of his, a young fair cat named Jacqueline, to listen and try to keep his mind off the Grand Temple. Granny began her tale.

-The great river that leads to Nowhere is a great source of life and it brings forth many, many good things.

But in the ages of long ago it yielded a terrible force and so began the long battle for the salvation of Cat City.

Luke's ears pricked up at this, for he remembered the markings inside the secret room, and he listened more intently.

-It's a great mystery and no one really knows but something...something evil came down the river. They say that the city was nearly lost forever. A great darkness fell and the air was filled with a foul smell. The young and newborn disappeared and mothers wailed for their kittens. All who tried to resist were killed and the evil that befell the city grew stronger. In ancient times there were evil forces that we couldn't even conceive of today. The power that took control of the city is unimaginable.

-But what was it? interrupted Luke. What happened to it and why did it leave?

The others all laughed at Luke's sombre impromptu but he was not deterred and continued to press Granny.

-Go on, finish the story Granny.

-That's it, my young eager friend, she retorted. The light that shines today in our great city is an enigma. We all give thanks everyday for all that is. We are all blessed to be here and amongst such harmony. We live in safe times and the forgotten history of our city will always be just a story here or a tale there and that's the way it is.

Luke was starting to get fed up with the way it *is*. He got up to leave while Granny continued to tell of the old days and Jacqueline followed. She was a very shy cat and Luke was endeared to her very much.

-Are you goin' to Lilli's later? she asked.

-Maybe. Luke answered in a cold manner.

-OK, said Jacqueline, embarrassed and she turned to go.

-Wait! Sorry. added Luke angry at himself for hurting his friend. Of course I'll be there I've just got something on my mind at the moment. See you later then?

-Sure, she said in a happy mood, see you there, and she

skipped off back to hear more stories.

-Jacqueline, he called after her.

-Yeh?

-Thanks! he said with a big smile.

He had never paid much attention to the market stories before but somehow something made sense to him now. Everyone had always assumed the stories were the made up tales of the over eccentric old cats who like to talk to everyone. But Luke could not, hard as he tried, get the secret place and the markings on the walls out of his mind. He considered going there, to try to gain get in one more time but as he turned to go he remembered his promise to Bird. The questions turning around in his mind were driving him crazy. Then, a scary feeling came upon him. He remembered that the last time he saw Bird at the temple he had been alone in the place where he liked to sleep and he did not notice that the city was particularly quiet until later. Now he was in the middle of the market place, a place that hardly ever empties. (The only time that the market is really ever empty is when there is a big game of Pouncing on). What would happen? Would he see the cats fall asleep? Would he sleep this time? Maybe the last time had just been an accident. He became apprehensive and a bit excited. He determined to stay, so he went off to find another storyteller and listen to one more, so called, anecdote about the city. He settled beside a very old cat called Gibo. Gibo was one of the oldest cats Luke knew. He sat tall. His hair was dark and light at the same time but his most distinguishing feature was his eyes, they were both different in colour. They hypnotized as he spoke. He was just starting his tale.

-New kittens are a blessing, he began. When there is a happy event in the city all are filled with joy. Everyone comes to see and pay compliment to the wonderful bounty. Yes, the little ones bring good fortune and strength, above all strength, for they are the backbone of all we see around us. Without the young we could no longer continue, for who would help us as we turn old? Who would carry on in our footsteps? We carry the blood of our parents and we are all destined to play our role, whatever it may be. Therefore, we only endure because of the innocent. Through the grace of our parents, we follow their ordinance and take our place in life.

Luke felt a little disturbed and sad because he never knew his parents. Bird found him when he was a very young kitten and indeed it is to Bird that Luke had always turned to as a parental figure.

-At all costs we must protect our young. continued Gibo. Protect them from all the evil that is in the world around. When the innocence goes from the innocent, it is a great injustice and those who take it away must be themselves judged extremely harshly, for if we take the morals from our pure then all is lost. The future will have no hope, all light will be extinguished because if you destroy the beginning how then can there be any sort of coming. Even in times of quiet, like these, we must keep constant vigil, never let down our guard.

It was in days of old when evil first came about and our young suffered greatly and as they suffered so did we. The pain that our ancestors suffered was great. An evil came to them from outside and swept across our great city. Darkness almost took over and our great race nearly perished. The smallest drop of hope can give light to the darkest places and so it was that there was indeed some light and our kind endured.

Once again Luke jumped in with his questions about this evil of ancient times.

-But what happened? What was the darkness? Where did it come from and who banished it?

-'Tis a big mystery so it is, the past of our predecessors. said Gibo. The vague impressions left to us are themselves confused and marred with wishy-washy facts. The important thing is to protect our future, never to befall evil again. Vigilance...vigilance.

Here Gibo just stopped and closed his eyes and Luke knew that there was no point pursuing the matter. Everyone knew that when Gibo was finished his tale he simply closed his eyes. Some cats would leave some more would arrive and just sit and wait until he opened them again. That was his way.

Luke left in the direction of the far northeast tunnel, the very same one that Bird had brought him down earlier. He got some tasty titbits from a stall and sat on a small pillar, near the entrance to the tunnel, to eat them. He could smell the warm night air flowing through the space and more than ever the urge to go out overwhelmed him. It was still early, for Cat

City. Normally at this time of night Luke would have a little snooze before heading towards the nightclubs or the games if they were on. He wanted to settle to sleep but the thought that he might stay asleep while the sacred council were in session made him even more alert. He began to ponder Gibo's story.

He tried to think about his parents and what they must have been like. When he was very young he asked Bird about them. Bird told him that they had both died of a great illness that took hold of them and it was impossible to help them. He also told him that they had loved Luke very much and they were the best parents anyone could have had. As Luke grew he just naturally followed Bird around and that was that. He met Giuli and all his other friends as he was growing and he had always felt content. That was until now. As he sat there alone he had never felt so lonely in all his days. He felt misplaced.

Without any warning, he felt strange. What was different? It had gone quiet and when he turned to look into the market, he could not believe it. It was true! Every single cat was sleeping. He dashed around quickly looking at the sleepers. It amazed him. Even old Gibo was still sitting as before, eyes closed. Luke wondered whether he was asleep or just waiting as he usually did before his next story. He kept running around in a craze, just running and looking. Then in a flash he found himself running up the southeast passage. He stopped. He was standing at the mouth of the tunnel looking out into the dense darkness that hung over the city. The silence was nerve-racking. He took a step forward.

He went as quickly and quietly as he could. Before long he found himself in the same place he had been hiding the last time he saw Bird at council. What he saw was similar to the first time but instead of just Bird standing on the temple altar there were five others with him. It was dark but Luke recognised the other cats. They, like Bird, were well known about the city. Luke kept his head down low and his ears pinned back. He felt rigid with fear. He waited in the darkness.

The magic began. Luke was awestruck, the clouds, like before, started to unfold slowly to reveal the moon. Unlike the last time, when there was only one divine cat, this time there were six in total. As the clouds completely disappeared, Luke

could see six of the most exquisite divinities sitting each to a column. The light from the moon seemed to glow tenfold behind the imposing beings. It was the most perfect image Luke had ever seen and it made him feel immensely happy. The sacred ones themselves seemed to glow a brilliant white as if the light was coming through them or from them. They all seemed to have the same cat form but Luke could clearly see that each one was different. Each had its own character. Then to Luke's amazement, the one sitting on the tallest pillar spoke. The voice was whispered but dominant.

-Welcome my family. We all know why we have been summoned to council this night. An old and deadly nemesis has been discovered by us, an ancient devil that once nearly destroyed our great kingdom. He has not yet reached us and we do not know how he shall try to gain access. It was thought that this foe had been obliterated many, many moons ago. We are all aware of the enormous threat this enemy presents and he must be stopped from gaining any sort of entry. The foul beast has been sensed in the air coming up the river, but what power he has to navigate that impregnable path is not clear. The safety of our citizens is in danger; they know nothing of the enormous evil that once, almost took hold.

-Majesty, began the Spirit two columns away, we, the Spirit Guardians of Cat City remember *well* this demon and the long hard struggle to banish him from within our walls. There are questions we must ask ourselves. Where he has been all these ages? Why has he only now surfaced? What can his strength be and where he could have possibly obtained it?

-Our friend is right Majesty. continued another. The one we speak of was indeed a strong foe. We must discover his present state, it is imperative. We must answer these questions without delay!

-What is there to do but keep constant vigil and foil any attempt of entry? added yet another.

-More must be done, said the Spirit on the lowest column, the risk is too great. If Dhrug ever gets into the city, the outcome would be catastrophic.

-A more perilous action must be taken Majesty, said the last. Something that has never been attempted and may bring death to the ones who try.

A silence fell over the meeting and Luke stayed absolutely

still, he did not want to be discovered. He was spellbound by all that he was hearing and seeing. *Dhrug*.

-My friends. Body Guardians of Cat City, said the one they called Majesty, are there any changes about the city we need know of?

He was addressing Bird and the other cats.

- I'm afraid Majesty, started Bird after he had bowed nobly, that another change has taken place in our kingdom. Luke has seen the council.

At this, Luke almost gasped out loud. He did all he could to stop. He watched as the members of the council turned to look at each other, the silence was intense.

-Where is he now? asked Majesty.

-I left him in the market, replied Bird, and made him promise to stay there.

Luke felt guilty for breaking his promise and he considered returning to the market, but he wanted to see what would happen next.

-He told you of his discovery himself? added Majesty.

-Yes, with some reluctance. His friend Giuli also helped him come to me.

-So, we can understand by this that she also knows of us?

-I'm afraid so, said Bird, but she has shown the utmost discretion on the matter.

-What did you tell Luke? asked Majesty

-Only the bare facts. Bird replied.

-Good, said Majesty, he need not know all the facts just yet. He will learn the full truth of the past in good time. Keep a firm watch on him and do not answer too many questions for now.

-Great Spirit Guardians, began the cat on the altar beside Bird (Luke recognised him as Bird's friend, a cat called Bush) what are we to do about this *Dhrug*? There are too many uncertainties about his whereabouts or even if he poses any real threat, tell us what we are to plan. We the physical guards can but use our strength on any worldly bodies but we all know that only you can contend with a force like *Dhrug*. We were chosen to serve and protect the city and this we shall do till the end.

-Bush speaks well Majesty, added another cat Luke recognised as a cat called Amy (she was also Bird's friend).

Whatever earthly strength Dhrug may use, we will combat with all our might. We know that we have your full protection and the strength of the council is formidable, but you need to instruct us well on the matters that will be if there is to be a struggle.

-Serissa has mentioned a dangerous course of action, said Majesty. We must now listen carefully to what she has to say. The Spirit Guardians know of what she speaks now you the Body Guardians of the city must listen to what she has to say. And it is true that if indeed this evil Dhrug is trying to get hold then the fight will be most dangerous.

Luke observed that the one called Serissa was on the column furthest from the one called Majesty, all had directed their attention towards her.

-Our foe, Dhrug, came down the great river many moons ago. He entered our peaceful city without warning and he wreaked a terrible havoc on us. He became very powerful by his despicable abuse of our young. He took them from the safety of their mothers and killed those who opposed him. He drew from them their innocence and used it to become strong; he was the vilest creature imaginable. With him he brought a band of tyrants who obeyed his every command. These were the earthly creatures that your forefathers had to contend with. They had special strengths, as did your ancestors, and indeed you too possess these powers that you derive from us. The Body Guardians at that time had a hard struggle. They gathered as many citizens as they could and took them to the great games' arena. The few that remained were small in number and so it was vital that the tunnels leading to the arena were defended at all costs.

The city had been turned to complete darkness and the air became foul and rancid. The unfortunate remaining citizens were gripped with fear and great hunger, for no food could be obtained. The constant wails of the endless battles caused sheer panic and our kind were slowly fading. The brave Body Guardians fought well while we the Spirit Guardians had to contend with the might of Dhrug.

Dhrug had totally conquered the south east part of the city. He controlled the river and all its life. He took our citizens there and those he did not kill he imprisoned in the huge dark caverns. All the mothers were separated from their young and

then forced to produce more. There, in the deepest dark, more young were produced and immediately taken by Dhrug and he did indeed grow stronger. The cries and screams from that corner of our city were unbearable.

We, the six remaining members, fought constantly to combat the power of Dhrug but we were not of full strength. We were originally nine in total but Dhrug had managed to entrap three of us. Our three brave lost members were magically captured on top of their sacred columns by some evil force. Without them we were weakened and Dhrug was starting to win power over us. Try as we did, we could not release our beloved ones, the magic was too strong. The force surrounding them bound them and we could not even communicate with them.

All was almost lost, but although we could do nothing to save our beautiful friends we did not realise that they were still at council with each other. So it was that they sacrificed themselves to save our kind from Dhrug. From within their prison they used their mind power to collapse their mighty sacred columns, breaking the force field. In doing so, two things happened. First, they gave themselves to all eternity, and went to the skies forever, and second, they passed their strength to us. The unity of this sacred council has strength beyond imagining and the force we yielded upon Dhrug was unstoppable. With all our power, and love for our lost ones, we drove Dhrug and his ring of corruption into the river and the strong current took them by force. We took all his strength away, the power he derived from our lost young, and poured it into the great river so that it would protect us for all time. We reduced Dhrug to nothing and when he washed down the river the foul air went with him.

Thanks to our most blessed lost members the light had been restored to our wonderful kingdom. The part of the river where Dhrug came from has been guarded ever since. It took a long time to restore our kind and after a long council meeting it was decided that all the hurtful bad memories were to be erased so that the innocence could be restored to us. That is what we did. One night, long after the battles, when the city was once again filled with the blessing of young, we lay everyone to sleep and cleared their minds of bad thoughts. Some of the old who had survived had stubborn minds hence the odd tale of mystery crept through and today these stories

survive. But the city turned back to normal and has been so ever since, that is until now.

Luke sat still with tears in his eyes; the history had moved him so. He continued to watch the sacred council who seemed to be having a moment of silence. Maybe they were remembering their lost heroes.

-Thank you Serissa for telling of our trouble, said Majesty. We must now decide the type of action to take. Ulmus, he continued addressing the one next to him, will you explain some more for our loyal Body Guardians.

-With pleasure Majesty, replied the one named Ulmus. If we are to face this most wicked of enemies again then we must prevent, at all costs, his entry as we have already said. The problem is that we cannot be sure of his whereabouts and herein lies our weakness. The only thing we are sure of is that he was banished down the river and that the foul air points to that direction. That is where we must start.

-My lord, said a cat on the altar, a cat Luke knew as Smit, are you suggesting that we double guard the mouth of the river and keep vigil?

-Smit, responded Ulmus, that will not be enough, more must be done. This time we must not fail to stop Dhrug.

-What must be done? asked another Luke recognised as a cat called Miriam.

-We will do whatever is bid, added the last, a cat called May.

Ulmus looked to the one on his right and spoke.

-Nandina, will you continue for our good friends, please?

-With pleasure, said the one called Nandina. We, the Spirit Guardians of the city are, as we have already said, a strong body but this applies only within our walls. We could not even leave the confines of the city if we wanted to. Here we have all the power to protect and here we must stay. So, it is to you our faithful Body Guardians that we must turn. We need to send someone out of the city to investigate the situation. It will be the most perilous journey imaginable and those who undertake this mission may meet with a dreadful end. We need to determine Dhrug's whereabouts. In order to eliminate the problem, we need to discover its source.

-Bird, began the one next to Nandina, the one you referred to before, the one called Giuli you must talk to her.

Luke was amazed. What could they possibly want with Giuli?

-What must I do Ilex? questioned Bird.

-There are things we need to know, things about where she came from, said Ilex. Everything she can remember about the place whence she came must be discovered.

-It will be difficult my lord, said Bird, she is shy to talk about her past.

It was true thought Luke. Anytime he had ever mentioned her past she immediately took offence and left him so he just stopped asking.

-Why must Bird obtain this information, sacred ones? asked Amy.

-Because the place she came from may be something to do with the whereabouts of Dhrug, said the one next to Ilex. If she did come from such a place then we need to know what it's like. She may be the only link we have at this time.

-Thank you Malus, said Majesty.

-What's to be done if the information is useful? asked May. The sacred ones looked at each other in silence then Majesty spoke.

-If Giuli's knowledge is indeed of the place where Dhrug dwells then we need to send two volunteers to that place to find out as much as they can about Dhrug and how he plans to attack our peaceful city. We cannot plan this now, as the information we receive will be our guide to that. Now we need to ask for our two volunteers.

The Body Guardians bowed their heads in acknowledgment.

-Sacred Spirit Guardians of our great city, began Miriam, there is not a member here who would not give his or her life to protect our kingdom. It is with you that the decision must lie. You with all your power and knowing must choose who is right for this mission and we will accept graciously.

The sacred ones were silent for a minute then Nandina spoke.

-So, it will be to Amy and Smit that this task will go. We will send you out with all our protection and love.

Amy and Smit gave a bow of acceptance.

-Bird will talk to Giuli, started Ulmus, and tomorrow you will be given instructions, till then, think not of this task.

-Bird, Bush, Amy, Smit, Miriam and May, said Majesty, by all that is good, I, Majesty and the other members of the sacred council, will do all to protect you, and our kind. We

promise to do all within our power to uphold the light that keeps us. Now there is much to be done. Till the next moon.

Suddenly Luke saw that the clouds started to fall and the great council members began to fade. Then he realised that he did not have much time. He turned quickly to go back to the market. He ran as swiftly as he could.

Just as Luke was entering the market he saw that the cats were already starting to move about. Within seconds it was as if nothing had happened and the hustle and bustle continued as usual. He began to get anxious thinking about how he would be when Bird returned. He waited, expecting Bird to arrive at any second, but he was kept waiting and this made him worse. He knew that Bird would have no problem finding him; he never did, so why was he taking so long? It was a very long time indeed before Bird came upon him and the look of worry on his face told Bird a lot.

-Where have you been all this time? asked Luke.

-You know where, replied Bird.

-But it finished a long... Luke stopped and realised what he had just said.

-O, Luke, said Bird, why did you disobey me on this, why? Luke just hung his head in shame. He truly did feel terrible for offending his friend. When he looked up Bird had vanished. He walked away, head low, and heart even lower. As he left the market, he decided to find Giuli, she would be his only comfort now and so he headed towards the nightclub area.

He searched and searched, but he just could not find Giuli, which was very odd because he always came upon her at some time when he was looking for her. He bumped into Jacqueline who was thrilled to see him.

-Luke, you're here, how are things?

-Jacqueline, he replied, I'm looking for Giuli, have you seen her?

-Why yes, she answered a little worried, she was here earlier and then she went out with Bird, and I haven't seen her since, is everything okay?

That is why Bird had been so long coming back to see him at the market. He had gone immediately to see Giuli!

-Yes, yes, everything is fine, but I need to go now, I'll see you later and thanks again.

He ran off leaving Jacqueline with a bewildered look on her

face. He ran as fast as he could to the niche at the back of the Grand Temple where Giuli liked to be. When he got there he stopped outside. He listened, then he heard Giuli, she was inside *crying*.

Chapter III

City of Spirits

-I'm sorry my lord Majesty, said Bird, but I can't be sure that Luke isn't lurking somewhere again.

-Do not worry, replied Majesty. His presence is not to be detected tonight. Trust me.

Bird did and he realised that the sacred council must have known all the time about Luke watching them.

-He is a good friend, continued Majesty. He is where he is needed. Tell us of your discoveries.

-It took me a long time to get Giuli to talk, said Bird, and when she did finally break down I understood why.

My great Spirit Guardians, he continued, it is as you have suspected.

Bird continued to relate Giuli's story while the council listened quietly. The sad events of Giuli's life brought a silent gloom to the council.

-We do not know in which direction the river flows after it leaves our land, said Ilex to Smit and Amy. So you must start your journey from the southeast side and use all your instincts to follow it to this horrible place. You must trust in each other and in yourselves.

-Amy and Smit, please step into the temple, said Malus. They both stepped into the centre of the temple and the light from the moon shone through the Spirit Guardians. They were engulfed in a brilliant light and the most wonderful sound poured from the Spirit Guardians.

-You have been given our most special blessing, said Ulmus, with this we hope you will be able to complete your mission successfully and more importantly, safely.

Smit and Amy bowed graciously and returned to the altar to join their friends.

-If you find this place, said Serissa, you must try to observe without being detected. Understanding Giuli's story, there seems to be some magic at work. We must understand the nature of it.

-Our people are getting ready for the games, said Majesty.

This should be a time of joy for all. We shall let them proceed for now; it is the only thing to do. The air is turning but so far it has had no affect on them. When we protect the city we cover it like a great impenetrable sheet. If a new cat arrives at the city we know whether or not to permit entry. The only unwelcome visitor in our history has been Dhrug. He has been sensed, as we have said, but not close to us. This is the only thing we have been sure of.

-The huge shape Giuli described to Bird fills us with concern, continued Ilex. It does seem that our enemy is somewhere out there, waiting.

-Bird, said Nandina. It is time to tell Luke of his history. The change is coming we can feel it closing in. You need to take him and tell him the truth about his parents; he needs to understand who he is. We have always known that someone in his family would be of strong heart and when his parents died, all eyes were on him.

-Is there something more I should know about him? asked Bird.

-His place among us will reveal itself when and if it is time, Nandina replied.

-One more thing, said Serissa, we would like you to keep an eye on Giuli. She is upset about her mother and we do not want her doing anything silly.

-As you wish, said Bird.

-Leave us now, said Majesty, we shall stay at council a while longer.

Bird, Bush, Amy, Smit, Miriam and May gave a sign of respect and left the Grand Sacred Temple.

The members of the Grand Sacred Council are ancient Spirits that have been there since the beginning. They are the light and energy that gives life to the city. Apart from the city's Body Guardians nobody has ever seen them throughout history. But the cats in the city have always believed in them. With this faith the citizens live in total harmony. The Spirit Guardians are omnipotent within the city and this includes the section of the river which flows through it. There are many dark forces outside the city confines, many of which have tried to gain access. There has never been a foe strong enough or clever enough to succeed. That is until Dhrug came along. From some unknown place upriver Dhrug plunged his army

into the water, his destination Cat City. The river flows fast and strong and no ordinary cat could survive its currents. Dhrug had within him a black magic that gave him the advantage of a surprise entry. He entered the city with bullet speed one night while the sacred council were meeting. For a split second they were caught off guard and it was within that time Dhrug found time to debilitate the council. So, three members were forced to remain in meeting. While Dhrug did battle with the others he forgot about them, his fatal mistake.

-We shall risk one more meeting with the Body Guardians, said Majesty, then we will disperse and shield our people. If my judgement is correct, we will be able to converse with the little one who is changing. We all know what to expect from him. We pray to our lost souls that it will be so.

-Our rival has been away a long time, said Ulmus, what strength he has we can only assume is forceful. Maybe more so than before.

-If so, offered Ilex, we will need the young one.

-We cannot risk him being taken, said Serissa, at the first sign we must bring him to the centre. We need to be completely prepared, for we cannot be sure Smit and Amy will be successful. They are strong, smart guardians but if they come across Dhrug they will not stand a chance.

-I will stay by him, said Nandina, and whisper to him.

-Let us chant, said Malus.

The Spirit Guardians sat upon their great thrones and made the most beautiful music. It filled every dreaming cat with ecstasy. But there was one cat not having pleasant dreams. *She* was writhing with the agony of her constant nightmare. Her mother was in pain, so much pain. The Spirits could feel her pain and tried to soothe her but the agony was too strong. They sent blessings of strength and courage to help her on her way. They saw terrible pain inside her and even more to come which disturbed them greatly. They tried to see what it was but it was shadowed and this caused them even more anguish. They stopped the song and left the sacred council.

Chapter IV

City of Change

The screams and roars that surrounded the great games' arena were tremendous at last the big day had arrived. The opening ceremony for the games was indeed a grand affair and it seemed that every citizen had turned out for the occasion. All the participants paraded into the arena, full of enthusiasm and when the Pouncing teams entered the public went completely wild with delight. The arena itself was filled with flags and banners, and all the colours of all the teams were represented. This was the day that everyone had been waiting for. The games brought joy and happiness to all and every single citizen loved the excitement and thrill. Apart from the fun, the games also brought unity and a great sense of community spirit. The arena brought together the citizens and they met each other with respect and admiration and above all they met in peace. The opening ceremony was to be followed by the first racing games, then jumping and then the grand finale of the first day was to be the first Pouncing game of the season.

It had been two days and Luke still had not seen Bird. When the sacred council met again, he did not dare attend. Instead he stayed with Giuli. He knew that the council was in session when Giuli fell asleep in front of him, but he was too scared to go and he did not want to leave her alone. She slept, but she turned and cried while doing so. He was beginning to get very worried and was concerned about Giuli. Since he found her crying the other night, she had been very quiet and she was even more withdrawn than usual. She had refused to talk about her conversation with Bird and told Luke to forget it. So now he was happy the games were starting. He thought they might cheer her up a bit. But as they sat there at the first day ceremony, she just stared blankly at the events. Luke felt like everything was his fault and he tried his best to look like he was having a great time, but every time he looked at Giuli his heart sank.

He was beginning to regret not having gone to the second council meeting. Not knowing what was happening was the

worst part. He had so many questions in his head that they were making him dizzy. What had happened at the second meeting? What did Giuli and Bird talk about? He certainly could not ask Giuli any more questions and he was sure that Bird would tell him nothing. The fact that he appeared to be the only cat in the city, apart from the Body Guardians, who could see the council, was also eating away at him. At first it made him feel special, but now he just felt strange. And so, he just sat there feeling terrible and trying to put on a smile for Giuli's sake.

What a pity, on *this* day which should have been one of the most special days. The games had already started and the crowd was truly enjoying the fun. As the day moved on, Luke and Giuli sat there watching, going through the motions. Finally the moment had arrived, the first Pouncing game of the season and the atmosphere in the arena was fantastic.

-Isn't it exciting? said Luke trying to rouse Giuli.

-Luke, she said. I have to go.

-Go? Where? he enquired.

-I need to do something, she replied, something that I should have done long ago. You have to trust me, you know that I love you and I would do anything for you, so don't ask me questions.

-You're worrying me, he said in an anxious voice, will I come with you?

-No, my little one, she answered in her soothing voice that Luke liked, do me this favour, stay here and watch the game. Besides, your favourite team is playing.

He always trusted Giuli and he never questioned her when she asked him not to, so he just nodded and smiled at her. She embraced him and spoke softly.

-Take care, my brave little friend.

She turned and left the arena, leaving Luke amid the masses but feeling alone with tears in his eyes.

He sat there and contemplated leaving, but Giuli wanted to be alone. Bird did not want to see him and all his other friends were here. The city would be too quiet and lonely for him, so he decided to stay put. He did not like feeling this sad, so he made up his mind to go to his friends, forget all about council meetings and any other strange events and enjoy the game. He joined Jacqueline and another friend called William.

-Hi all, said Luke.

-Hey, great to see you, said William. It's so exciting, isn't it?

-Our team is in the first game of the season, added Jacqueline. It's brilliant.

Luke was happy to be in good company and he started to feel better. He did love the games, especially when his team were playing.

The four Pouncing teams had entered the arena and the tension was building. Each team took its place on the playing field and waited for the umpire to give the signal. There was a silence.

All eyes were on the umpire. The four pouncers that were to start were ready to leave their zones, and their team-mates stood ready to defend against the entering opponent. The signal was given and the crowd went wild. The four pouncers left their home zone and the pitch was filled with action. Watching a game of Pouncing is very exciting because you have to concentrate on two things. First you need to keep an eye on the player from your team, who has left his home ground to get around the pitch. The supporters cheer him all the time hoping he gets through each zone safely, and give a huge roar if he lands on a blue safe zone. Then, you need to keep a constant check on your team's part of the pitch to see if they capture any of the opposition. If your team pounces on an opponent the crowd go crazy cheering while the captive makes his way to the black square in the centre. If a pouncer from another team successfully makes it through your team's zone, the air is filled with booing. Luke's team were doing great, their first pouncer; who is usually referred to as a Runner when he is out of his zone, had already gone through the first quarter of the pitch. He looked like he was making his way to the blue circle at the halfway mark. On their home ground they had pounced on the first and second entering Runner. When a Runner lands on a blue safe zone, the pouncers in the next quarter must stand well clear. There is a mark in each section to indicate the distance and a player may be disqualified if he gets too close when there is a Runner in the blue circle. By the end of round one Luke and his friends were thrilled. Their team had captured three Runners and their Runner had completed the circle successfully.

The second round started at the signal, the atmosphere was fantastic. Then, just as the second Runner from Luke's team was about to enter the first blue circle, he was pounced upon. Luke, Jacqueline and William gave a huge boo. Instead of getting up and going to the black centre, the Runner violently pushed his captor to the ground and ran to the blue circle. The injured party's team-mates all ran instantly to the blue zone and started beating up the Runner. Luke could not believe his eyes; in all his years coming to the games he had never seen a violent incident. The umpire was screaming for a halt, but no one was paying any attention! The supporters down below Luke started to push each other, and within a few seconds they were at loggerheads. The other two teams had also come to blows, and the entire games' arena exploded into a huge fighting ring.

-Let's get out of here, said Luke to Jacqueline and William, pulling Jacqueline away.

-When I'm ready to leave, reacted Jacqueline, I'll leave. She pushed Luke back and he just looked at her in amazement.

-He's always trying to boss us, started William. He thinks he's better than everyone.

-William, said Luke. What are you saying?

-I know, said Jacqueline in an angry voice. He wants to rule the gang, but he'll never be the boss of me. Why don't you go find your weird friend Giuli and leave us in peace? Luke could hardly see for the tears in his eyes, he could not understand why his friends were being so cruel.

-I thought you liked Giuli. Why are you talking about her like this? And why are you talking to me in this manner, we're friends?

-Friends? said Jacqueline in a vile voice. You suit yourself and you want everything to suit you. Get lost!

-Yeah! said William. Lose yourself.

Luke ran blinded by tears. He crashed into other cats who, in turn, violently pushed him aside. His mind was going crazy, only a short while ago he had been left alone by Giuli, and all had seemed lost. The games had made him feel better, and now this. What was happening? Everywhere he looked he could see violence, the city was breaking down and he felt really scared. He was running from the arena and he found

himself pleading with the Spirits. He ran and ran so fast that he could see nothing and then he slammed into a cat. He screamed with fright and almost passed out.

-Luke, Luke slow down it's all right, came a voice that sounded heaven sent to Luke. You are safe! Relax and don't worry.

Luke looked up.

-Bird?

-Yes, it's me.

-Please help me, I don't know what's happening.

-Let's go, replied Bird.

A while later Luke found himself in the secret room. He felt safe and weary at the same time.

-It's time to talk, said Bird, time to talk about everything. If you feel up to it Luke, we need to do it now, do you?

Luke just looked at Bird with no expression. He wondered whether he was angry with him. Bird knew what was on his mind.

-It's all okay, don't feel worried, he said. I wasn't angry with you for going to the council meetings. I knew in my heart that you wouldn't be able to resist. I just felt a little let down, that's all. But now there's no more time to waste, we need to hurry.

-Why? protested Luke. Why do we need to hurry? What's going on?

-Listen to me, said Bird, and he began. You've already heard how Dhrug came and almost destroyed our land. The story of the mothers he enslaved is particularly upsetting. The pain he inflicted, as we've already said, was unimaginable. The loss of a newborn causes a kind of agony only felt by a mother. Even the great power of the council cannot erase the feeling in a mother's heart. When Dhrug was finally defeated by our good protectors, the surviving mothers were but three of many. Their pain was too great for the Spirit Guardians to ignore. So the three Spirit Guardians, who gave themselves to save us, left to each a gift, the promise of a newborn and with the arrival of these tiny blessings would come peace of mind to the mothers. A terrible thing happened to one of these poor mothers at a final moment of battle. She was snatched by Dhrug's evil band and carried into the great river. It was too late to save her. The only thing the Spirits could do was send

a spell after her. A spell to hide and protect her until she gave birth to her new kitten. It was never really known for certain whether the spell reached her in time, for as you've heard, outside our city walls the Spirits have no strength.

You, my fine young friend, are a direct descendent of one of those mothers, and although that was a very long time ago, in your heart you can still feel the pain. Your family has carried the burden of our war all these moons. You are the first of a long line to carry a jolly heart. I was entrusted to watch over you ever since your birth. I have told you that your parents passed away because of a great illness. Well, in a sense, it's true. Your mother's heart couldn't carry the burden and when she left us your father couldn't take the pain. When you were born you were a great joy to them, they adored you, but the memories of the heart were just too strong. I have watched you with a very close eye since your first day and it is indeed a happy heart you hold. Till now, you have known no pain. But another gift you do hold. Your power to see the sacred council is an extraordinary talent. Not one of your ancestors had this ability. It is not clear to me how or why now, but I feel there is a connection. You are the last of your line, but something is happening to you and it's all connected, somehow. Inside you there is a happy heart and this happiness yields strength, your strength. You can feel the pain, as I've said, but it doesn't control you as it did your relations.

Luke looked at him and was about to say something but Bird continued as if he knew what it was.

-Now you'll want to know about Giuli, what we spoke about, what's her connection? As you know, Giuli came to us from a place outside the city. She was made welcome, as is our tradition, and she has led a quiet existence here. She has never spoken to you about the place she came from, and you have been good enough not to pursue the matter with her. The Spirit Guardians sensed there may have been some connection between Dhrug and the place Giuli came from. So, as you heard at the council meeting, the task was given to me to talk to her. I brought her here to this chamber and the discoveries made were, to say the least, shocking for both she and the council. Giuli related the facts about the place from whence she came, which are quite disturbing in themselves. But the whole thing is shrouded in mystery. The details about her

mother are incredible. We have no doubt that Giuli is a direct descendent of the mother taken down the river that awful day; but from a description of the conditions of the place it's impossible. From what she has told us, it would be impossible for any good life to sustain itself there; never mind generation to generation. Also, the way she describes her mother, it's as if she were describing the exact same mother taken all those moons ago. There is such a cloud hanging over her tale that we are extremely preoccupied about the whole thing. As you know, it has been decided that Amy and Smit, two of our great Body Guardians, are to journey to this strange place... Here, Bird stopped and gave Luke a grave look. Luke shuddered.

-Now, he continued, I must tell you something that you will not want to hear, but tell you I must. When Giuli heard about our ancient plight and the possible connections it may have with her, she stood before the great columns of the temple. She could not see, as you, but she implored the wise ones to send her on this mission. Both Amy and Smit were there and refused her any part, and told her of the dangers, that even their extra strength was no guarantee of survival. She insisted and told them that she could be of some value; that although it had been a long time, she would never forget the imprint she had of that place. But Amy and Smit, out of sheer love for our kind and a duty they are faithful to, said no.

-I must find her, started Luke. She can't be alone at a time like this...

-It's too late, interrupted Bird, she's gone. When Amy and Smit left the city, I was on my way to find Giuli because we knew she would try to follow. Instead I bumped into you my friend and you were in need. For certain she has left to discover her destiny. She has a brave heart like you. We can only hope that Amy and Smit find her first.

Luke felt numb, stupid, blind and weak. How could he have been so stupid? He felt ashamed for his crying and his fear. Giuli had so much on her mind, so much to deal with and all he wanted was everything to be perfect so that he could enjoy the games. All his life, she had been there whenever he needed her and he couldn't even open his eyes to her needs just once.

-I've been a fool, he said to Bird, walking around with my

tail in the clouds. Not recognising that something was wrong, something strange was happening, ignoring the foul stench in the air.

-What did you say? asked bird.

-The air, said Luke. It's changed, walking around too polite to mention it, that's me.

-Luke, said Bird with an anxious voice, can you really smell bad air or are you just being metaphorical?

-Can't *you*? he answered.

-Not as such, he replied, but the Spirit Guardians can!

They both looked up with a surprised look on their face. Luke had been noticing the bad air lately, but he did not want to mention it because he did not think it fit. Many faults he had, but rudeness was not one of them.

-What does it mean? he asked Bird.

-I don't know, he replied.

Chapter V

City of Evil

When Giuli left the games' arena the city was dead quiet. She was crying because she had left Luke in such a state. She felt guilty. She hated to see her little one upset. But since she had spoken to Bird, she couldn't get her mother out of her mind. She wasn't worried about Luke though; she knew Bird was there, he was always there. Amy and Smit had told her she couldn't go with them, but she knew she had to go, one way or another. The past that she had tried so hard to erase had finally faced her, and she did not care what the outcome was, she had to go. She made her way quickly and quietly to the southeast part of the city. First, she went to the river that goes to Nowhere. She looked down river; she knew well that it led *somewhere*. Then she ran to the city walls, she looked at the great caverns. She felt something, it disturbed her; she felt a pain. She ran quickly and scaled the wall, within moments she found herself in a place she had never been before. She sat on the top of the city wall looking out into the unknown, her heart raced. Everything she knew and loved was at her back; she did not want to leave it. Then, for the first time since she had arrived in Cat City, she stepped out into the unknown. She was more worried than scared. She had made the trip to Cat City a long time ago, and even then she was not quite sure how she had managed it. Most of the journey was blank in her mind. The pain of having just lost her mother was all she remembered. Her mother had spent weeks drilling the route into her, and somehow she had just found it. She whispered to the Spirits for guidance, she called to her mother. It was late and the moon was shining bright. She thought about Luke's story and wondered if the council was in session at this moment. She hoped Luke was having the time of his life at the games.

She did not feel very safe along the route she had chosen. It was full of high smooth walls, and should any kind of trouble present itself, she had nowhere to retreat to. The surroundings felt odd, not like the safety of the city. She moved as fast as

she could in order to find some safe place. It was very quiet, which made her even more alert. Eventually she came upon an opening. It was a small place, very small, somewhat like the city with columns. When she looked down into the space it was extremely dark, in fact, all she could really see was the tops of the pillars, as they stood high. She waited and listened for a while. She wanted so much to get out of the open, but her senses were telling her not to go down into the space. Then she heard a movement down below.

-Come down, a voice said, don't be afraid.

-I'm not afraid, replied Giuli. Who are you?

-Who are you? answered the voice.

-You answer my question with another question, said Giuli, but you give no answer at all.

-You are clever, said the voice, and strong in the mind. Come down and talk with us for a time and break your journey.

-Us? said Giuli in a cautious manner. How many of you are there? And don't assume to presume I'm on any sort of journey.

-Away from your city, looking for a place, came the voice. It appears to be a trip indeed!

Giuli did not like the way the conversation was going. Not one answer had she received so far from this voice.

-I come from nowhere, nor am I going anywhere, said Giuli.

-Come sit with us, we can tell you of your pain, insisted the voice. Of past pain and of the hardship to come, it's your mother you seek, is it not?

Giuli's head spun and she almost fell over the side into the space.

-What do you know of my mother? she demanded.

-Be calm my friend, said the voice. Come to us and we'll help you.

The voice was quite soothing and Giuli's attention was truly aroused. The thought of finding out something about her mother was driving her crazy.

-Why don't you come sit with me on the wall? suggested Giuli. It's a warm night and we can see each other clearly.

-Your eyes will soon adjust to the darkness, said the voice. And it's safe here. Come, we can eat.

Giuli had not given food much thought, but she was hungry.

-I would not like to intrude on your meal, said Giuli.

-Our pleasure, came the voice.

Giuli was deciding the best route to take to descend, when the voice said,

-Just jump from the wall, it's not far down and the grass is tall.

She decided not to risk the jump and scale down slowly till her eyes got used to the dark. The wall seemed to have enough ledges to go down at this rate.

-That's it, said the voice, hurry!

The voice seemed to have changed somewhat and Giuli became alert. Then she heard a scuffle below as if there were many pushing each other.

-Wait, wait, whispered the voice. Not yet you fools, wait.

Giuli heard the gnashing of teeth and growling. She pulled back suddenly and just at that moment a large snout bearing very sharp fangs came rearing up and snapped shut just before her face. She pulled herself back up out of the space and ran. As she was running away she heard the voice screaming,

-You fool Lupo, you idiot. We almost had her. Now you will starve because of your foolishness! Giuli looked back and she saw that they were not following her. She ran as fast as she could.

She was out of breath when she came upon a very large open space, a square. She stopped and looked around, she was in a panic. She desperately wanted to find somewhere safe she could rest for a while so she scanned the area. There were no apparent places to hide, so she decided to cross the square. She tried her best to stay as close to the walls as possible. She came upon a big round fountain, which was a great welcome, she was very thirsty after her run and the night was indeed very hot. The edge of the fountain was a little too high for her to climb, but at one point the water cascaded over the side. She lapped up the cool water with vigour. It made her feel better and ready to venture on. After the fountain she had to step out into the open, if she was to reach her next point of destination. It had just occurred to her that she seemed to have some idea of where she was going. She was not deliberately planning this route it just seemed to be the way to go. Stepping out into the open, where there was no shadow to

cover her did not seem very wise, but it was the way she felt she must go.

Fully alert and heart thumping in her body, she made a dash for the other side. Midway there were a couple of trees and she stopped briefly at the base of one. She hurried on after a moment, keeping the final place she had chosen to stop, in constant view. When she got to the other side, frightened but safe, she found herself at the base of a huge flight of steps. They made her feel uneasy. Belly to the ground and ears pinned tightly back, she scurried across the base of the steps. On the far side she found herself in a space filled with grass, on the wall there was a big bath shaped fountain. She crawled under the fountain and sat in the shadow. She was weary, but she decided to go on. She went along the wall of the fountain and came to a corner; she went round the corner and shuddered. Something in the air frightened her, she felt close to her old home. She waited in the dark and listened to the night. At the end of the wall was yet another turn, she went towards it. When she reached the turn she felt petrified, she could not reason why.

She waited a few moments trying to calm herself. It was almost impossible to breathe normally. She plucked up the courage and put her head round the corner. Her hair stood on end with shock; she froze on the spot the most terrifying sight lay before her. The Gate! She wanted to flee, to run all the way back to the city, but she was too scared to do anything. Finally, she managed to pull her head back around the corner. She sat there panting with fear. Her whole past was flashing through her mind, her mother, the darkness, the monster and the foul air. Suddenly, her eyes diverted to something that almost made her pass out. Two figures, moving in the shadow, coming around the corner she had just taken. She pulled back as far as she could into the shadow. She was panting heavily with fear and she was aware that she was making too much noise, but it was hard to stop. The two creatures moved, almost together, in her direction. She thought of the strange creatures she had encountered earlier. Had they been following her? They came too close and she screamed with fear and started to run. The two creatures were upon her in a flash, and with a final scream they pulled her into the shadow.

-Giuli, stop, Giuli, Giuli, came a voice.
It was a nice voice and she stopped struggling.

-Giuli, said the other voice, it's Amy and Smit. Remember us? Why are you here? You were told not to come here. You need to leave now. Go back!

-No! said Giuli in a firm manner. I can help you and you can help me, I know this place. I'm staying whether you help me or not.

-We know that Luke has told you of our strength, said Smit. A force we receive from our Spirit Guardians, even so, we are out of our depth. This place may have a power we don't know, a power that once nearly finished our kind.

-Look, started Giuli, I know all that stuff, but I'm going to find out why my mother had to endure the life she had. I want to know who's responsible for that misery, and yes, I'm terrified, but that's the way it is. She gave them both a stern look. Do you have a plan?

Amy and Smit looked at each other and then at Giuli with a kind of admiration.

-Not as such, replied Amy. But we need to get in to this place and observe without being detected, if possible. We are not here to battle we want to avoid any sort of confrontation if we can. Information, that's what we need.

-You can't just ramble around as if you were on a day trip, said Giuli with an air of leadership in her voice. Look, she continued, I have a plan, so if you help me it will benefit you.

-What do you mean to do? asked Amy.

-How do you think I survived for so long in that place without being detected? she asked.

Both Smit and Amy looked interested.

-Go on, said Smit.

-Well, continued Giuli, my mother kept me in a den. This place was very difficult to detect. When my mother took me from the lair, I sat outside with her for a few moments and I remember well the feeling I had of the place. But when she had taken me a short distance from the entrance, I couldn't see it any more. It was as if it had vanished. I didn't have time to discuss it with my mother because our perilous journey through that horrible place was in silence. The thing is, this den must be a safe place. My mother had me there, and there I was raised safely. If we can reach this place, maybe we can

observe from there and not be discovered.

-And how do you propose we find this *hidden* place? asked Amy.

-I know it won't be easy, answered Giuli. But I remember the direction, the way we came. And I have a feeling, besides it's the only plan we've got.

-She's right, said Amy. This den could be useful. Giuli, she continued, when we enter this place, you stay by me at all times and do exactly as I say. Don't worry we'll get through.

-Thanks, said Giuli, you're very brave.

-Not brave, said Amy, I'm a *curious* cat; maybe that's why the Spirits chose me.

-Ok, said Smit. It's almost light and we need to rest.

-But there's nowhere safe here, said Giuli. There's no place to hide.

-Look at the trees over there, said Amy. We can rest there.

-But it's not safe just to lie under a tree, said Giuli. We don't know this place and it's not like the city.

-Don't worry, said Smit. Come on!

They crossed over to where the trees were and stopped at the base of the tallest one.

-This will do, said Amy. Up you go!

With that Smit scaled the tree in an instant. Giuli was amazed she could not believe her eyes. She had seen Bird up trees such as this one before, but she had never seen him climb them.

-But...How...? started Giuli.

-Don't be afraid, said Amy. It's the power of the Spirit guardians. Are you ready? she asked Giuli.

-But I can't climb like Smit, she answered, he's stronger than me.

-Trust me, said Amy.

With that she scooped Giuli up and climbed the tree with ease. Giuli did not even have time to get dizzy. She was up in the tree before she knew it.

-You ok? asked Amy.

Fine, answered Giuli. I think.

She looked around and found that they were sitting on a branch, broad enough to lie down comfortably. They were very high up and she felt really safe here. They could not be seen from below, and from above there was plenty of shade

from the rising sun.

-Listen, said Amy, we all need to rest, try not to think about what we have to do.

-She's right, said Smit. We need all our strength, physical and mental, so sleep.

Amy curled up on one side and Smit the other, Giuli felt warm and, for the first moment since she had left the city, safe. She wondered if Luke was enjoying the games. She missed him.

She woke up screaming, Amy and Smit had to take hold of her to stop her from falling from the tree. It took her a while to remember where she was before she calmed down.

-Are you all right? asked Smit.

-It was my mother, said Giuli. She spoke to me.

-You were dreaming, said Amy.

-No. She said. It was real. I walked to the end of this branch and looked across at that terrible place; then I heard her voice. She said, "Go back my little one, go home". She always called me *little one*. I know that it was her, I know. She's over there, I can feel her.

Amy and Smit looked at each other and then at Giuli with sadness. She looked so lost and vulnerable. She was just sitting and staring across at the evil place. Her eyes all swollen with tears.

-Let's go, began Giuli. We need to hurry.

She was looking for a way down out of the tree.

-Patience Giuli, Please wait, said Smit. When the time is right we'll move. We need to wait till it's quieter and we can hear better.

-We'll need all our senses, if we are to be successful, said Amy. If we go rushing in, we'll be found out immediately. We'll also need to eat, she said.

-Leave it to me, said Smit. And he vanished down the tree. After a while he was back with some food and they ate. They sat quietly in the tree for a long time just looking at the place they were to venture into. All the while they were looking, not one movement did they see. It seemed as if the whole place was deserted. Giuli watched Amy and Smit for a while, it looked like they were in a trance, they watched without moving or even closing their eyes once. The evening drew into night and the night became very silent.

-It's time to move Giuli, whispered Smit. Stick with Amy and stay quiet.

Giuli's blood ran cold; she remembered the night she had left the den. Amy brought Giuli to the ground as swiftly as she had taken her up. They crossed to a point which left them standing before the huge gate. Giuli shivered. She remembered her mother's words, *Run for the gate and don't stop. Don't turn...* The words ran through her head like a thousand echoes.

-There's still time to go back, said Amy.

-I'm fine, replied Giuli in a cold voice.

When Giuli had left the evil ruins the last time, the gate was open. It was firmly shut now and it looked as if it had been closed for hundreds of years. The gaps between the bars were spaced sufficiently, so there was no problem for them to enter. Giuli wondered why her mother had waited until the gate was opened before she had taken her out. She could have just as easily gone through the bars.

-What is it? Amy asked her.

She told her what she was thinking and explained that her mother seemed to have been waiting for something before she took her from the den.

-It's odd, said Smit. What do you think? He said to Amy.

-Stay with Giuli and I'll go through and have a look. She answered.

Amy approached the gate, sniffed it and slipped through the bars.

-Anything? asked Smit.

-A slight sensation coming through, she said, but nothing apparent. I'll come back and you can try.

Amy walked to the gate and as she was about to go through she was thrown back. She quickly got to her feet and ran back to the gate.

-There's no way out, she started. You can enter but you can't get out. Go back, I'll try to find another way out and I'll meet you at the tree.

She had just finished speaking when Giuli stepped through the bars of the gate.

-What are you doing? shouted Amy in a whisper.

-You told me to stick close to you, said Giuli. And that's exactly what I'm doing; anyway now we know what my

mother was waiting for.

-What are you saying? said Smit from outside.

-Don't you see? replied Giuli. There is no other way out. This is the only way, and that's why my mother was waiting. And I'm sure that if we haven't raised anyone's attention by now, we will do very soon; so get in here and let's get under cover.

Smit looked at Amy.

-Well? she said smiling. You heard the little one, let's get moving.

Smit slid through the gate and they all hid behind the nearest rocks to get their bearings.

The place was indeed foul, and the air was almost impossible to take. It was dark, cold and scary.

-Which way Giuli? asked Amy.

-We need to go up high, she replied, somewhere in that direction.

-Let's move, said Smit, slowly.

Giuli went in front of Amy, and she seemed to be leading them. She did not remember the exact way, but somehow she felt guided. The memories she carried of the place had not altered, nor had the place itself changed, it was as she remembered. She found a path which appeared to go up, she took it and the others followed.

-Shush! whispered Smit.

He and Amy crouched low, Giuli did likewise.

-I can't hear anything, she whispered.

Smit and Amy immediately gave her a sharp look. She froze; they reminded her of her mother and the looks she had given her on their last day together. She wanted to run but she knew that would be foolish. She heard nothing, yet when she looked at Amy and Smit she could clearly see that they were hearing something. Slowly, Amy pushed her tightly against the rock and into the shadow. She could hardly breathe; they had both backed up close to her. She could feel their quickening heartbeats. She hated this place, it was so dark, and it stifled her. Then she heard.

-It was something around here, said a voice. It was deep, whispery and very frightening.

-Yes, came another; similar in tone. I can feel it. Get the others and search everywhere.

Amy was looking straight at Smit as if she were communicating with him. Then Smit made a move and he beckoned for Giuli to follow. She glanced at Amy. Amy signalled for her to go with him, so she moved away with Smit. He made his way through a gap in the ruins and with Giuli close behind they ran very quietly moving up the hillside. Giuli was wondering why Amy had not yet caught up with them, when Smit stopped. They were between some fallen columns and covered by some tall grass. Giuli immediately looked to see Amy but she had gone from the place where they had been. Then, suddenly she heard screams. She looked and saw Amy jump in the air, but a huge cat pulled her down, within seconds she was covered by the big creatures. The cries of cat screams were terrifying. Giuli was about to scream when Smit came down on her. He was strong and she could not move. He brought his mouth right by her ear and barely whispered.

-Find your home.

He sounded very scared and Giuli understood. Smit urged her on. Giuli, keeping low, started in the direction she felt was right. She was crying, but she made no sound. All the time they were climbing, they could hear Amy screeching. At the top they came to a flat ledge that Giuli recognised, but she did not know how to find the entrance to the den. She began to panic inside when Smit took hold of her.

-Concentrate, he said, as quiet as before.

She sat quietly, with her head to the ground. She knew that she was in the vicinity of her old den. She sat as the tears began to make a stain on the ground before her. She was quite sure that it would be impossible to find the entrance. As they listened to the last cries coming from Amy, Smit began to get worried. He sat by Giuli and waited patiently for her to make a move. Then she raised her head.

-Over here my little one, this is the place.

Giuli got up and walked towards the rocks, Smit instantly followed. When they got to the end of the passage there was a sharp turn, and there was the entrance to the den. It just seemed to appear before them. Giuli entered, and then Smit, she was home. It was exactly as she and her mother had left it, even the bad air was better here. Giuli went to the bottom and curled up, like when she used to wait for her mother to return.

Smit went to the bottom, turned and went back to sit and look out the entrance, like her mother used to do. She had stopped crying now. The tears just seem to dry up and she felt nothing. Amy was on her mind, and of course her mother. Eyes closed, she waited for Smit to say something. The night had gone quiet again; Smit was very still waiting and listening. He did not move from his position. Giuli fell asleep.

Giuli opened her eyes, turned and saw that Smit had not left his station. She whispered up the tunnel for him to come down which he did. He sat and waited for her to speak.

-My mother spoke to me again, she started, she told me that we would be safe in here but the dangers outside are unimaginable. We must wait here till she opens the gate then we are to make our move.

-I need to look around, said Smit; not paying much attention to what Giuli had said. You can stay here while I do so. It's important I find out what's going on here.

-I know you don't believe me about my mother, said Giuli. But it's true and I too need to look around. So, we can help each other. We both know that we are in a perilous place, so we need to be careful. And brave.

-Do you really think your mother's alive? asked Smit.

-I don't know the answer to that, she replied. But she's speaking to me from somewhere. What about Amy, she asked, do you think she's...?

-Yes, said Smit. And he lowered his head. She was a very brave cat who gave herself in order to save us. She was a fine Body Guardian of Cat City and she will be honoured for doing her duty.

-We owe our lives to her, said Giuli.

-We're not out of the woods yet I'm afraid, said Smit. Later, when things settle down, we'll have a look around.

-O.K, said Giuli.

When the evening drew in and darkness fell, it was very dark indeed. Giuli and Smit left the den; they had previously agreed to stay completely silent and only use sign language if they needed to communicate. The air was rank and Giuli felt nauseous. She followed Smit who had decided to continue upwards along the trail. The place seemed forsaken but Smit knew there were others about. When they reached the end of

the trail Giuli realised what Smit had intended. From the top they could get a clear view of the place. It was strangely eerie this place and had it not been for the light of the moon, it would have been impossible to see anything. Smit indicated to a place in the distance, it appeared to be some sort of old temple. Without saying a word he moved off in that direction and Giuli followed.

They moved along slowly and they were extremely quiet. Along the way they stopped a few times when they came close to some of the other catlike creatures. They noticed that all the cats here had a very sinister look about them, and they were all very large in size. When they came upon the place they had seen from above the weather began to change. The sky roared with thunder and the lightning struck above the ruined temple while the wind blew. Smit gave Giuli a grave look and quickly moved to find cover. She understood and followed swiftly. Just as they hid under a fallen column they saw what Smit had felt. The hair on Giuli's back stood on end, and she nearly collapsed at the sight.

Without any shadow of doubt Giuli was looking at her mother, she was being led into the old temple by a group of menacing cats. She had not changed one bit, Giuli cried softly as she watched her crippled mother move slowly along surrounded by her tormentors. Smit looked at Giuli and understood. They both kept very quiet and waited until the procession had gone inside. Smit ran, followed by Giuli, to the side of the temple where they came upon a staircase leading up the side of the building. He stopped and glanced at Giuli but she did not wait, she ran up the staircase without a thought. Smit gave a glance towards the skies, sighed and went after her. They found themselves standing on what seemed to be a kind of balcony. It was right at the top of the temple. It was difficult to see into the temple because it was so dark, but with the help of the lightning it was possible. They had to grip hold of the wall because the wind was so strong. There seemed to be some kind of ceremony about to take place.

Then, everything went quiet, even the wind seemed to die down. Giuli's mother stood, on what seemed to be some kind of altar, waiting. It became so still. Smit and Giuli were afraid to breath. Silence. He came out of nowhere, he just seemed to

appear slowly; like black smoke. He was huge, at least five times bigger than any other cat. He moved catlike and seemed feline, but he had an evil stance that made the others all revere him, fear him. All bowed except Giuli's mother, she had not moved an inch from the place where she stood.

-There has been a disturbance among us this night my soldiers, he started. An outsider was killed. It was most unfortunate for us, because the one who wouldn't be taken alive could have served as our mother.

Smit and Giuli both knew that he was talking about Amy, but they were not sure what he meant by *mother*.

-So once again we must turn back to our gracious queen here, he indicated to Giuli's mother. So Hinsii, he said, Will you grant us one more litter for the glory of *our* kind?

Giuli gave a slight gasp, it was the first time she had heard her mother's name. She thought it was beautiful and she repeated it to herself, *Hinsii*.

-You've taken all you can from me Dhrug, said Hinsii. You can do me no more harm. My suffering has ended, knowing that I can deny you the strength you need to return to Cat City. From the moment I got my precious little one away from this hell I stopped being afraid.

At this Dhrug reared up and roared so loud that Giuli could feel the wall shake. His huge body moved like a cloak, swaying from side to side as he went. He stopped suddenly and stared down at Hinsii, she looked worried.

-But there is something, he started. You are worried, aren't you? You can sense something, can't you?

He moved around her like a black fog. He probed her mind.

-Tell me what you are hiding my queen. What could it be? Hinsii moved back in fear. She tried everything in her power to block her mind and any thoughts of Giuli. But Dhrug was strong and he knew there was something.

-There's only one thing I can think of that could possibly induce this sudden preoccupation in my dear queen, he said in a cold manner.

Hinsii began to cry.

-Tears? Why, we haven't seen tears in a long, long time. Now what silly little thing could be the cause eh? He became very cruel in his behaviour.

-Please Dhrug, implored Hinsii.

-Ah, now we're being nice, he mocked. Want to cooperate, do we?

-I'll do what you want, said Hinsii in a defeated manner.

-Why the sudden change of heart my dear? Eh? What has you so eager, he shouted. Let me think, he said. Then turning quickly to face her he said, would it be anything to do with your darling Giuli?

-No, no, please...started Hinsii.

-Silence! he ordered.

He became still and stuck his nose into the air as if he were smelling it.

Giuli was very scared and she looked at Smit. He beckoned for them to leave but Giuli gestured no. He moved off down the stairwell and urged her to follow, but she would not. As Smit disappeared out of sight Giuli turned to continue looking. She looked down but she could no longer see Dhrug. Within a split second she was surrounded by the big shadow, she screamed as she was falling. She heard her mother squeal. She found herself on the altar and her mother was in the corner being held down by some cats. She was in a panic. Dhrug rose up, he seemed to touch the ceiling he was laughing at the top of his voice.

-All hail our new queen, he was saying. What you would not do Hinsii, shall be done by your daughter. His voice was thunderous, I will have my power again and I will rise up and finish what I should have finished a long time ago. Cat City will be mine.

Giuli's mother was wailing with agony.

-Please, no, she kept shouting.

-Take her out, roared Dhrug. Till I decide how to dispose of her. Now my new queen, he said taking Giuli, let's build my empire.

Giuli was carried off into the dark screaming.

Chapter VI

City in Peril

Luke sat in the cool of the secret room. He was thinking about Giuli and what was happening to her. He had stayed in the room, with Bird, since the evening before. Bird had said that it was not safe to go out into the city till the Spirits had made a decision of some kind. The secret room was very quiet but Bird could hear the fighting among the citizens outside. Luke could not, but he trusted his friend completely. Luke had remained mostly silent and lost in thought. Bird just sat and listened. Luke had slept a little; he had not noticed whether Bird had or not. He was very edgy; he did not like this waiting and not knowing. But he was not going to go against Bird again so he endured. As time passed he seemed to grow more patient. His mind did not wander so much and he felt secure.

-The foul air is turning our cats against one another, said Bird. The evil has truly started to take hold. Let's pray we can find the source in time to save our city.

-Do you have any idea what will happen? asked Luke.

-No, my friend, he answered. For now our faith lies with our protectors.

The wait seemed to last forever and Luke was losing his mind when Bird unexpectedly got up.

-It's time to go, he said.

Luke was happy after the long wait, but also nervous. He got up and followed Bird out of the secret room to the surface. All around them were sleeping cats and they both knew well what this meant.

-We're going to the sacred council, announced Bird.

Luke was so shocked he said nothing and just continued to trail Bird. They moved along swiftly, Luke noticed that the city was a little darker than usual. He felt a little colder too. When they got to the sacred council Luke was excited, he could see that the light had not gone from here. The sight before him was as wondrous as he had remembered. The entire council was in session, minus Smit and Amy. The Spirit Guardians were truly a magnificent sight, glowing, radiating

beautiful light. Bird gestured for Luke to take his place on the first step in front of the Body Guardian's altar. He did as he was bid, nervously, then Bird took his place on the altar beside the others. Luke turned to look at Bird, who in turn gave him a sharp look, meaning, turn around and be quiet. He did so, bowed his head and waited.

-Greetings, Luke, said Majesty.

-He... Hello, stuttered Luke.

-We meet face to face at last, said Majesty. It makes a change from you looking on from your clandestine position.

-Sorry, offered a very embarrassed Luke, I meant no offence.

-It was only to be expected, said Majesty, All things considered. You are, after all, who you are.

-And who exactly is that? dared Luke. Bird has told me of my parents, but where do I fit in, what am I to do?

-Your faith has chosen you to serve the great council, said Majesty. But you must be the one to discover the true purpose. You will no doubt follow your soul on these matters and it shall lead you right.

Luke felt totally at a loss, he did not understand anything, so he just sat there feeling blue.

-My lord, said Bird. Giuli has gone after Smit and Amy.

-Yes, we are aware of this, said Nandina. She has only the spirit of her mother to protect her now. Let us all have hope for her.

-A terrible plague has caused our citizens to revolt, said Serissa. The bad air has poisoned their thoughts.

-But we cannot combat air, said May. We are powerless.

-It's true, said Bush, we can't do battle with our own kind. And there doesn't appear to be any other force at hand that we can tackle.

-This is what we must do, said Majesty. Bird, Bush, Miriam and May, you will patrol the city perimeters. Keep a constant watch for anything strange. Our people are not of sound mind, so it is best to avoid them as much as possible. Keep to the trees and columns, patrol the walls and be extremely careful.

This is to be the last council meeting until we discover what is happening to us. It would not be safe for one or all of us to be trapped at council, we cannot risk that history repeat itself. So,

we will protect this great city of ours as we have done for generations, but we shall not be seen. We will be with you and you will get great strength from us. Luke, go with Bird and stay close. Good fortune to you all.

It grew dark and the great Spirit Guardians were gone. There was a moment of silence, of fear, then the noises of the city became apparent.

-Luke come with me, whispered Bird. May the Spirit Guardians be with you, he said to the others as they were leaving.

-And you, answered Miriam as she slipped into the dark. Bird ran along the back of the temple and scurried up his favourite tree. Luke followed.

-Bird! he shouted.

-Hush, said Bird.

-But Bird, whispered Luke. I climbed the tree just like you. I...I didn't even feel it.

-Good, said Bird. Let's hope there are many more things you can do.

Luke looked down from the great height and his head spun. Now he understood why Bird liked being up trees so much. He could see all around to different parts of the city. He noticed again that the city was darker than usual, but the air was fresh up in the tree and he liked it. There was movement below, cats were going about as usual only now they were fighting and bickering amongst themselves.

-Wait here, said Bird. I'm going to check around my station.

-What do you mean? said Luke.

-Each Body Guardian has a particular post that he or she must guard, answered Bird. I take care of the northwest section.

-Oh! Will I come with you? Luke asked.

-Right now, said Bird. It's probably better if you wait and keep watch from here.

-Ok, said Luke.

Bird was on the city wall and moving off in a flash. Luke watched him move around, keeping low and inconspicuous. Then Luke saw him leave the wall and go down into the city. He could see him for a moment then he lost sight. From the direction he took, Luke could see that he was going towards

Public Square. He watched and waited to see if he would spot him again, but he had vanished. Luke wanted to go down into the city but he was not going to let Bird down, so he stayed and watched.

When Bird returned he was glad that Luke had waited.

-There's a lot of unrest in the city. said Bird. Fighting everywhere and there are a lot of frightened cats hiding around within the walls.

-Whatever magic is in the air, we assume this is affecting our people, said Luke.

-Right, replied Bird.

-And if I'm not mistaken, continued Luke. The Body Guardians are immune. And I'm not affected because of my past connections?

-That's correct, said Bird.

-So, the big question is, said Luke. Not *why* or *how* but *where* is it coming from? And why isn't it up here?

-What do you mean? said Bird surprised.

-Oh, I forgot you couldn't smell it, said Luke. The air up here is fine. It's just below the city walls.

-I wonder why the Spirit Guardians never noticed, said Bird.

-Well look, said Luke indicating below. The branch we're sitting on is over the wall and therefore outside the city limits.

-Yes, said Bird. And the Spirits are not susceptible to anything beyond our boundaries.

-So, if the cats leave the city, the madness will leave them, said Luke. But we can't ask them to leave. Where would they go?

-And they wouldn't listen to us anyway, would they? said Bird.

-That brings us back to our original question, said Luke. Where's the source?

-Well, if the air outside is good, said Bird. It must be coming from within. The Spirits did say that the signs did indicate to the river. But how? And what is to follow?

-That must be the place. said Luke. And that should be where we are.

Bird looked at Luke and admired his courage. He realised that he was growing up, fast. Luke noticed the way he was looking at him and felt proud.

-And there's no point telling me it's dangerous, he said. Giuli's gone, the city's gone crazy and all my friends hate me. I've been to a sacred council meeting and I can climb a tree as quick as a gecko and who only knows what else, so...

-Let's go, said Bird.

As they moved through the city they were both saddened by all the unrest. Bird went along very swiftly and Luke noticed that this time he had no problem keeping up. They arrived at the southeast corner of the city and they were greeted by May; the southeast was her station. Bird explained their discovery about the air outside the city.

-It's very strong here, said Luke.

They went down a tunnel that took them to the edge of the river that leads to Nowhere. They stood looking downriver. All of a sudden Luke felt nauseous and he lay down.

-What's wrong? asked Bird.

-There's something, said Luke, I'm not sure...I feel something really bad.

He rolled around as if he was in agony and he was groaning.

-Luke? said Bird.

-Is the madness getting to him too? asked May.

-I don't know, replied Bird. Luke, are you ok?

But Luke continued to roll in the dirt squirming and moaning then he sat up and looked down the river and screamed.

-GIULI!

-What is it Luke? Bird was asking. Tell me!

Luke stopped moving, sat up and looked at Bird and May. He had tears in his eyes.

-I saw Giuli, he started. She was in great pain, she was crying and...something dark...it was horrible. Oh poor Giuli, why did she go?

He was shaking all over. May looked at Bird in confusion. Bird sat close to his little friend.

-He has Giuli, began Luke after gathering himself together. He's going to use her to regain his power and leave the place that has him caged.

-Who is it? asked Bird.

-Dhrug, shuddered Luke.

-Is he coming up the river? Bird inquired.

-No, answered Luke. He's going to attack the city walls. He will flood the city with his army of strong followers and

then he plans to take the sacred council. When he's finished Cat City will be no more.

-How can you know all this? asked May.

-Trust him, said Bird.

Luke was still gazing down the river with a blank expression on his face. Bird waited for him to continue.

-A great gate will open, continued Luke, as it does every twenty-nine and a half days. Up till now Dhrug hasn't been able to pass through it; I can't say why. But he's close to gaining enough strength to defeat whatever force holds him within. He is strong, very strong. That's why he is poisoning our air, so we can't organise ourselves against him. It will be a simple matter of entering the city and enslaving our people. He uses the river as a sort of portal, sending his foul disease.

Luke turned and looked straight at Bird.

-It appears that our time is short, he said. For, if I'm not mistaken the gate will open in within twenty-eight days, but Dhrug will need more than double this time. He's waiting for something...something to happen.

Luke paused as if in a trance.

He's waiting, he continued, for...Giuli to give birth to a litter. My poor friend. What has he done to you?

-How can this be? asked Bird

-He's making Giuli have kittens to get back his strength, said Luke. And when he returns to our city he will take our young as he did before.

He walked back towards the city, Bird and May followed without any more questions. But they were worried, very worried. They stayed with Luke and he led them back to Bird's tree. High up, they all felt a bit better.

-May, said Luke. You had better get the others, Bush and Miriam I mean. Tell them to come to the secret room at once.

May was gone without a word.

-How do you feel? asked Bird.

-I don't know, was his reply. Let's go!

They made their way to the secret room and Luke waited for Bird to open it.

-You do it, said Bird.

Luke touched the wall with his paw as he had seen Bird do and it opened. He did not act surprised, he simply went inside. They waited in silence till the others arrived. Miriam and

Bush both greeted Luke then Bird described the details of what Luke had told himself and May.

-We'll have to get the cats to leave the city, said Miriam. It's the only way. If they stay they'll be easy targets. Slaughtered!

-They will not listen, insisted Bird. And where would they go if they did?

-Bird's right, said Bush. We need to find another way.

-I know a way, said Luke to the other's surprise.

-Go on, urged May.

-Let history repeat itself, he started. We have to gather all the cats in the great games' arena. Once all our citizens are safely inside our Spirit Guardians will put them all to sleep and then we must guard them with our lives. We don't have much time, so we'll have to work fast gathering the cats. They will fall into their slumber as soon as they are placed in the arena.

Luke's four peers looked at him in amazement.

-Luke, said Bird. This task is impossible. Even if we could manage to get the cats to the arena, how can you be sure the guardians will put them to sleep?

-I'm sure, he replied. You have to trust me.

-I do, said May. He's right, she said to the others, it's the only plan we've got.

-So, just to understand *exactly* what we're proposing here, said Bush. Within the next sixty-something days, we have to round up every cat in the city, because they won't go willingly, get them to the arena and protect them while they sleep. And they *will* sleep according to you.

-That's what the Spirit Guardians want, added Luke. And with their help and strength we may have a chance.

-You can sense them, can't you? said Miriam. They're in touch with you, aren't they?

-I can't say, replied Luke. I just feel something.

-Ok, said Bird. How do we aim to do this? It won't be easy but we are strong. Each cat will have to be taken by force, but that's not the problem. The amount of cats in the city is great.

-If you each start with your stations, said Luke. I'll start with Smit's then we can all concentrate on Amy's.

-But Luke, said Miriam. We don't expect you to take part.

-Don't worry about me, he said looking at Bird.

-He'll be fine, said Bird realizing that his little friend no longer needed his protection he had the shelter of the Spirits now.

So they each went out into the city to their respective stations to begin gathering the citizens. Luke went to Smit's part, which was the southwest part of the city, containing the nightclub area. He decided to start with the outer walls and steps before he ventured inside. The sight of the cats fighting and hurting each other saddened him. Usually at this time of night there would be many cats sitting around singing and enjoying the merriment. But he did not stop to think about it, he saw a cat sitting alone in a corner, licking what appeared to be a wound. He made his move and in a flash he was on the unsuspecting fellow and carrying him off in the direction of the games' arena. Luke could not believe what he was doing, he had hold of another cat and he was moving at a considerable speed and he felt no strain. He decided the best route to take was along the wall and down one of the tunnels behind Public Square. The cat he had hold of kicked and screamed all the way but he did not hinder Luke. Under normal circumstances screaming like this would have brought many cats to investigate, but now no one was bothered. Luke went down the tunnel and into the arena, the kicking cat suddenly stopped and Luke found himself holding a sleeping cat. He brought him to a comfortable place and set him down.

-Forgive me, he said.

-Good work Luke, said Bird from behind.

Luke turned and was comforted by the sight of his friend.

-Thanks, he said. I don't know how but...

-Well, said Bird. Now that you've started, don't stop. We have a huge challenge.

-Right, said Luke as he vanished up the tunnel.

Luke carried on as he had done with the first cat until he could no longer find any more on the outside. He went into the tunnel to the clubs. The scene inside was even worse than outside. The place that Luke loved so much was in a terrible state; even the beautiful light seemed to be fading away. He walked towards Lilli's pad and entered. There was a crowd of cats in a corner and they were very boisterous. As Luke came nearer he recognised some voices.

-I'm fed up with this place, came a voice Luke knew. Let's

go somewhere else.

It was Jacqueline.

-Let's go to the market, said another Luke also knew. We can have a laugh at those stupid storytellers.

It was William.

The crowd all laughed and turned to move.

-Well, well, well, said Jacqueline. If it isn't bossy Luke, what are you doing here?

-Come to try take over the gang, said William. Shove off before we do some harm.

Luke closed all his emotions and moved in on Jacqueline. Before she or the others could do anything he took her and carried her off. She was screaming and biting as Luke took her through the tunnel.

-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, he kept saying. Please trust me.

-William, help me, she screamed.

-Don't worry my dear friend, he said. Soon you will be peaceful and William will be at your side.

He was relieved when Jacqueline fell into her slumber. He took her to the far side of the arena and lay her in a comfortable place. He looked down at her with great sadness. She was such a gentle creature that he hated to see her crazed with this illness.

-I'm going to see that you're safe, he whispered. You'll see.

-Luke, come over here called Bush from the other side of the arena.

As he made his way over he saw that already there were many sleeping felines. Progress was good. The others were all back and Luke felt good to be away from the madness, so did the others.

-It's almost sunrise, said Bird. It's hot and we're tired. Let's rest. We can take turns guarding the entrances.

-I'll go first, said May.

-Me too, said Bush.

-Ok, said Bird, we'll rest for a bit. He looked at Luke. You all right?

-Fine, he replied. Just tired. If you don't mind I'd like to go to stay for a while with Jacqueline.

-I'll call you later, said Bird.

He walked slowly over to Jacqueline and lay down beside her;

she looked really peaceful. He closed his eyes but he did not sleep, he wanted to keep watch over her.

The days and weeks went by. Luke and the Body Guardians continued to bring the cats to the arena. As the time passed it seemed like a futile endeavour, cats were hiding in every nook of the city. There were so many cats and time was short. But miraculously two days ahead of time before the gate opened, for the second time since they had started their mammoth mission they had completed their task. They all stood in the centre of the great arena surround by sleeping cats. It was the strangest sensation. Never had the arena been so filled to its capacity yet been so quiet. They had set the cats down in a kind of order; market, nightclub, Public Square etc. As Luke walked around he came across Gibo, the storyteller, who was in his usual sitting position, eyes closed. He would have liked a story, just gazing into those bicoloured eyes.

Chapter VII

City of Evil Escaped

Smit sat at the entrance to the hidden den looking out into the dark night. Two months had gone by since he had left the city and the evil gloom was a heavy burden. He turned and went back down inside.

-How are you feeling? He asked.

-Better, replied Hinsii.

-Do you feel up to telling me what's happening? he enquired.

-Yes, she said and made herself more comfortable.

Smit also sat so that he was more at ease.

-My name is Giuli Hinsii and I am of Cat City, she began. In ancient times I was a mother like any other, just Giuli then. But *I* was the unfortunate one taken down the river by Dhrug. I was carrying a litter when I was taken, that's what Dhrug was after. But something happened to me as I was snatched down the river. One of the fallen ancient Spirit Guardians entered my soul and became me. I, Hinsii, was one of the three who fell in the ancient battle and now I exist here. I've lived in this place for thousands of years.

As I have said, she continued, I was carrying kittens, but when Hinsii joined me they vanished, all but one. From then on I existed in the body of Giuli and the mind of Hinsii, but my Spirit power had left me once I had quit the city. Instead, I found myself in some strange limbo; not powerless however.

Dhrug wasn't aware that Hinsii had become a part of me. He was too busy trying to fight the strong current that swept us away. Then, the river brought us here.

Dhrug pulled himself from the river, taking me with him. He roared with anger, his fury was immense. This place was dark, not as dark as it is now though. Dhrug soon found his way about picking up whatever cats he found, turning them into his disciples, killing those who opposed. He imprisoned me and waited for the arrival of my young.

Three months had gone by and Dhrug realized that there were no kittens on the way. He didn't, however, know that I had

willingly stopped the birth until a time when it was safe. I didn't have my former Spirit Guardian power but I had some other force driving me. And at the time I did not know it, but now it is obvious that my Spirit soul has made me immortal. Dhrug grew impatient. He beat me. He ordered me. He hurt me in so many ways. But, I was strong and he couldn't break me.

It was also evident that some evil incantation had Dhrug and the rest of us trapped in this place. It was believed that some ancient demon once ruled here, but nobody knows the story. There are only rumours. The gate, as you have seen, opens at the end of every lunar cycle. It is the only true way out of here, for some force blocks every other possible exit, including the river. But it's not as simple as it appears, only the pure of heart or innocent may pass through.

-But I could not pass, interrupted Smit, nor Amy.

-You have seen the hardship of life; that is why. said Hinsii.

Dhrug tried time and time again, she continued, to get me to produce kittens. He was strong and he gave his strength to his army of followers. They came from far off to join this evil army we see before us today. The strange thing was that all the females who came to join were wicked minded and not one of them could bear young in this place. Under normal circumstances innocent life cannot be born here. But the cats that did come to Dhrug received immortality from him. I am eternal because of my connection to the Spirit Guardians. The cats in Dhrug's army are kept alive by Dhrug's iniquitous magic. He has created an army of living skeletons; you've seen their abnormal shape and size. They are strong.

As the years went by, Dhrug became incredibly powerful but pass through the gate he could not. He required the strength of just one more kitten. Many times he called for me and asked if I knew a solution. And many times we argued because I would not speak to him. Then one day, many years after we first arrived, Dhrug summoned me. *You're looking remarkably well Hinsii*, he said to me. I became frightened by his tone. *Thank you my lord*, was all I could think of. He came closer to me and said, *How is it that you haven't aged a day when you should, I'm quite sure it's not my doing?* He looked at me intensely, he was pure evil. I didn't want to show fear

so I stood to face him. He didn't like this. I made feeble attempts to convince him that time had been good to me. He saw through me and started to shout. He made me very angry, he said one thing I said another... Then I did a very foolish thing. I wanted to win over him just once and my foul pride got in the way. *You need kittens, don't you? Well you can't have them, can you? You'll be damned to this hell for all time because you can't get any more young. But I can, I have within me an innocent and you will never touch it. You're condemned.* I covered my mouth with my paws. I couldn't believe what I had just done. In a blinding moment I had given away my precious secret. I was silent. Dhrug stared at me with cold eyes. Never had I seen him so angry or mad. I waited, I felt sick and ashamed of myself. He smiled and walked about in a crazy manner mumbling to himself. He turned and roared. *My day has finally come, with this innocent my power will be almighty and no gate shall hold me in. This time I shall rule.*

From that day on it became Dhrug's mission to get hold of my kitten. He understood that there was something special about me. He tried everything from torture to solitary confinement, but I never caved in. And that's how my life was from then on. Then one day Dhrug lost all his patience and came down on me like a falling pillar. These crushed legs are the result of that day. The only blessing that came was that I told him that he had destroyed my kitten. He had killed the one thing he sought to dominate. It was a bluff but it worked.

I was put into a dark guarded cave and forgotten about. I don't know how long I was there, I was away from Dhrug and that was fine. One day I crawled to the entrance to find the guards preoccupied with some passing feline friends. I crawled and crawled without paying any attention to direction. I passed out and when I awoke, I found myself here. This den is hidden from the eye. It's an optical illusion. The entrance looks like pure rock. But it's like an oasis of good in a desert of evil. That's how you can find it and not the others. You're good inside. From that day, I lived here going about incognito, watching, waiting for the right moment.

So, having carried my kitten for all those moons, the time came when I let her be born. Giuli, my precious Giuli. She was the most beautiful new born. Having spent so much time

in the company of evil she had given me new hope. I knew that she would be able to pass through the gate because she was innocent. I planned to get her out alone. I was too badly hurt to make the journey but I had to make sure she got out. If we were caught, all would be lost. I knew Dhrug was looking for me so I had to be extremely cautious. That was the worst period of my life. Every waking moment my nerves were gone, poor Giuli must have sensed it. As she grew I constantly gave her instructions on how to get to the city. I don't know how they were in my head. The time I had with Giuli was cherished, but I had to get her out.

I'll never ever forget that night, crawling through this place. The gate opening, Giuli's scream, and Dhrug, the look on his face when he saw my Giuli. I couldn't stand it, the thought that he might touch her. When he moved to take her, I don't know where I got the power. I threw myself in his path and took him down. He took me and inflicted great pain on me, but as I looked and saw my darling Giuli go through the gate all pain stopped and a type of ecstasy took over. She was free after all those centuries within me. Free!

When Dhrug saw that I had produced Giuli he insisted I could do it again. Once more, he became obsessed with the idea of me having a litter. I explained to him the magic of Giuli but it was no use, he needed some new kittens to obtain the strength to pass through the gate unharmed. I was locked up again whenever Dhrug tired of me and that's how it was. At least until the day I sensed Giuli coming back this way. You and your brave friend, Amy, were with her, but my fear grew again so I tried to stop her from coming. I spoke to her while she slept, but it was futile. It's ironic; the thing is Dhrug didn't have the power to leave so he sent his foul disease up the river. He knew someone would come and investigate and you did. Amy knew better than to be taken alive. And so it was to poor Giuli that the misery befell. But the great Spirits of Cat City couldn't have known they were falling into a trap. You know the rest. Giuli has been taken you rescued me and brought me back here and any day now Dhrug will have what he wants and...

Hinsii stopped, she cried silently. She wanted so much to be with her baby and tell her that all was well. Every time she thought about her with Dhrug, she grew weak.

-Is there any way to prevent the gate from opening? asked Smit.

-No one knows the magic behind it, she replied. And if Dhrug has received new life from Giuli, he will be unstoppable. He will march his evil warriors to Cat City and cause destruction.

-Hush! said Smit. Listen!

They listened quietly to a commotion outside. Smit ran to the exit, put his head out and looked around. He saw nothing so he continued up the hillside to get a better look. At the top he saw the most terrifying sight imaginable. Within moments Hinsii was standing beside him and they were both looking down on Dhrug's immense army. It was hard to see, but they could make out the shape of a huge crowd. Then, at the front, they saw the great shadow of Dhrug appear.

-Soon, he began. Our great day will be upon us. No gate will stop us now. We shall pass through and this time I shall finish Cat City. The mob screamed with excitement.

-Your new queen has given me the strength to do whatever I wish, continued Dhrug. Now, I am complete.

Once again the others roared with joy. Hinsii turned to go back to the den. She had failed to save her baby. Smit watched her go. He felt helpless. The rabble below had started to dance and cheer. Smit went to the den.

-I'm going to find Giuli, said Hinsii. Will you help me? Smit knew that it was an almost impossible task but he needed to do something.

-Let's go, he said.

-I'm almost certain Dhrug will be holding her in the same place he kept me, said Hinsii. I'll take the lead.

As they made their way along the celebrations continued; it was very noisy.

When they got to the place where they hoped Giuli would be there were two guards outside.

-Wait here, said Smit. I can take those two easily and with all this noise no one will hear.

Smit was swift and the two guards did not even see him. They were down. Hinsii came over and they entered. Her heart dropped when she saw her daughter. Giuli was crouched in a corner crying and shivering.

-*Little one*, whispered Hinsii.

Giuli looked up and cleared her eyes.

-Mother? she said. Is it you?

-It's me my darling, replied Hinsii.

Giuli ran to her and Hinsii took her.

-I'm sorry my dearest, said Hinsii. I tried to protect you but I failed.

-Oh mother it's you, said Giuli. I'm sorry I left you, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. She was crying frenziedly.

-Come, urged Smit. We need to get out.

Hinsii knew he was right; there was no time for all this.

-Come little one, she said we can talk later.

They went out into the night. The revelry continued which made their journey easier. When they got back to the den Giuli collapsed with exhaustion. Hinsii held her.

-Sleep little one, she said. She looked at Smit. Thank you!

Smit went out into the night; it was very dark and silent. The festivities had finished and it seemed like a ghost town. It was hard to breathe the air. His goal was to go down to the gate and have a look around. He went with the usual caution. When he got there he hid behind some rubble. He remembered this place. It was the place he had waited with Amy and Giuli when they first arrived. He thought of his lost friend and he felt very low. He crept over to the gate to have a closer look. He looked out into the night; it seemed so fresh out side. He longed to be back home. He was just about to turn and go back to the den when he heard a voice.

-Go through the gate, it whispered.

-Who's that? he said.

-Surely you don't forget your friend? came the voice.

-Amy? he said. Is that you?

-Yes, go through the gate, she said again.

-But you know I can't pass, he said. We've already tried.

-You can pass through my spirit, she said. Courage.

-Sorry, he said. I don't understand.

-My spirit shall cover the gate and you will be able to pass, she said.

-But what about Hinsii and Giuli? He asked. Will I get them?

-There's no time, she replied. Don't worry they'll be safe in the den for now. Hurry my friend, there's no time to lose the

gate will open tomorrow.

Smit stepped up to the gate and put his head through. He moved slowly and he was filled with the happiest feelings as he went. He saw Amy and he knew that she was happy.

-Go and warn the others, she told him. Be swift.

Smit was outside and his lungs filled with the sweetest air imaginable. His heart filled with joy and he ran as fast as he could in the direction of the city.

Chapter VIII

City in Silence

Gibo opened his eyes; he sat and stared, statuesque. Luke sat up amazed. He looked around at the other cats. They had not awoken. He glared into Gibo's eyes, he could not help himself. It was quiet because the Body Guardians were either resting or on tunnel duty. Luke waited in silence.

-Soon a great struggle for our city will begin, started Gibo. You must be ready to follow instructions, he continued, and follow them without discrepancy. If you fail, we may all perish.

He closed his eyes and returned to slumber. Luke waited but he had finished. Luke was not quite sure what he had meant. The voice was not that of Gibo.

He walked over to Bird who was with May and Bush at the entrance the arena. They were talking about scouting around the city to check for any hidden strays.

-Listen! hushed Luke.

They all stopped immediately.

-Something is coming down the tunnel, he said.

Bird and the others prepared themselves for attack. They waited.

-Where is everybody? came a voice.

Smit appeared at the opening and the others all let a huge sigh of relief and joy. They all greeted him with delight which woke Miriam who had been sleeping.

-Praise the Spirits your alive, said Bird. We've been so down in the heart thinking of you.

-And Amy? asked Miriam.

Smit lowered his head as a response. The others understood.

-When the time is right we shall sing to her glory, said Smit. My devoted friend who helped me to live and go free. But now we must talk.

-You've been gone so long, said Bird.

-I'm lucky to be here at all, replied Smit.

-Tell me of Giuli, said Luke.

Smit turned and looked at him, his face grew dim. He thought

of Giuli and Hinsii still in that terrible place, hoping they were still safe inside the den.

-Is she alive? asked Luke.

-Yes, she's alive my friend, he answered. But there is much more to talk about.

Luke felt some relief at the news but was anxious to hear the entire story.

Smit looked around and noticed all the slumbering cats.

-Don't worry, said May. They're all fine. We'll explain later.

-We don't have much time, started Smit. Dhrug will arrive soon and he is strong. Let's go to the temple to talk.

-Is it safe to leave the cats unprotected? asked Bush.

-For the moment, it's fine, said Smit.

They all left the games' arena for the temple.

In the total silence of the city Smit told the others about the evil place. About that tragic first day when Amy gave her life. The details about Dhrug and the appalling life of Hinsii. When he spoke of Giuli being captured Luke cried silently. Unexpectedly, the temple lit up and Majesty was sitting in his place. They all bowed and took their place on the altar. Luke went to the same spot as before.

-First let me both welcome you back and congratulate you Smit, he said.

-Thank you my lord, said Smit.

-You speak of our great Spirit Hinsii, continued Majesty. She has been trapped, enslaved and crippled by our enemy. She has existed, all these moons in physical form under these dreadful conditions. It is unthinkable. She must be restored to us. And Giuli is of Hinsii you say. They both must be returned to their rightful place. They were safe when you left them?

-Yes, said Smit. Inside the den. I don't think they will move till Dhrug has departed. But I don't know what is to become of them. Dhrug will be marching his army here very soon now and we need all our strength to fight them. He is strong my lord.

-I can go to them my lord, offered Luke.

-No. It is out of the question, said Majesty. You must remain in the city at all costs, do you understand?

-I do, answered Luke.

Even though he did not but he would not defy the Spirits.

-Smit, asked Majesty. Are you and your comrades able enough for Dhrug's army?

-They are big, said Smit. But they are foolish my lord. With the right plan we can take them.

-Good, then we shall deal with Dhrug.

All of a sudden the winds started to blow and a great chill blew across the city. They looked up at Majesty.

-The gate to this evil place is opening, he said. Prepare yourselves for battle.

He disappeared.

-Tell us about these creatures we are to fight, said Bird to Smit.

-They are big as I've said but without our strength. We can easily take on three or four at a time but the problem is the amount of them.

-How many? asked May.

-Thousands.

-That's what we must do then, said Luke. Take on a few at a time.

-What do you mean Luke? asked Bush.

-Our main objective is to protect our people. They are in the arena so that's where we fight. We need to move some of the great columns and block most of the entrances to the arena. The ones we don't block will be our fighting posts. Because we will be inside the tunnels the enemy won't be able to surround us, and we can take them as they come at us.

-Brilliant Luke, said Bird. It has to succeed, it's our only hope. Let's get to work.

They moved with speed taking some of the city's huge fallen stone. They covered the passages so that they could not be detected. They had to be sure that the enemy would not be able to get into the games' arena via any other tunnel. It would be disastrous if that happened; for *two* reasons. One, the enemy would be able to slay the sleeping cats and two, they would be surrounded in the tunnels and sure to meet their doom. The stone they moved was heavy but the power of the Spirit Guardians gave them the power to shift them.

-Remember, Bird said to Luke. We can only combat with the mortals. The Spirits alone have the force to deal with Dhrug.

-I know, said Luke.

When they had finished the work they went to the three remaining tunnels left open. They were large enough to move around in but impossible for more than one to pass by. They decided to go in groups of two, Bird with Luke, Smit with Bush and May with Miriam. While one would take the lead in the tunnel the other was to stay behind in case one of the enemy slipped by. After a time they would exchange places, and continue to do battle like this. The three couples bid each other good fortune and went to their designated tunnel. All they could do now was wait. The hush that descended upon the city was intense. Bird was happy Luke was by his side. It was a good opportunity to talk with his little friend. Luke felt the same, he missed sitting around chatting.

-Are you worried? asked Bird.

-Not for myself, he answered. But for Giuli.

-You're forgetting that her mother is a great Spirit Guardian, said Bird. She will take good care of her. Do you feel up to this battle?

-The fight doesn't bother me, said Luke. I feel like I've got the strength of twenty cats inside me. What's happening to me? I'm not sure but I'm just doing what I feel inside. I can feel things, I don't know how or why, so I'm letting it take me.

-I've watched you grow since you were a kitten, said Bird. You've always been special. Before you were born I was chosen to be the one to watch over you, as I did with your mother and her mother.

-But Bird, said a surprised Luke. How old are you?

-Quite old my young friend, laughed Bird. You see when a cat is chosen to become a member of the Body Guardians, he or she receive a sort of power, as you know. They also get longevity. We're not immortal like the Spirits. We do die like everyone else, eventually.

-Were you happy to become a Guardian? Luke enquired.

-Oh yes, answered Bird. It's an honour to be selected.

-How were you chosen?

-A long time ago, started Bird, when I was a young cat, my father called me. He told me that the Spirits had favoured me and that this was a great thing. He said that when the time was right, I would be summoned. When I asked him how he knew all this he told me that he himself had been summoned many

years previously. He told me that his time was almost at an end.

-So your father was a guardian too, said Luke. And it's always passed down in the family?

-Not necessarily, Bird replied. The Spirit Council call upon a cat who is of good virtue. My father was great, he taught me all about the city and how to live an honest life. I obeyed him and always followed his example. I was chosen simply because I was so like my father.

-What happened, asked Luke. How did they call you?

-When my father passed on I had an empty space inside me. I was sitting on the wall one evening looking out into the city when suddenly everything grew dark and before me appeared a ray of light. I stepped into the light and followed it through the city. It took me to the altar in the Sacred Temple. And, as you've seen for yourself, the beautiful vision of the Spirits came before me. They told me how my father had served them faithfully for many years and that I had been chosen in his stead. All the emptiness inside me disappeared and I was filled with great joy. It's difficult to explain but inside I could feel a physical and mental change. I felt the same yet different. The Spirits sang the most wonderful music that filled me with ecstasy. I didn't need to ask questions about what was expected of me. I understood perfectly. Then the other members of the guard joined me and we sat, in council, listening to the beautiful music.

-That sounds wonderful, said Luke.

-Yes, said Bird, and now we are missing our friend Amy.

-Does this mean that the Spirits will select a new member? Luke asked.

-Under normal circumstances, replied Bird. It would be the case, but there's nothing normal about these times.

-Maybe it's me, said Luke. And that's why I'm here.

-Who knows? replied Bird. The Spirits have been watching your family for generations.

-Do you think we can defeat Dhrug? asked Luke.

-It's going to be hard, said Bird. We know all about the last time he challenged the city. The only advantage we have this time is that we know for sure he's coming. It was the element of surprise that gave him the upper hand the last time. The Spirits will shield us from him so we can concentrate on his

warriors.

-He's not far from us now, Luke exclaimed.

-Can you feel him? Bird asked.

-Yes, said Luke. He's using his magic to find his way. He's a monster, we must stop him. You can't imagine the pain he'll inflict on our good people if he takes us.

-We'll fight to the end, said Bird.

-I can't stop thinking about Giuli, said Luke. And what might be happening to her in that place. I can't feel her.

-Look, said Bird. Smit told us that they were alive when he escaped, so let's hold onto that for now okay?

-You're right, said Luke. She's a smart cat, a survivor.

-I wonder how the others are, said Bird. Maybe I should have a look outside to check the situation.

-Let me go, said Luke.

-Ok, said Bird. Be swift.

Luke came out of the tunnel and made off quickly for the other two. He came across Bush and Smit first.

-I'm just checking around, he said. Everything under control here?

-Everything is fine, answered Bush.

Luke hurried to May and Miriam, they were prepared. On his way back to Bird he decided to climb a tall tree to have a look around. Because the tunnel was close to Bird's favourite tree he chose that one. He climbed to the top in a flash. The sight that lay ahead of him made his blood run cold. On all four sides of the city as far as Luke could see were huge menacing creatures, standing, waiting. Luke almost flew out of the tree.

Chapter IX

City of Evil Abandoned

-Giuli, wake up little one, whispered Hinsii.

Giuli opened her eyes, it was dark as usual but she recognised the warm smell of her mother. She moved in close to her; she felt like a kitten again. Then she remembered Dhrug.

-Don't think about him, said Hinsii. He's gone.

She had slept ever since Smit and Hinsii had brought her to the den. Every time she tried to wake up she had visions of Dhrug, she could not face reality so she kept falling back into a deep sleep.

-Wake up my darling, Hinsii whispered again. We need to move.

-I'm sorry mother, said Giuli. I left you.

-You didn't leave me my child, said Hinsii. You were very brave and you did exactly what I wanted. You're a very special cat and soon you will know all about your past. Then you must tell me of your life. But for now we have to decide what's to be done.

-What do you mean? asked Giuli.

-You've been asleep for days, Hinsii answered. And a lot has happened.

-Smit, is he all right?

-He's gone, replied Hinsii. He had a miraculous escape.

-I don't understand, said Giuli. How did he pass through the gate?

-The night we brought you here, started Hinsii. Smit went to have a look around, but he never returned. I started to worry about your brave friend but then I had a visitor.

-A visitor? questioned Giuli.

-Yes, continued Hinsii. It was while you were sleeping. All was quiet when suddenly I felt something strange. I turned towards the entrance and there I saw a Spirit. I believe you know this Spirit for she smiled when she saw you safe.

-Amy, whispered Giuli.

-That's right my dear. She explained how she liberated Smit and told me to stay inside no matter what I heard. And

sure enough, the next evening there was such a big commotion. From this very spot I could hear Dhrug's despicable voice roar. I'm sorry to say but the kittens he took from you gave him what he wanted.

Giuli cringed at the thought. Hinsii held her.

-It's all right, comforted Hinsii. Don't think about it just yet. He has gone and he has taken his army to besiege Cat City. We don't have much time we need to get there as soon as possible.

-I think I'm strong enough, said Giuli. But what about you?

-I'll make it, said Hinsii. Don't you worry.

-Ok, let's go, urged Giuli.

-Wait, Hinsii protested. We have a problem.

-What?

-Dhrug is clever and very evil; he knows we are hiding somewhere. When he left Amy visited me again. She told me that Dhrug chose two of his most ferocious warriors and left them behind to find us and kill us. He has no further use for us. The gate is closed and we can't afford to wait for it to open again. If we can get to it safely then Amy can help us like she helped Smit.

-Let's go, Said Giuli. It's time to go home.

She got up and left the den followed by her mother. She sat quietly and cleaned herself for a bit. She turned and looked into the den.

-This place has been our heaven in this hell, she said. But never again will we have to hide from our enemy. It's time to fight for what's right.

-Be calm my little one, whispered Hinsii. It's still not safe. Giuli took the lead as they moved through the ruins. They both had a sense of déjà vu. They knew exactly which way to go.

-I am waiting, be careful.

They heard Amy's voice. It soothed Giuli. She had been very fond of her. Finally, as they neared the gate, it was as they had expected. The two creatures left to be their ruin were guarding the gate. They hid and listened.

-Well this is just fine, said one of the creatures, Stuck here when all the others have gone away. And why? Because of those two contemptible felines.

-When we find them, started the other. We'll...

-You mean *if* we find them, interrupted the first. How long have they been hiding from Dhrug? Wherever they are, we'll never find them. I mean if Dhrug couldn't... What's the use? We're doomed to this place, without Dhrug we can't get out.

-He said he would come back for us, insisted the second. He said that this was a very important job and we would be well rewarded. He said he couldn't trust nobody else. That's what he said. He said it.

-You stupid fool, said his companion. It has taken Dhrug ages to escape from this prison, why would he ever think about returning. To save little you and me, that's what he'll do. Get ready, oh look! Here he comes now.

-I'll go mad, replied the fool.

-You are already mad.

-We need to catch them and kill them, started the fool. Catch them. That's what we need to do, and *kill* them. Then Dhrug will know that we have served him well. Catch them.

-Shut up, you rambling idiot. All we can do is wait here. Hinsii and Giuli looked at each other. These cats were big and strong but they were so stupid. Giuli could not fight for herself and her mother. This was definitely a case of brains over brawn. The gate was just beyond the big creatures but making a run for it was also out of the question with Hinsii's back legs. Hinsii moved close.

-Follow my lead, she whispered.

Giuli nodded. Hinsii stepped out into the open and started towards the beasts.

-Someone's coming, said the fool. Stop! Halt! Who's that going there?

-Moron, said the companion. Who do you possibly think it could be?

He seized Hinsii and pinned her to the ground. Giuli gasped but did not move.

-Kill her, kill her, shouted the fool.

-No, you dope, said Hinsii's captor. We'll get her to tell us where the other one is first. Do you understand? Where is she?

-What's your name? Hinsii asked softly.

-Don't tell her Weevil, said the fool.

-Aw! Limpet you nincompoop.

-What lovely names you have, said Hinsii.

-I'll ask the questions, said Weevil. Where's your friend?

-She has sent me to you, said Hinsii. She's on her way to meet you and she's sent me to tell you to be prepared.

-What? Be prepared, said Weevil.

-Yes, said Hinsii. Our queen has decided to return to her throne.

-Our queen? said Limpet.

Giuli listened very carefully and understood what her mother meant. She came out from hiding.

-Let my mother go, she said. And *bow* when your queen approaches. How dare you not fall to the ground when I enter.

-What does she mean Weevil? Limpet said in confusion.

-Silence! shouted Giuli.

Weevil let Hinsii go and she joined Giuli.

-What do you mean by all this? asked Weevil.

-I told you to shut up, roared Giuli. I'm the queen of this place. The mighty Dhrug appointed me Queen and I have not been dethroned. This means that it is I who have control here. This is now my glorious kingdom. From this day forth I shall be queen Giuli and you will bow before me and obey my command.

-She sure talks like a queen, quivered Limpet.

-You have been warned, Giuli screamed. Do not test my patience.

Weevil and Limpet bowed their heads and awaited command. Giuli, who was very nervous, glanced at Hinsii.

What do you say to your queen? said Hinsii.

-Your Majesty, they said in unison.

-What do you command? said Weevil.

-We're here to serve you, said Limpet.

-That's much better, said Giuli. Now listen. I'm not happy with my sleeping quarters and I want to change. You must go into our wonderful new empire and find me a palace. Whoever finds the perfect place shall be handsomely rewarded. I can be a very pleasing queen when my subjects do well. After all, I *do* need a new king.

Weevil and Limpet could hardly contain themselves.

-Go now, Giuli commanded.

They scampered into the night. Giuli and Hinsii could hear them arguing as they went.

-You buffoon, they could hear Weevil say. The queen will obviously choose me.

-Don't be so sure, was the reply. After all I'm the one with the brains in this operation.

-You numskull...they faded into the night.
Giuli almost fell down with fear.

-Quickly, said Hinsii.
They moved as fast as they could, hoping the two creatures had not realised that they had been tricked.

-*Hurry.*
They got to the gate, breathless.

-You go, said Hinsii.
-No, said Giuli. This time I'm not leaving you now go.
Hinsii slipped through Amy's spirit. When she turned she could see the two huge cats racing towards Giuli.

-Now, she screamed.
Giuli pounced through the gate and right behind her she heard a big crash.

-*I must go now.*
-Thank you Amy, they both said. Goodbye.
-Your Majesty, said Limpet. What about us?
-Shut up you halfwit, said Weevil. We've been fooled.
How did you get out? He demanded.

-Come on mother, said Giuli ignoring them. Our time here is finished.
They got up and left. Weevil was screaming obscenities at them as they went.

-Don't turn around, said Hinsii. Never will we look at that evil place again. Let's go home.

-If home is still there, said Giuli.
Weevil was still shouting at them.

-You'll die when the master gets you.
-Weevil? said Limpet.
-What? he screamed.
-Shut up you birdbrain.

Chapter X

City at War

The silence only lasted a few seconds. From every corner of the city Dhrug's army poured in like a flash flood gushing into a canyon. The roars and screams were deafening, especially after the long silence. They scattered throughout the city in search of its inhabitants, causing destruction as they went. Then the darkness appeared like a gigantic black cloud. Suddenly, the creatures knew which direction to take. They gathered at the mouths of the three tunnels like scavengers waiting to join the feast. The air grew foul and the winds began to rage. Without further hesitation they charged.

-Stay close to me, Bird said to Luke as the onslaught commenced.

The first two creatures came at him and he tossed them aside like rag dolls. Their comrades had to pull them out of the tunnel in order to continue the attack. This was good because it gave Bird a moment to gather himself. Then another two came and another. Bird fought them all with ease. When he tired a little he exchanged places with Luke.

-Courage my friend, he whispered.

As he waited for the tunnel to be cleared, Luke concentrated on what he had to do. He was not scared. He had the true courage of a warrior. Then the enemy approached and just like Bird had done, he defeated his foe in a matter of seconds. He fought for a long time and did not get tired. He actually felt himself getting stronger. Within a short space of time he felt a sort of metamorphosis take place. One thing was certain. He was no longer skinny little Luke. In the other tunnels the fight was taking the exact same course and two by two the enemy were being defeated. After a long time the creatures stopped and retreated.

-So far so good, said Luke.

-You've done very well, said Bird. I'm proud of you.

-Thank you, he replied. But I'm just doing it. I'm not giving it any thought.

-That's fine, said Bird. They've obviously stopped to

rethink their strategy. We can just wait now. Try to rest. They waited for the next attack and it came within moments. This time only one of the creatures came down the tunnel immediately followed by another. When Bird brought down the first, the second dragged him out while a third came charging in. It was faster and more tiring for Bird but he kept his pace. He changed places with Luke more frequently but they managed to crush their attackers each time. The battle went on like this for a very long time. Every so often, the enemy changed strategy but the Body Guardians and Luke continued to be successful. After many creatures had been defeated the battle ceased. The silence returned, though it was not a very welcome hush. Luke sat with eyes closed, pondering.

The Spirit Guardians were managing to keep Dhrug contained but they were having many difficulties. He had descended upon the city in a huge black smoke and was trying to seep in. The Spirits could feel his strength and they knew that it was much stronger than before. He had already managed to force entry for his immense army by using all his power. The Spirits had to direct all their force to repel Dhrug and this allowed his warriors access. He was shifting around like a sandstorm just above the city where the Spirits could not reach him. He was testing their every move, teasing them, taunting them. The Spirits moved around the city like lightning, they created a force field. They were confident that the Body Guardians could cope with the situation on terra firma, so they determined to keep Dhrug out. If he gained entry, things would become much more dangerous.

A few days had passed and the battle continued. Dhrug had instructed his soldiers to stop fighting in vain and to wait for him. So, all his soldiers scattered into the city some to the market to search for some leftovers, others gathered in the nightclub area. But most of them lay around Public Square and even worse *The Grand Sacred Temple*. They defiled it by just being there. Dhrug continued to fight for access and the Spirits held him back. He hit them with black magic spells with a strong force behind them, all to no avail. Then on the fifth day of fighting, disaster struck.

It had been a long slow process for Giuli and Hinsii. Giuli remembered the route she had taken well enough but poor

Hinsii's legs got worse with every day that passed. Giuli was very loving and understanding. All she wanted was to be with her mother on safe ground. The problem was they did not know whether the city would be safe anymore. They had to stop many, many times each day either for safety reasons or to rest. Then on the evening of the fifth day of their journey they reached the southeast corner of the city. They were scooped up inside a huge whirlwind that took them high above the city. They could be heard screaming all over. Luke jumped up in horror.

-Wait Luke, urged Bird. You can't leave your post now no matter what.

-But it's Giuli, he said. She's in great pain.

-I can hear her, replied Bird. But there's nothing you can do for her right now. She's under the protection of the Spirits. You know it would be foolish to try help her.

Luke knew very well that there was nothing he could do. He closed his eyes and spoke to the Spirits. He blocked out the screams. Dhrug was crushing Giuli and Hinsii. Hinsii was very weak from the trip and she was fading fast. He roared in satisfaction. The life had almost left her when he dropped her. She plummeted at great speed and below there were hundreds of horrible soldiers waiting to devour her. As she plunged Dhrug followed her trail, covered her aura and infested the city. Giuli got misplaced in the confusion and she was left to fall. Hinsii's body did not clash with the ground it remained in the air and hovered towards the Grand Temple.

Dhrug made for the tunnels where the guardians were and his army rose up. With him they were stronger. They blasted into the tunnels and Luke and the Body Guardians were expelled into the night. Dhrug entered one of the tunnels but was surrounded by the Spirits. They warned him not to continue but he laughed at them. The Spirit Guardians were forcing Dhrug out when he sent a bolt of fire down the tunnel, ripping the huge stone out. Then the big beasts came teeming down and into the arena. Luke and the others quickly moved in and they fought with all their might to save their people.

-Bring me the young, growled Dhrug as the Spirits carried him off.

They had surrounded him and were trying to drive him out of the city. The Body Guardians had managed to subdue the

creatures that had gained access and were now guarding the entrance which was filled with snarling cats. Dhrug had released himself and was swirling around in a mad tempest. His powers had multiplied and he was starting to have an effect on the Spirits. Suddenly he moved with light speed into one of the empty tunnels and exploded into the arena. Huge boulders of stone flew into the air landing on some sleeping innocents. He moved about in a violent spiral making it almost impossible to move. The Spirit Guardians retreated. The whole city shook as Dhrug started to consume the young.

-Your time has come, came a voice in Luke's ear, it was Majesty. *Go to the centre of the temple, now.*

The three tunnels were completely filled with the enemy and Luke looked for an alternative way out but there was none. He glanced over at Bird who like the other guardians was struggling to hold his ground. Bird saw him and smiled. Luke rose up and charged towards the tunnel filled with cats. He ploughed through like a ball in a cannon and forced every single cat out. When he emerged he was completely surrounded.

-Be brave Luke, said Majesty.

Luke tore through the crowd as if there was nothing there, flinging the nasty creatures in every direction. When he got to the temple he hurried to the centre as he had been instructed. As he stood there he looked up and saw Hinsii floating. Then came the light. The Spirits came in from around the base of the temple flying round in the circular form of the great temple. As they rose the light grew brighter. Luke felt himself spin; he was starting to move with the Spirits. As they rose, they then encompassed Hinsii and from there an enormous vortex swirled into the sky. The light spanned out into every opening in the city and went to work. It passed over the innocent and cut down the evil. The light that came through Luke headed straight for Dhrug. Finally he came face to face with him. He had huge black shiny eyes and a form that was neither mass nor spectre. He rose up to the height of the arena, and Luke equalled him. Luke stared into his dark eyes and let all his light flow to them. Dhrug squirmed and screamed with agony and flew up the tunnel where he was greeted by the circle of light. Luke came behind him and ensnared him in the middle. Dhrug writhed in agony. The light surrounded him

like a big sphere and moved to the Grand Temple. He was left dangling in the centre as the great Spirit Guardians took their positions at council. Dhrug was suspended by a ray of light generated from each Spirit. Two of the ancient fallen columns magically ascended from the light where Hinsii and Luke were placed.

-You have once again brought terror to our peaceful land, bellowed Majesty. We were too foolish to have merely banished you. Now you shall cause havoc no more. Two of our ancient Spirit Guardians have been given back to us and you can never challenge us again.

The rays of light climbed higher and higher into the sky bringing Dhrug with them. Then in the light of the moon, with his last cries of agony, he burst into flames and was taken by the night. Dhrug was no more.

Bird lay Giuli's limp body for the council to see, and then he took his place. The splendour of the new council was marred only by her unsightly presence. Bird had found her mangled between some rocks.

-My people, started Majesty. We have vanquished our foe. You have been brave and honourable; we especially salute our courageous friend Amy. Without her wisdom we would have perished. Her soul is safe with us. Hinsii, it is a delight to all to have you back with us. We praise you for the difficult life you chose in order to return to us. You are a true Spirit.

-I am returned and as I was before the war, said Hinsii. And the past will be forgotten. The strength of the Spirits has kept me and brought me back.

-For generations we have waited to restore our mighty council and tonight we shall put an end to our long wait, said Majesty. And now, we welcome with great pleasure our lost friend Luke who has finally joined us. The happiness of his heart has given him the strength to be as one with us again. From this time on he shall be known by his ancestral name and we will call him Hinoki.

-Bird, said Hinoki. Your guidance has been my strength. You alone have helped me to take my place here. Now for the first time I see who I am. Many moons ago when I and the other Spirits, Hinsii and Helix, fell, we each entered one of the three surviving mothers Dhrug had captured. Hinsii was

able to enter the body of one of these mothers and she became that mother carrying those kittens that Dhrug so desperately wanted. Helix was completely exhausted, she had just enough strength to reach Hinsii and join her to become one of her litter. Whereas I had only strength enough to place a divine spell on one of these mothers before my strength was taken. A spell that one day a kitten born of this mother would find the strength and courage to take his or her place at council. I have been reborn to my rightful place. So, here tonight we have gone full circle and our council will be complete. Thank you again my friend.

-It has been my pleasure, replied Bird. You are magnificent my lord Hinoki.

-It is time to conclude our circle, said Majesty.

-I don't understand, said Smit. What's to be done?

-Take my daughter, said Hinsii. And place her on the fallen column beside me.

Smit did as he was instructed and put Giuli on the third fallen pillar. The light of the Spirits came to life. The column rose up into the air as the Spirits sang their wondrous song. Giuli sat atop dazzlingly glorious.

-Welcome back Helix, said Majesty. Your long hard journey has ended. Helix looked around and smiled, she was truly a beautiful Spirit.

-There is only Amy's place to be filled now, and then we will be complete, continued Majesty. Now it is time to turn our city back into the safe peaceful place it is. We will awaken our people and the games shall commence. Let everyone celebrate our victory and pay respect to our three glorious Spirits returned.

Epilogue

Jacqueline sat on the city wall looking all around, admiring the wonderful place she lived. She had an empty space in her heart. For some strange reason she was not worried about Luke but she missed him dearly. She remembered him fondly. He had always been so good to her. She wondered if she would ever see him again and her eyes filled with tears. As if by magic it grew dark all around and a great ray of light appeared before her, she stepped into it and it took her to the Grand Sacred Temple.

The end