



THE RAT CATCHER

A Blackspire Story

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AZARIN always had a way with cats.

His mother would tell the other women in town stories about how the neighborhood strays would slink through the open windows at night and curl up alongside him in his crib. When he learned to walk, it was rare to see him toddling down the street without at least one or two curious felines trotting along behind him. The ship that bore him and his sister across the seething ocean to the continent of Delinor held half a dozen mousers in the hold and every one of them left him a grisly gift each morning. His sister came down with mucklung their first summer in Blackspire, and when she died later that year, Azarin had no one left but the slate gray cat that stalked the nearest alleyway to keep him company.

The gray died from some mysterious ailment some months afterward, but by then it was one of many. Azarin knew them all by sight and smell, gave each one a history all its own. In those early days, they helped him survive the tough streets of the city's Spiresreach district on his own. When he was old enough to pay his way and keep a roof of his own, he repaid the debt in full, keeping his windows open to all comers.

The rain always brought the most visitors.

He hadn't quite reckoned that something other than a hungry stray might slink into the second story flat when he was out.

There wasn't much left of the black, not after they'd dashed his little skull against the wall. With the brown, they'd shown more creativity, nailing her paws to the wall before stuffing her mouth full with a greasy rag. The tan he didn't notice right away, not until he looked up to find her dangling from the rafters by a little noose, her guts still oozing out the gash running down her belly. For a hopeful moment, he thought the white managed to escape, but then he saw her skinny tail hanging from the kettle boiling over atop his little wood stove.

Azarin didn't have to look far for the perpetrators.

The ruffians from the Catchers Guild were still there waiting for him.

Rough hands seized him from the dark and smashed his face against the nearest wall. The stale scent of dry poison tickled his lips as a leather glove clamped over his mouth. Something struck the back of his legs and he dropped to his knees.

"Hold him down, lads."



They pulled his limbs taut, pinning him against the floor. He tried to kick free, but someone fell on his legs while the others held his arms. The gloved hand over his mouth belonged to a rosy woman with greased back hair and eyes like sulfur. Straddling his chest, she reached into a small pouch at her side and produced a handful of what looked like green sand.

Only it wasn't sand.

"You know who I am?" she asked.

Azarin nodded. Everybody in Spiresreach knew Lady Isikelle. She wasn't a highborn lady, of course, but being master of the district's Catchers Guild counted for more than noble blood in that part of the city.

She sprinkled a bit of the green stuff over his face, leering with gleeful anticipation.

"Maybe next time we tell you and your little friends to bugger off, you'll take the hint, won't you?"

With that, she removed her hand from his mouth and dumped the rest of the sandy powder onto his face. He tried to shake it from his skin, but she forced bits of it into his mouth, nostrils, and eyes, smearing it over his pores while the two men holding him down cackled like overexcited dogs.

The pain began as the faintest inkling of an itch, which gave way to a burning sensation that flickered like a dying candle before exploding with the fury of a hundred million stinging insects.

"Well come on, now! Let's give the poor sod some space to grieve for his little darlings."

Laughter mixed with the dry rasps coming from his raw throat. The intruders released him, but his limbs no longer responded properly, flopping this way and that like suffocating fish.

Azarin fought against his flailing body, willing it closer to the open window, struggling for the touch of the cool rain falling outside.

"Looks like he's had enough, lads. Why don't you help him out?"

A sense of weightlessness enveloped the searing pain, followed immediately by water pelting against his clothing. Cold air rushed over his skin, but none of it seemed able to make its way down to his lungs as he choked.



He smashed against something that gave way with a loud crunch before tumbling onto the mud smeared cobblestones. When he finally came to rest, his limbs no longer bothered to even twitch uncontrollably, instead laying limp and heavy upon the ground. Rain poured over him, though no amount of water could wash the agonizing pain from his skin. The moisture opened his throat enough to let a sliver of air sink into his chest, but not enough to keep him from passing out.

Unconsciousness brought little relief. The pain merely followed him into his dreams.

It took nearly two months for his eyesight to return to something approaching what it had been before the attack. His leg, injured in the fall from the flat's window, never quite healed correctly, leaving him with a permanent limp. The poison left his face badly scarred, especially around the mouth and the eyes. Even after the swelling went down, the skin remained discolored and swollen, the purplish-green flesh looking like it might slough off at the merest touch. Whenever he went out in public, he wrapped his face with a silken scarf he'd stolen from an unwary loomwright's cart. The covering didn't help much; people still crossed the street to avoid his shambling figure, especially at night.

He came close to starving after the attack. Unable to do any meaningful work, he couldn't afford a roof anywhere in Spiresreach, even the lowly ward of Beggar's Gate. Living off street scraps, he slept under back alley staircases and trash piles until he could move around well enough to earn a bit of coin delivering candles for the Chandlers Guild workshops in Gloomwick ward. He couldn't move as swiftly as the children the guildmasters typically employed, but since nobody dared touch him for fear he might infect them with some disease, there was less chance of him being robbed.

The cats treated him differently now. Maybe they smelled the poison still festering in his lungs, the green, viscous bile he coughed up whenever he spent too long on his back. Most of them, the younger and healthier ones especially, kept their distance, usually long enough to watch him pass by before scurrying out of sight. Only the sickliest strays bothered getting close to him, and they often died before he got to know them.

Azarin never had many friends to speak of, but they all probably thought he was dead by now anyway.



Which made it all the more surprising when someone rapped their knuckles against the door to his despicable little Gloomwick hovel.

He shuffled over to the door, stooping over to avoid banging his head against the low ceiling. The woman outside flinched when her lantern's light fell across his face, a gentle reminder that he'd forgotten to draw the scarf over it.

She was young, little more than a girl. Bits of hardened tallow encrusted her sleeves, and she smelled of boiled grease.

Something moved inside the basket next to her feet.

They stared at each other for some time before she cleared her throat. "You're...I mean, I heard you used to take in strays."

"Used to, sure." His raspy voice was lower than a whisper, but the woman must have heard him.

"Here," she said, nudging the basket toward his door with her foot. "Papa says they can't stay in the shop. Told me to dump them somewhere, but..."

Azarin pulled the cloth back to reveal four tiny kittens huddled together, shivering. He ran a fingertip along the back of their heads. They fell still when he touched them, their little limbs curling up against their bodies.

"Please," she said. "One of our apprentices said you could—"

"Yes, I'll take good care of them."

He pulled the basket inside and shut the door before she could say anything else. Their brief conversation had been taxing enough on his scarred throat. He took the basket over to his makeshift bed and nestled it down amidst the threadbare blankets. Reaching for the nearby waterskin, he wet his fingertips and pressed them against the kittens' tiny mouths. After the briefest hesitation, they began to lap the water from his skin.

Azarin smiled, or at least tried to make his mangled lips smile.

For the next three days, he spent his every waking moment tending to the four little kittens, leaving his pitiful shack only long enough to fetch more water and milk, which he sometimes mixed with pig's blood he obtained from the local carver.

On the fourth day, the biggest kitten, a gray flecked with black spots, opened its eyes.

It didn't flinch when it saw Azarin's uncovered face, instead licking its lips in anticipation of another feeding.



The others opened their eyes over the course of the next two days. None drew back at the sight of him.

Azarin couldn't remember ever feeling so happy.

He took kittens with him wherever he went, sewing little pockets for them inside the folds of his coat. After what happened at his old flat, he was afraid to leave them alone for any length of time. The vile stuff pooling in his lungs made it difficult to get much sleep, but even when he did manage to drift off, he would dream about one of the poor cats butchered on that dreadful night.

They grew fast, especially the black-spotted gray. His siblings, two female and one male, deferred to him, always shirking back at feeding time until he'd had his fill. They were smaller, but they kept together, countering their big brother's strength with unity. Their coats were also gray, but with white instead of black spots, the patterns differing only slightly. Although Azarin had no difficulty telling them apart, any casual observer would have sworn they were the same cat if they weren't seen together.

One day, as Azarin limped down Sicklewing Street delivering a basket of candles, the big gray squirmed from its pocket and dashed into an alleyway. He chased after it as fast as he could manage, but it didn't go far. The gray was waiting for him, sitting in the middle of the narrow alley with a bloody rat splayed out before it. When Azarin drew closer, it picked up the rat, trotted over to him, and dropped it next to his feet.

He blinked, and in that instant he saw the gray lying dead on the ground instead of the rat.

Scowling, he scooped the cat into his arms and shoved it back into its pouch.

"No," he said, kicking the rat aside. "No mousing."

The black-spotted gray meowed as the rodent skidded into a pile of street debris.

Azarin didn't sleep that night after returning to his meager hovel, instead watching the slumbering cats to make sure they didn't sneak off under cover of darkness to heed their predatory instincts.

When he lumbered over to the chandlers' shops the next morning, he asked the candlemakers about the young woman who'd brought the kittens to his door several months earlier. None of them could recall any chandler master having a daughter working in his shop.



He tried to stand watch again that night, but fatigue dragged him to a fitful slumber, filled with lurid dreams of butchered cats and boiled kittens.

Sunrise came and went before he woke, coughing up a hearty mouthful of green mucus onto the floor. The vile stuff splattered over the mangled corpse of a rat. Several dead mice lay nearby, some of them chewed in half.

The black-spotted gray sat at attention beside the foot of his bedroll, its coal black eyes staring at him with unflinching intensity.

He saw something there, something familiar.

"I said no mousing."

The cat went on glaring, unmoved by his recrimination.

"You don't understand. It's too dangerous."

The white-speckled gray trio returned then, slipping through a hole in the wall one by one to add three more mice to the grisly pile. When they finished, they scurried over to him, rubbing against his legs and purring. The black-spotted gray meowed, its unblinking gaze still fixed upon him.

Azarin sighed.

"Alright," he said. "You win."

Instinct is a powerful thing. It pulls at the heart and fires the blood, setting the body into irresistible motion. No creature born into life, be it natural or unnatural, can truly be whole without coming to terms with its purpose for being.

Azarin didn't particularly care for such philosophical musings, but he recognized the beauty of a cat on the hunt for what it was: a purity of instinct bent upon one dreadful purpose.

They started out small, careful to avoid drawing too much attention to themselves. The chandlers were eager to be rid of the vermin infesting the walls, attics, and cellars of their old shophouses, gladly paying Azarin more than he made in a month ferrying baskets of candles all over Spiresreach just to turn his cats loose for a single night. Come morning, he greeted the shopmasters with a bloody sack of dead rats.



The cats worked with a savage and unnatural efficiency. Azarin had never seen anything like it before. Once he set them loose, nothing escaped their murderous fury. The black-spotted gray showed no fear whatsoever, taking on even the largest, nastiest swamp rats that lumbered up from the docks of Mire Shore. When the vermin took to their holes, the white-spotted grays gave chase, squeezing into the narrowest spaces to drag the wretched things into the open where the trio could rip them to pieces. The ones that managed to slip away, Azarin handled himself with his quarter-length spear or his hatchet.

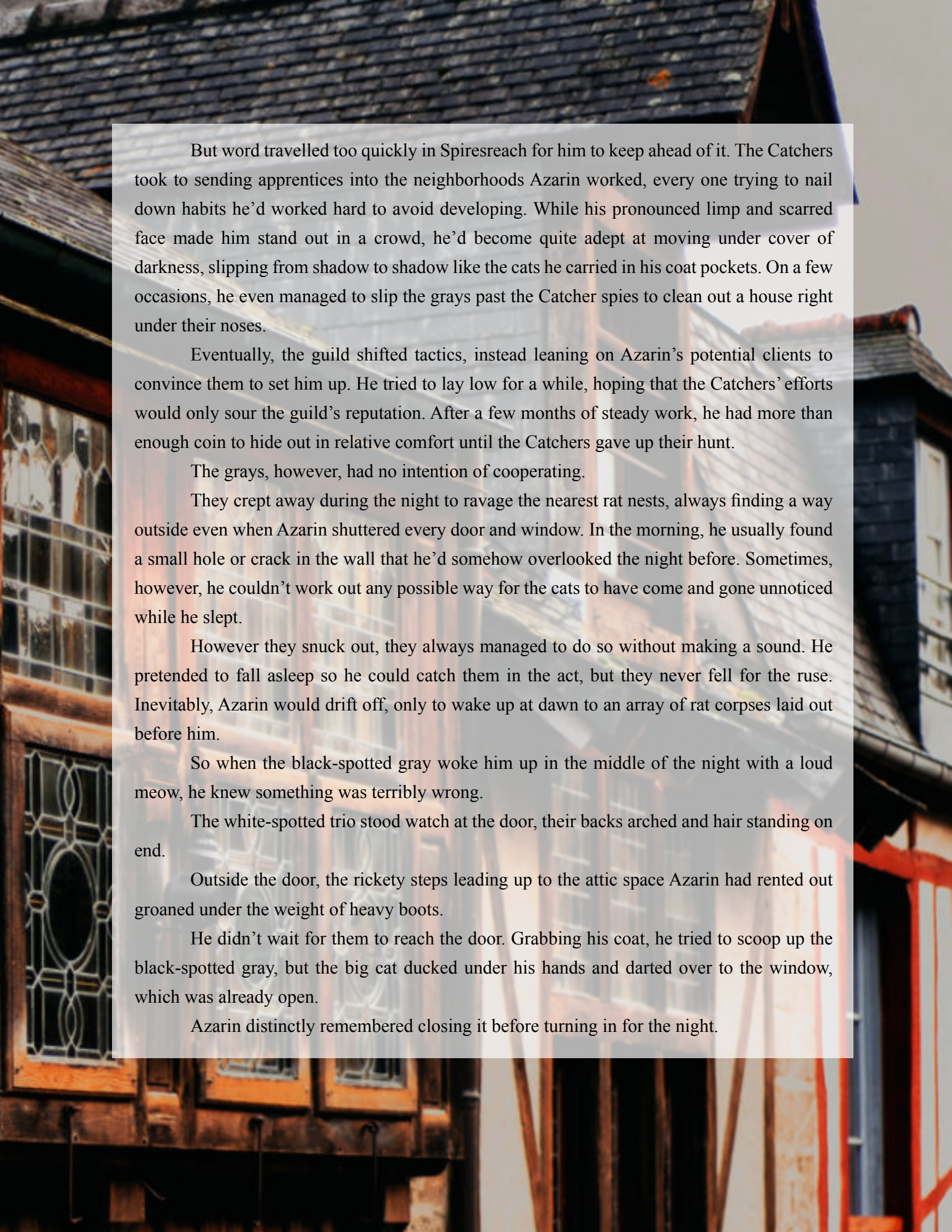
He promised himself that they would keep to the smaller shops and residences of Gloomwick, but word spread fast, faster than he could hope to contain it. Soon, familiar names from neighboring wards sent messengers looking for him. Some were pleased to hear he was not, in fact, dead, but all rejoiced at the news of his return to the mousing trade. Yet even after the inevitable offers came in, Azarin remained selective as ever, carefully vetting each job to avoid drawing the ire of the Catchers Guild.

Cutting into the guild's business nearly got him killed the last time he took up the trade, but he was more worried about exposing the grays to any retribution. They were the innocent ones, after all, just doing what instinct demanded of them.

It should have been an easy thing to keep clear of any clients who did business with the Catchers, but Azarin was disabused of that notion after he came across the guild's distinctive green poison powder in the attic of a shop in Ivory Point ward. He should have known better; the merchant who owned the place made it quite clear he wanted it cleared out at any cost. Whether he had an active contract with the Catchers or not mattered little; Azarin knew the guild didn't give up its claim to a client lightly once it put down poison and traps.

Taking the money the cats helped him earn, he moved out of his Gloomwick hovel and took to a life of vagrancy once more. He didn't dare settle down in one place again, not when the Catchers might come looking for him and the grays at any moment. Instead, he kept moving, never sleeping under the same roof more than once a week and only taking on work he could fulfill in the span of a single evening.





But word travelled too quickly in Spiresreach for him to keep ahead of it. The Catchers took to sending apprentices into the neighborhoods Azarin worked, every one trying to nail down habits he'd worked hard to avoid developing. While his pronounced limp and scarred face made him stand out in a crowd, he'd become quite adept at moving under cover of darkness, slipping from shadow to shadow like the cats he carried in his coat pockets. On a few occasions, he even managed to slip the grays past the Catcher spies to clean out a house right under their noses.

Eventually, the guild shifted tactics, instead leaning on Azarin's potential clients to convince them to set him up. He tried to lay low for a while, hoping that the Catchers' efforts would only sour the guild's reputation. After a few months of steady work, he had more than enough coin to hide out in relative comfort until the Catchers gave up their hunt.

The grays, however, had no intention of cooperating.

They crept away during the night to ravage the nearest rat nests, always finding a way outside even when Azarin shuttered every door and window. In the morning, he usually found a small hole or crack in the wall that he'd somehow overlooked the night before. Sometimes, however, he couldn't work out any possible way for the cats to have come and gone unnoticed while he slept.

However they snuck out, they always managed to do so without making a sound. He pretended to fall asleep so he could catch them in the act, but they never fell for the ruse. Inevitably, Azarin would drift off, only to wake up at dawn to an array of rat corpses laid out before him.

So when the black-spotted gray woke him up in the middle of the night with a loud meow, he knew something was terribly wrong.

The white-spotted trio stood watch at the door, their backs arched and hair standing on end.

Outside the door, the rickety steps leading up to the attic space Azarin had rented out groaned under the weight of heavy boots.

He didn't wait for them to reach the door. Grabbing his coat, he tried to scoop up the black-spotted gray, but the big cat ducked under his hands and darted over to the window, which was already open.

Azarin distinctly remembered closing it before turning in for the night.



The window overlooked a narrow alley three stories below. Azarin didn't dare jump the distance and the attic's window ledge extended out over the main building below, leaving no handholds for climbing down.

He reached for his hatchet, determined to fight back this time before the Catchers overpowered him. The black-spotted gray, still perched upon the window ledge, meowed at him again.

“What?”

The cat leapt upward, scrambling through the window and disappearing. Azarin leaned outside and found his feline companion sitting on a flat overhang jutting out from the sloped roof. If he stood on the window ledge, he was just tall enough to reach it and pull himself up.

Inside the room, the door handle rattled.

Azarin followed the black-spotted gray out the window, scrambling awkwardly up over the ledge. If they came for him now, he wouldn't have anywhere to run.

He wished he'd grabbed his hatchet before going out the window.

The door gave way with a loud crack, and the heavy footsteps advanced into the attic.

“Where is he?”

The voice rattled in the back of his skull, dredging up terrible memories of being held down as he suffocated.

“Here, kitty, kitty, kitty...”

The second voice stabbed into his ears like an iron spike nailed into old wood. He glanced over at the black-spotted gray. It stood completely still, staring down at the window ledge below.

“Here!” the first voice said. “There're three of them over here!”

Azarin held his breath, the memory of the atrocity committed in his old flat flooding back to his mind.

“Don't just stare at them, idiot. Put them in the— Look out!”

A shrill cry sounded out below, followed by a man's incoherent scream.

“Get 'em off me! Get 'em off!”



Azarin peered over the ledge in time to see a burly man in a brown leather cloak stumble out the window and plummet to the street. An instant after he smashed against the pavestones below, three gray shapes darted away from his broken body, disappearing into the alley.

The other Catcher leaned out the window, cursing at the sight of his dead companion. He stared for a few moments before glancing upward to find Azarin perched above him.

“You!”

Before the man could move, the black-spotted gray pounced, digging its claws into the Catcher’s throat and biting at his face. The force of the big cat’s impact caused him to lose his balance, sending him hurtling down to the street.

By the time Azarin clambered down from the ledge, the four grays had made their way back up to the attic. They rubbed up against his legs and licked at his fingertips. He stuck his head out the window to stare at the bent and broken Catchers below. Luckily, the alleyway was too far from the nearest intersecting street for anyone to spot the bodies by chance, especially in the dark.

But someone would find them eventually. If nothing else, the guild would grow suspicious when the two thugs didn’t return.

They would come looking for him again.

He rubbed the swollen, scarred flesh around his eyes.

Next time, he might not be so fortunate.

“We have to go,” he said. The grays scattered as he paced from one end of the little room to the other, fetching his few belongings. After grabbing his hatchet and quarter-spear, he tried to usher the cats into their respective coat pockets, but they darted away, keeping just beyond his reach.

“Stop it. We have to go!”

The black-spotted gray retreated to the doorway, where it stood like a stone gargoyle and stared at him. It meowed, and the others struck sentinel poses alongside it.

“They’ll come back,” Azarin said. “More of them. We have to get away.”

The big cat blinked. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d seen it blink like that. Then it glanced to the white-spotted trio. The smaller cats meowed in unison and moved in on him.



“What? What is it?”

He tried to step around them, but every time they nimbly darted around to cut off his advance. Gradually, they moved in close enough to cause him to take a step back to avoid stepping on them. In the little attic, he quickly ran out of space and bumped into his bedroll. After a brief stumble, he found his balance and sat down, even as the cats pressed in on him.

The black-spotted gray meowed loudly, and the others hurried back to its side. Working together, they pressed their paws against the door and pushed it closed, though it no longer latched shut after the Catchers had kicked it open.

When Azarin shifted his weight to stand up, the little grays hurried over to him again, glaring at him with their black eyes.

“Okay, okay,” he said, easing down onto the bedroll.

The black-spotted gray meowed again after Azarin got situated, and the white-spotted trio nuzzled against him, rubbing their soft fur against his exposed skin.

“What are you...?” His eyelids suddenly became heavy, his vision fuzzy. Fatigue tugged at his limbs, holding him down even as he told his body to stand up and get as far away from that attic room as he could.

Sleep took him, a blissful and dreamless slumber accompanied by soothing chorus of purrs.

The black-spotted gray’s meowing roused him shortly after sunrise.

He rolled over and coughed, shaking loose the sludge in his lungs. Barely opening his eyes, he stumbled over to the window, hacked up a mouthful of the vile stuff, and spat into the alleyway far below. The greenish spittle hit the pavestones hard.

When his vision came into focus, Azarin’s stomach tightened.

There was no sign of the Catchers’ bodies.

The black-spotted gray meowed again behind him.

He turned to find the four cats huddled around a roughspun sack in the center of the room.

“What’s that?”



The white-spotted gray trio meowed with one voice.

Azarin walked over to the sack and picked it up. The bottom was dark and wet. He reached inside, his fingers closing around a fistful of hair.

“Oh, gods...”

The cats rubbed against his legs as he pulled Lady Isikelle’s head from the sack.



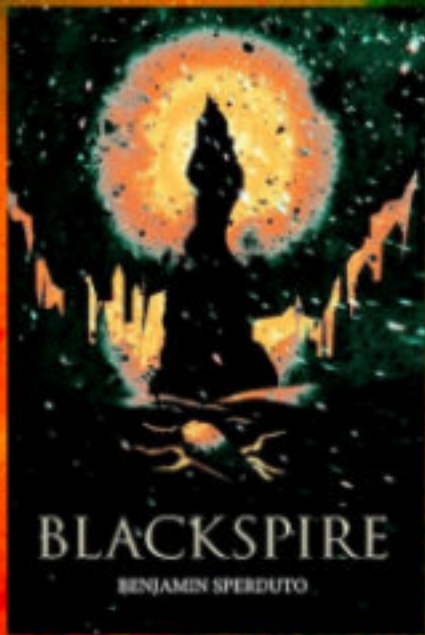
Word of Lady Isikelle’s murder spread quickly through Spiresreach. The Catchers Guild, a quarrelsome assemblage under the best of circumstances, quickly fragmented into competing factions without her leadership. A few senior journeymen struck out on their own, claiming master status and taking their former apprentices with them to lay exclusive claim to one of the district’s wards. As the competition over territory escalated, the Catchers seemed to forget about the strange circumstances of Lady Isikelle’s death, forget about the way her headless, naked body turned up in the guildhall courtyard one morning covered with thousands of slashes.

More importantly, they seemed to forget about Azarin and his cats. With the Catchers squabbling amongst themselves, no one could afford to waste time tracking down an unsanctioned rat catcher. Every now and again, overeager apprentices would bring word of his activities to their masters, but they received only reprimands and derision for their efforts. Rumor also had it that no small number of Catchers developed an inexplicable fear of cats, especially gray ones.

Azarin and the grays pulled in enough coin to afford a decent roof in Daggerfell ward. He even managed to find an apothecary who could brew a concoction that helped him sleep peacefully at night without choking. The strays never quite warmed up to him like they had before, but he always put food and water out for them every night. He didn’t really miss having them around, not with the grays following him everywhere he went and watching out for him.

No Catcher ever bothered them again.

END



A City Unlike
Any Other...

Ancient and wicked, the city of Blackspire feasts upon the broken dreams of its inhabitants. Can five restless souls defy the city's power to take control of their own fate?

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