

The
first
Pillar

A Stranger in the Marketplace



Over and over again, the sun wrestled the moon for dominance of the earth, a ritual dividing night from day. When Mati first became aware of this struggle, his was a floating home of shrieking gulls and furious surf. Soon the cries of the gulls faded and the ocean mellowed. Its purr was Mati's lullaby, the creaking of the ship's planks his morning chorus. Until today. On this morning, Mati awoke to unfamiliar sounds: the thumping of heavy crates being lifted onto the deck, voices barking directions, the strains and beats of an unknown song. Deep within the bowels of the ship, the engine groaned. The small ruddy-brown cat stretched for a few moments, then snapped to attention. Perhaps he had finally arrived—but where?

It seemed an eternity since Mati had first been nudged into the cargo hatch of the ship in the harbor of his old

home. He recalled his mother's words: "Where the ship draws to land, there you must leave it. Until then, stay safe and don't let yourself be seen."

"And what then, Amma, what then?"

"Then, my son, you will be truly alone, free to follow your senses, to carve out a new life in a very different world. Let the three pillars be your guide."

He was only a catling, barely out of kittenhood, and memories of his life before the voyage were smudged like the ink of an old book. He had survived the long days on the ship undetected, stealing scraps. Indeed, Mati considered himself a master thief. He prided himself on his stealth. On a mission to the kitchen or the small dining room where the crew sat for meals, Mati imagined himself invisible, his narrow body hugging the dark cabin walls, dissolving into shadow.

Mati had found it easy to make his way around the ship unnoticed. There were numerous gaps between crate and corridor through which a stowaway cat could scramble. He could even squat under a chair only tail lengths away from crew members, realizing that these furless giants could smell him no more than they could a ghost.

Thirst was easy to quench. Mati had soon discovered the shower cubicle, where the drizzle of a faulty showerhead ensured that he could drink his fill once the crew was up and about the ship. But one trip above deck was enough for the catling, terrified by the impossible expanse of ocean and the salty air that stiffened his whiskers and stung his eyes. His

territory was the world below deck, with its satisfying odor of the crew's rubber boots, oil, and leather.

On this morning, as unfamiliar sounds and smells alerted him to a change in the world, Mati froze in the cargo hatch and listened to the fading murmur of the ship's engine. Whiskers bristling with excitement, he pounced onto a ledge and out of the cargo hatch until, neck craned, he was peering into a damp autumn morning. Even in this dull light, his eyes ached as they adapted. A hazy sun was rising over looming gray buildings.

Mati's lips parted and his nose crinkled. He could taste the moisture in the air and knew that the ship had finally moored in fresh water.

After weeks on the ship and remembering almost nothing from his previous life, Mati was overwhelmed by a sudden fear. This would be his first opportunity to leave the ship, but his surroundings looked so strange. He missed the real home he could hardly remember and the mother he loved. What would she have advised?

He remembered again what she had told him before withdrawing from the ship: "Where the ship draws to land, there you must leave it."

Glancing about, Mati noted that the vessel had moored at a dock, on which men were preparing a small crane to lift the cargo onto dry land. He crept toward the left side of the deck, hiding between some pipes. Nearby, a gangplank had just been laid, and Mati was about to run down it when he

saw two pairs of boots rushing toward him. Oblivious to Mati, the men marched up the gangplank, dragging a trolley behind them. Mati glanced back between the pipes to find the deck now blocked by a huge crate, which crew members were fastening to the crane.

"What are you doing?" demanded one of the men pulling the trolley.

Mati glanced up guiltily before realizing that the question was directed at one of the crew members handling the crate.

"B-crates off first—you will find these are the rules. White cottons, in style Oxford."

"I don't care about the style. They ain't coming off that way."

"Sir, I have my instructions!"

"Just back up, back up."

"B-crates first, please."

"Back up, will you, or we'll be here all day!"

"It's on the Instructions for Carriage. I have here copy, if you like to inspect. It specifically say—"

"Listen, you're in England now, and you might like to show a bit of common sense—"

"There is absolutely no need for . . ."

Although Mati understood human chatter, he scarcely had a sense of what the men were arguing about. He was busy making furious calculations. The men had not yet noticed him hiding between the pipes, but he had better leave quickly

with this argument looming above his head. He dashed under the trolley on the gangplank. From here he judged that he was quite close to land, perhaps only two or three tail lengths away if he leaped at an angle from the gangplank. After a moment's deliberation, Mati crept out from under the trolley. He drew himself together, took a deep breath, and cleared the stretch with a running jump. He landed gracelessly and scrambled away from the ship, zigzagging along the ground with lurching steps. He collapsed under a pile of plastic chairs beside the dockers' yard. Nearby, men in overalls smoked cigarettes and drank milky tea from foam cups. Mati realized that a life on the ship had taught him how to keep his balance on the shifting seas but had ill equipped him for land. It took him a few moments to adjust.

Mati turned back to bid farewell to the ship, then hastened along the dock past warehouses and wastelands of concrete, following the river upstream. He passed lonely fishermen dotted along the riverbank and hurried beneath bridges that trembled under traffic. Finally he came to a small park flanked by peeling metal railings. He spotted the bare feet of an old man asleep on a bench. The man clutched a mottled blanket, a skinny dog with a rope for a collar asleep on the grass beside him. Mati hesitated, then backed away from the park and skirted around it until he saw stalls where goods were being exchanged for metal discs and pieces of paper. He spotted fabrics, sparkling silver trinkets, wooden objects, and all manner of curiosities. This

must have been a popular spot with the humans; Mati noted a growing crowd clucking over the wares on display.

Pressed down low to the ground, the soft fur of his belly almost stroking the tarmac, Mati slunk under people's legs to investigate the marketplace. He lost his fears completely when he spotted a pigeon pecking about in the dust, a bird with a body almost as large as his own but a head scarcely bigger than his muzzle. Mati ran toward it, but the bird saw him coming and fluttered away noisily in a gust of grime and feathers.

"Ah! Come on!" cried Mati. "Come back! Please come back! I won't hurt you!"

Suddenly his nostrils filled with the smell of cooking meat. Seized with intense hunger, Mati followed his nose to a stall selling a collection of savory meals. A line of people snaked around one side. Along the other, Mati noticed a piece of spiced chicken that had fallen beside the bins. He made an excited dash for it, licking his lips in anticipation.

"And who do you think *you* are?" hissed a voice. Mati froze in his tracks. Three pairs of slanted green eyes were staring at him.