# Counting

One.

Two.

Three.

I can count the number of metal bars I see.

A thin, ragged piece of cloth hung from the dirty ceiling of my cage door. Small sparks of light shone through the spaces between the stitches. Besides that, everything was dark.

The sound of keys jingling echoed through the cramped space. I heard a voice:

"…and five cents. We're going bankrupt, Frank."

Another voice cut into my ears. "We have to do something with these things. No one wants to take some overgrown cat."

I sniffed the air tentatively. The pungent scent of bourbon lay thick in the air. Different smells signaled different days. The overpowering smell of cologne meant that it would be one of the better days. The grimy mix of sweat and alcohol that torched my nostrils meant it would be a bad day. Of course, our moods depended on his mood. All of us knew this.

"Get these things to the Ringmaster."

"Does he know about the finances?"

"Of course he does!" The voice yelled, raspy. "Yeah, he might waste his money on drinks, but he's not stupid. Now get the animals onto the ring before he ditches our sorry butts."

"…Yes, sir."

A heavy slam echoed, and the voices went away.

"Are they gone?"

A small voice, one that I easily recognized anywhere, startled the silence in the room. The voice belonged to another one of myself. One that had never done anything to be sent somewhere like

this. One that he thought he could just torture and get away with.

"…Hello?"

My enraged thoughts slid to a stop as I struggled to control myself. Luckily, the voice of my kin helped calm me.

One.

Two.

Three.

I can count how many breaths I've taken.

"Yes, my friend. The two humans are gone. We are safe, but only for now."

A small paw grasped at the blanket covering my cage. One yank and the dim lights of the room were flooded in my eyes. In front of me stood a small and dainty squirrel. His eyes were about as large as marbles; his arms could barely support a pebble. In his smile lay innocence. Innocence that I would make sure would never be taken for granted. I'm not creating another circus animal. I am freeing another soul.

"You broke out of your cage again."

He giggled. "Silly Bagha. Those mean humans can't keep me locked up like that!"

"That's dangerous. They'll cut off your hind legs if they catch you."

The squirrel half-lidded his eyes condescendingly and shook his head from side to side. "It's like you always say, Bagha. One, two, three-"

"-If you bite the bullet, you cross the sea. Yes, I'm aware of that." I chuckled heartily.

The squirrel bounced up and down. "Ooh, could you tell me the story again?! Please?"

"I'm about to go on, Orava." I started to protest at the request, but the small squirrel's large eyes stared back at me solemnly. Orava pulled this trick every single day, and every single day, it worked. Such young eyes, glazed with tears that were threatening to spill out. Even though I

knew those tears were fake, he could somehow convince me to answer his wishes exactly as asked.

"Fine," I mumbled in defeat, secretly having as much fun as my friend in front of me. "When I was small, even smaller than you, my mother would show me how she learned all of her skills for being the best hunter in our ambush. One of those skills included counting. Examining a group of prey and assessing the number and direction was essential. One night, I was getting so upset that I kept forgetting the number names that I stomped on a group of fresh vegetation and tore it up with my teeth. My mother saw. She wasn't happy. After she knew what was wrong, she thought up the perfect solution. To my surprise, my mother started singing. Yes, *singing*. She sang-"

"*One, two, three,*

*If you bite the bullet, you can cross the sea.*

*One, two, three,*

*Look close, you can still see the birds in the trees*

*One, two, three,*

*One day, you'll know what it's like to feel free."*

Orava stopped crooning and smiled at me.

I smiled back. "You took the words right out of my mouth."

Out of nowhere, the booming thuds of steel-toed boots hit the floor in a shaking rhythm. It rattled the cages with its sheer intensity. Orava was frightened of what could possibly be happening, but I have been here long enough to know what that sound meant.

That sound meant *run*.

"Flee, my friend," I nudged my head against the cage door several times. "Flee. The Ringmaster's intoxicated. His misdirected anger could be dangerous."

"I can't just abandon you!"

"Orava!" I hissed in a whisper. "You-"

The footsteps ceased.

It felt as if the whole world went quiet.

A tall shadow blocked out all the light in front of the cage.

"Ah, it seems that the rat has escaped. I wonder, have the mousetraps stopped working?"

In one swift movement, a pale and skinny hand snatched Orava from his place, nearly crushing his middle in the grip. The man examined him with disgust, and eventually tossed the small squirrel at the wall, as if he had thrown a piece of paper in the garbage.

My eyes darted to my friend. *Is he alright?*

A few seconds later, Orava stood up, a bit stunned, and scurried into the dark. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

The old man turned to me. His sickly fingers wrapped around the bars of the cage. He giggled like a madman, obviously drunk. "Hello, little kitty," he cooed. "Are you ready to be a star tonight?"

His finger stuck through the small metal wires of the crate. "Here, kitty, kitty," he clicked his tongue repeatedly as if I were a child. As if he actually cared about me. Just taunting me. I was so sick of it.

"Who's a good kitty-cat? Who's a good—"

I bared my teeth and bit down on his finger. Hard.

I have never heard a human be so loud before.

The Ringmaster slammed his body against the wall in pain. He grasped his bitten hand, which

was now bleeding profusely from the knuckles. His face twisted and contorted, similar to the faces of every single animal he has ever whipped.

Fortunately, he managed to control himself. After all, he had creatures to torture, and the whole world would be watching. The man stopped cradling his wrist and scowled at me.

"*Filthy vermin*," he whispered, right up to the cage door.

I rolled my eyes slightly, not meeting his gaze.

"*LOOK* AT ME, TIGER!" He reached inside the cage and yanked the chain around my neck, squeezing the breath out of my throat. "I'M TALKING TO YOU!" He stared at me the way a predator might gaze at prey that tried to escape its claws. He banged his teeth-sunken hand against the cage, as he was trying to rip the door away. "YOU'RE AN *ANIMAL!!* YOU DO WHAT I SAY, OR ELSE—"

The ringmaster's bloodied hand with teeth marks slammed against the cage walls. It fell limp against the cold metal, as if he had no control over his own body. As if it were lifeless. Sudden flashes of early memories whipped through my mind. I was overtaken by instinct and backed up in fear.

The man grinned, knowing his games had worked. He leaned in close to my soft ears, pinned against my head. "Or else you will end up as a nice purse just like your mommy."

One.

Two.

Three.

I can count how many painful memories this man brings to me.

The ringmaster swung open the cage with swift movement. Clutching my tight-fitted collar, he yanked me away from the only safe place here. His shoes clicked in rhythm as he walked down the dark hallway. Murmurs of a crowd could be heard from our position.

I whined. I didn't mean to, but the spiked collar began to dig into my throat.

The man glared, his face sinking into a wicked frown. He reached behind his back, and pulled out the one object that could keep his prisoners silent. A phrase I've known all too well escaped his dried lips.

"Give me a show, or I'll give you something to cry about."

The curtain swung open.

I've done this routine a hundred times. I could recite all the sounds you could hear in my sleep. The giggles of the small children in the audience, the sparse applause from the mothers and fathers once they saw my sickly, skinny figure. The scratchy voice of the ringmaster, addressing the crowd and filling them in on, "his escapades to find the one and only mind-reading tiger". The sharp crackle of his instrument when I didn't perform as expected.

But today, I couldn't hear anything.

Only one sound was echoing in my ears.

Birds.

The high-pitched chirping and warbling of small songbirds rang out. It was quiet, yet loud enough for myself to hear. A warm feeling cast throughout my body, and every other noise was silenced as I tuned into the melody of nature. A part of me was brought alive; perhaps instinct, perhaps yearning. I wasn't sure, exactly. The last time I heard this sound was so, so long ago. Almost nine years. I didn't think it would ever come back since that day. The day I had been stolen from my home. The first day I started to appreciate everything around me.

But that day was not my last.

*One. Two. Three.*

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages, please give it up for the colossal counting cat from the jungle, Bagha!" The spotlight turned over to the main stage, yet another flash of light

intermittently illuminated the room. The tent flap to the outside was wide open.

*If you bite the bullet, you can cross the sea.*

For a single moment, the ringmaster let go of his vice around my collar to adjust his jacket. My golden opportunity. I leapt from my stance on the stage and started running towards the open flap. He tried to grab at my chain, but I was too quick. The audience erupted in frightened gasps and whispering.

*One. Two. Three.*

The crowd parted for me, out of fear. As I neared the exit, I saw a glowing white light stream into the tent. It was something that I hadn't seen since I was small. Bright, warm light, glittering into the beautiful foliage in a burst of green. It felt as if a wonderful song was silenced, and I was now hearing it for the first time in years.

*Look close, you can still see the birds in the trees.*

"Get that tiger!" The ringmaster screeched. Hordes of men broke out of their stance around the circus tent. I could only hear them; I couldn't dare look back now. Not like this.

*One. Two. Three.*

As my paws scampered across the floor, brief shards of memories cut into my mind. The memory of being thrown into a cold metal cage, the only home I would ever know. My memory of Orava, a small, fragile animal. Smaller than I was when I was taken. The kindest soul I ever met. And my mother. My last memory of her lying on the ground, her breathing tense. She was my everything. No, she is everything.

She… is still here.

I'm living her dream for her. Her dream of liberty.

I hear her voice.

*One day, you'll know what it's like to feel free.*