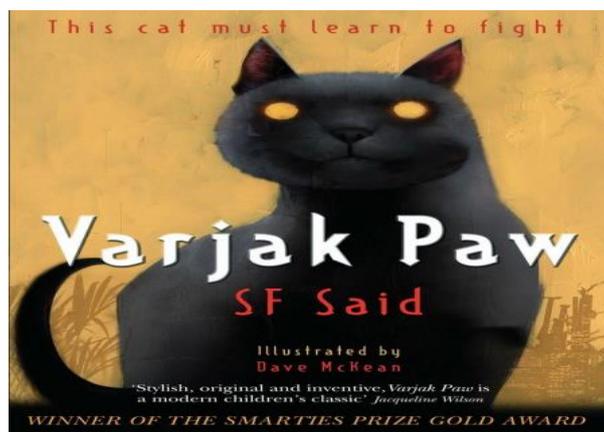


VARJAK PAW - CHAPTER 7



Varjak dreamed.

He dreamed he was walking by the river in the heat of the night. Zigzag trees swayed in the warm breeze. The air smelled like cinnamon, and tasted of ripe dates. He looked up. The stars were different. They sparkled big and bright in a brilliant sky.

An old cat with silver-blue fur like starlight walked beside him. He looked like a Mesopotamian Blue, but he wore no collar and his eyes were amber like the rising sun.

‘Welcome to the land of your ancestors,’ said the old cat. ‘Welcome to Mesopotamian.’

‘Mesopotamian? Where Jalal came from?’

‘Jalal the Paw, yes indeed. This was his home in olden days.’

Varjak’s pulse beat a little faster. ‘Did you know Jalal?’ he said.

‘And if I did?’

‘Then I’d ask you questions! Are the tales true? Could he really talk to dogs? And – and what would he think of me?’

The old cat cackled. ‘What a question! Why should that matter to you?’

Varjak looked away. ‘My family say I’m a disgrace to the name of Jalal. They say I’m not a proper, pure-bred Mesopotamian Blue.’

‘Oh? And what say you? Are you worthy of your ancestors – or not?’

‘No,’ said Varjak quietly. He hung his head. I’m not.’

‘What if you knew the secret Way of Jalal? Would you then be a proper, pure-bred Mesopotamian Blue?’

Varjak smiled sadly, remembering the Elder Paw. ‘I already know about the Way. And I feel just the same.’

‘You know the Way? How impressive. Perhaps you will demonstrate. Strike me.’

The old cat stopped walking. He blocked Varjak's path. He wasn't big, but something about him looked dangerous. Varjak stepped back a pace.

'Strike me!' he commanded again. His amber eyes flashed. 'Strike me now, or die where you stand.'

Well, if that was what he wanted ... why not?

Varjak swiped gently at the mad old cat, meaning to tap him on the side. But somehow, he didn't connect. His paw sailed through the air, and thudded harmlessly on the ground. Varjak frowned. How could he have missed?

The old cat combed his whiskers. 'Am I too quick for you?' He challenged. 'Is this the Way of Jalal? I think you know nothing, little kitten. Strike me again!'

This was becoming annoying. Now Varjak wanted to hit him, hit him hard. He decided to give it his best shot: there was no way he could miss.

He slammed out a silver-blue paw, missed completely, and lost his balance. Those alien stars twinkled at him with silent laughter as he rolled onto the riverbank. He sprang up again, furious.

'Once more!' goaded the old cat. Varjak's Frustration boiled over. He lashed out. His paw flapped stupidly in space, and he toppled to the ground. He kicked with his back legs, but he was fighting himself now, and he knew it.

He was beaten.

His elderly opponent peered down at him. 'I thought the first attack rather half hearted,' he said, as if they were having a friendly chat about the weather. 'The third was crude and clumsy, as you know. The second showed potential, yes; but it was slow, terribly slow ... Still, you have spirit. If you wish to learn the Way – the true Way – only ask, and I will teach you.'

Varjak couldn't speak. The words stuck in his throat. He felt ashamed and embarrassed. It was obvious that this old cat knew far more about the Way than him, but he couldn't bring himself to admit it. His pride wouldn't allow it.

The old cat shrugged. 'Farewell, then.' He began to walk away.

Something shifted inside Varjak, like a locked door opening. 'Wait!' he called. The old cat turned about. His body shimmered in the warm breeze. 'Don't go,' said Varjak. 'I - I want to learn the Way.'

The old cat smiled. 'Very well. Then I shall teach you. We begin now.' He cleared his throat. 'There are Seven Skills in the Way of Jalal. The first of these is Open Mind, and you have just found its secret. For only when you admit that you know nothing, can you truly know anything.'

Varjak's eyes widened as the words sank in. 'Who are you?'

'Do you still not know me, my son?'

‘Jalal?’

‘Jalal the Paw, that am I.’ He winked. ‘Believe none of the tales.’