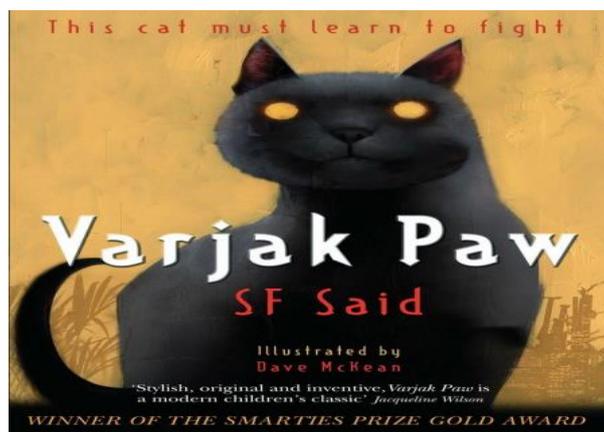


VARJAK PAW - CHAPTER 6



Varjak could see for miles and miles. There were no walls or trees to block his view any more. Just open space, rippling out ahead of him. beneath him. He was standing in space, and it was a long way to fall.

He peered down the inside of the wall He could see nothing through the trees. The Gentleman's cats and the Elder Paw were hidden by the tangled net of branches. There was no back. He was truly on his own.

Had he done the right thing? Shouldn't he have helped his grandfather? He couldn't get that picture out of his mind: the Elder Paw, limp like a broken toy.

Tremors were coming up from somewhere deep within him, racking him open. Varjak blocked them, stopped them, pushed them back down. The Elder Paw knew what he was doing. He'd planned it. He was willing to lay down his life, so Varjak could have the chance to go Outside, and find a dog.

All he could do now was go on. But where?

Ahead of him was a sea of lights, stretching far away into the darkness. Varjak couldn't tell what they were, or where they led. He looked up. Another sea of lights: the moon and stars, cold and distant. They made him giddy in the pit of his stomach, so dizzy that he could almost feel the wall slip out from under him.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten. It didn't work. The view was too big; he was too small. A pure-bred Mesopotamian Blue had no place on top of a wall. But then, as his family said, he wasn't much of a Blue. So who was he?

Beneath that giant sky, he was no one. He was nothing.

Varjak's stomach lurched. He was going to be sick if he stayed on the wall any longer. Down. He had to get down, and quickly – the black cats would be looking for him. But how? He couldn't climb down the wall: it was sheer. He'd over-balanced and crash if he tried.

There was a tree Outside the wall, just one. He could climb down a tree, if he could only make it far.

He stretched out the paw. His pad zipped on wet moss that cloaked the stone. He clung on with his claw and regained his balance. A blast of bitterly cold wind almost pushed him over the edge. Another wave of giddiness washed over him. The wind seemed to taunt him with its song. Too high, it sang. *Too high, too soon!* Varjak tried to shut it out, but the song was everywhere. *You've gone too high too soon. You'll never make it to that tree!*

He ignored it, positioned his tail for extra balance and took another step along the mossy stone. It was like walking on ice: treacherous: impossible. In his mind, he saw himself slip, slide, skid off that wall, smash to pieces on the ground below. He shuddered.

Think of something else, he told himself. Think of the Way. What was it? Slow-Time. Moving Circles.

Shadow-Walking.

Varjak staggered towards the tree. *Too high*, whistled the wind.

'Slow-Time!' he yelled back. He wasn't going to let the wind beat him.

'Moving Circles!' He wasn't going to let the wall beat him

'Shadow-Walking!' Because he was Varjak Paw, and he knew the Way.

Varjak walked the wall like he'd been walking walls all his life. He was light and springy on his paws.

It worked: the Way actually worked! He wasn't dizzy anymore. He didn't feel sick.

I'd like to see Julius do this, he thought

Now he just had to step into the tree, and he could climb down easily. He'd done the hard part. Varjak grinned, and pounced onto the nearest branch.

CRACK!

Falling...

Didn't test it? Stupid!

The wind whipped into his face as he fell towards the ground. He closed his eyes-
-and everything went black.