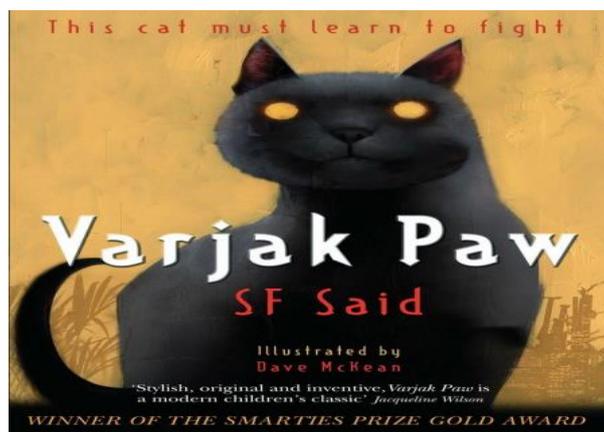


VARJAK PAW - CHAPTER 3



‘Family Council is now in session,’ declared the Elder Paw above the hubbub in the front room.

Mother, Father and Aunt Juni were whispering to one another, huddled together on a rug so old it had lost its pattern and faded away. Julius and Jasmine were sitting behind them, nodding seriously, as if they were grown-ups too. Jay, Jethro and Jerome were fighting over the toy mouse, trying to push each other into the flames of the antique fireplace.

As the Elder Paw’s words, they all settled down. Varjak was sitting quietly, on his own at the back, but his mind was burning. This was his first Family Council.

From the Contessa’s red velvet armchair, where he stood he stood, the Elder Paw began to speak. ‘The family tales tell us that when our ancestor Jalal came out of Mesopotamia, he wandered the earth for many years, before finding a home with the Contessa. Generations of Paws have lived in this house since Jalal’s time. But those days may be coming to an end. I believe the Contessa is dead.’

The older cat gasped. They shot strange looks at one another, and shook their heads. A log crackled loudly in the fireplace.

The Elder Paw waited until it was quiet again to continue. ‘She has seldom left her room of late, only to feed us and tend the fire. Our youngest litter – have hardly seen Varjak, Jay, Jethro and Jerome – have hardly seen her. They barely even know what she looks like. She would only let that happen if she was ill, very ill. And now this Gentleman. What we saw today confirms my fears. The Contessa is gone.’

‘Yes, she’s probably gone somewhere,’ said Father. ‘I’m sure she’ll be back. And in the meantime, her Gentleman friend is looking after us,’

‘He is not her friend,’ said the Elder Paw. ‘I remember him. He came to this house years ago, before any of you were born. He and the Contessa had a terrible argument. He wanted to take us away, but she wouldn’t let him. She threw him out in the end, shouting and screaming.’

It was silent for the moment. Varjak saw Father's eyes glint green in the dark. There was no light in the room but crackling, flickering fire.

'This is abused,' said Aunt Juni. She licked her plump paws confidently. 'We're pure-bred Mesopotamian Blues, the noblest of cats. Nothing bad can happen to us.'

'It's silly to alarm the kittens like this,' tutted Mother. 'They're too young and impressionable to understand anything so serious. They'll go and have nightmares now, you see if they don't.'

'That's right.' Father arched his back and stood up. 'I don't understand the problem. The Gentleman is feeding us better than the Contessa ever did.'

'But why is he being so nice to us?' said the Elder Paw. 'Fancy food, presents – it's too good to be true. And what about those black cats who gave Varjak a scare?'

'We all know about Varjak and his tales,' declared Father. 'No, I see nothing to worry about. I don't believe the Contessa is dead, and I don't believe this is the same Gentleman the Elder Paw remembers. He must be getting confused in his old age.'

There was a murmur of agreement around the room. Varjak couldn't stop himself. He had to speak.

'I saw the men carry something away,' he said. 'It could've been the Contessa's body-'

'Varjak!' hissed Mother. 'That really is too revolting!' she turned to Elder Paw. 'You see what you've done?'

'But it's true!' said Varjak. 'And so are the cats! They've -'

'Shut up, you stupid insect!' snarled Julius.

'We're the only cats in the Contessa's house. And this is grown-up business, not kitten make-believe.'

Everyone started to shout at once. The flames roared louder and higher in the fireplace.

'Listen to me!' demanded the Elder Paw, struggling to regain control. 'We need to make a plan. If things change in this house, we will have to go Outside.'

'Elder Paw!' cried Mother. 'What can you be thinking of? Everyone knows the world Outside is full of monsters. At least here we're safe from dogs.'

'But we don't even know what dogs are!' said the Elder Paw. 'This house is the only world we know.'

'This house is the only world we need,' said Aunt Juni. 'The Contessa is fine. Everything will go on as before.'

'Listen to me,' pleaded the Elder Paw. He stepped down off the armchair and into the middle of the room.

Father Squared up to him. 'No. You listen to me for a change.' His fur bristled. 'Maybe it's time for someone else to make the decision in his family.'

The room was completely still now, except for the raging fire. Shocked at what he was seeing, but unable to look away, Varjak watched the two of them intently. Everyone did.

Father began to circle the Elder Paw, wordless and menacing. He bared his teeth. He looked twice as big, twice as fierce as normal. His shadow danced across the Elder Paw's body in the firelight. He hissed, and strode forwards.

The Elder Paw backed away. Suddenly he looked tired and old, very old, like the threadbare rug on which he stood. 'I'm just saying we should think -'

'That's enough!' blazed Father. 'This Council is over,' He turned to face the family. 'Let's go.'

There was a rumble of support around the room.

Varjak's throat felt dry. He couldn't believe how fast it had happened. One moment, the Elder Paw was in charge; the next, it was all over.

'Pure-bred Mesopotamian Blues,' croaked the Elder Paw. 'The family of Jalal. Is this what we've sunk to?'

'The Council,' spat Father, 'is over.'