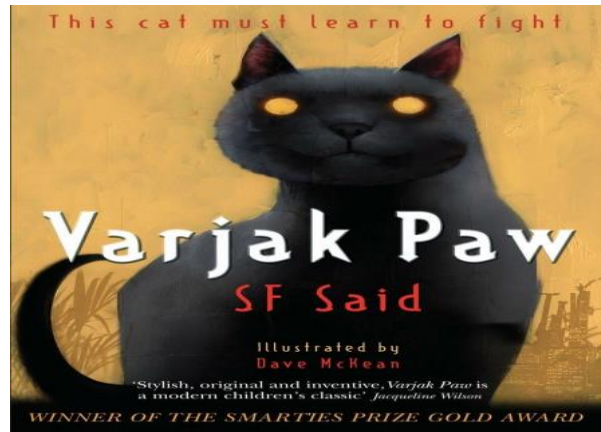


VARJAK PAW - CHAPTER 1



The Elder Paw was telling a story.

It was a Jadal tale, one of the best. Varjak loved to hear his grandfather's tales of their famous ancestor: how Jadal fought the fiercest warrior cats, how he was the mightiest hunter, how he came out of Mesopotamia and travelled to the ends of the earth, further than any cat had been before.

But today, the Elder Paw's tale just made Varjak restless. So what if Jalal had such exciting adventure? Varjak never would. Jadal had ended his days in the Contessa's house. His family of Mesopotamian Blues had stayed here ever since.

The old place must have been full of light and life in Jadal's time, generations ago – but now it was full of dust and musty smells. The windows were always closed, the doors locked. There was a garden, but it surrounded by a high stone wall. Jalal was the last to cross it. In all the years since then, no one had ever left the Contessa's house.

Now, no one except Varjak was even listening to the tale of Jalal's adventures. Father, Mother and Aunt Juni were dozing in the late afternoon light that trickled through the thick green windows. His big brother Julius was flexing his muscles; his cousin Jasmine was fiddling with her collar. His brothers Jay, Jethro and Jerome were playing one of those Kittenish games that Varjak could never see the point of, and wasn't allowed to join in anyway.

No one was looking at him. This was his chance. He'd been in the garden before, but the family didn't like it out there, and never let him stay very long.

Stealthy as Jalal himself, Varjak rose up and padded to the cat door. He could see the garden on the other side. He could almost feel the fresh air, brushing through his whiskers. He nudged it open –

'Varjak Paw!' It was father.

'Where do you think you're going?'

Varjak spun around. The tale was over; they'd woken up and seen him. But this time, he wouldn't give in.

'Aren't we allowed in the garden, now?' he said.

'Sweetheart,' said mother, coming over and straightening his collar, 'the garden is a nasty dirty place. You're a pedigree cat. A pure-bred Mesopotamian Blue. What do you want out there?'

Varjak looked around ; at the stuffy furniture, the locked-up cupboards, the curtains he wasn't allowed to climb. He'd never been anywhere else, but this had to be the most boring place on earth.

'Hunting,' he said 'Aren't we supposed to hunt? The tales talk about –'

'Tales!' snorted his brother Julius, green eyes glinting. It was said that their ancestor Jalal had green eyes. Everyone in the family had them – everyone but Varjak Paw.

'Tales are for kittens,' scoffed Julius, Cousin Jasmine giggled; Varjak bristled.

'Jalal was a long, long time ago,' said mother, smoothing and grooming Varjak's silver-blue fur, until he wiggled away. 'Anyway, Jalal came to live in the Contessa's house for a good reason. The tales also say there are monsters Outside, huge monsters called dogs, so fierce that even people fear them.' She shuddered. 'No, we're lucky that the Contessa loves us, and lets us live here.'

'The Contessa loves some of us,' interrupted Julius. Varjak knew what was coming; and worse, he thought it might be true. 'When I was a kitten,' boasted Julius, 'the Contessa was down here every day. She used to let me play on her lap, she made a fuss of me. But now she only ever comes down to feed us, and sometimes she doesn't even do that. In fact, we've hardly seen her at all – since that funny looking Varjak was born.'

Cousin Jasmine giggled again. This time, Varjak's little brothers Jay, Jethro and Jerome joined in.

'It's because of his eyes,' added Julius. 'The colour of danger. A Mesopotamian Blue whose eyes aren't green – it's embarrassment.'

That did it. Julius was bigger than him, and older, but Varjak couldn't help it. He faced up to Julius, fur rising anger.

'I don't believe you,' he said. 'You're a liar.'

'Varjak!' said Father. 'That's no way to talk to you brother!'

'But Julius said-'

'Whine, whine, whine,' sneered Julius. 'Listen to the little insect whine.'

'Julius, you shouldn't tease him so much,' said Father.' 'The Contessa's upstairs because she's ill, nothing more. But Varjak Paw – you have to learn to behave like a proper Mesopotamian Blue. We're noble cats, special cats. We don't run around calling each other liars. We don't talk about disgusting things like hunting. And we

don't get our paws all muddy in the garden. That's not what being a Blue is about. Do you understand?'

Varjak's tail curled up. It was always like this. Julius could get away with anything; but everything; Varjak did was wrong.

'Your father's talking to you,' said Aunt Juni sternly. 'Do you understand?'

He stared down at the cold stone floor, silent. There was nothing he could say.

'Fine,' said Fahter. 'Suit yourself. But until you learn to act like a Blue, there'll be no supper for you.' He licked his chops. 'Come on, everyone. Let's eat.'

They all headed down the corridor to the kitchen, leaving Varjak on his own in the hallway between the stairs and front door. Last to go was the Elder Paw, the head of the family.

'Don't worry, Varjak,' he whispered, so no one else could hear. 'I'll tell you another tale tonight – one about his greatest battle.' He winked, and then joined the rest of them.

It made things a little better. Even if the tales made Varjak restless, he loved them. They were the closest he'd ever get to adventure in this place. He looked at the old, wooden stairs, covered in dusty carpet. The cats weren't allowed up there now the Contessa was ill. Her door was always shut.

The whole house was like that. No one came in and no one went out. Nothing new or exciting ever happened. It was the dullest life a cat could have.

creaak

The front door swung open. A blast of wind swirled in, sweeping all the dust into the air. Varjak's fur stood on end.

Click CLACK

Two shiny black shoes. Each big as a cat. Coming through the door.

Heart racing, Varjak bent back his head, to follow the line above the shoes. Up a pair of legs, up some more, he saw huge white hands, huge enough to hold his whole body, strong enough to break his neck.

He had to crane back further, till it hurt, to see the face. It was a man Varjak had never seen before. It was hard to make out the man's eyes for the shadow of his brow, but his full pink lips glistened wetly in the half-light.

The lips creased and opened, and out came a voice that rumbled like thunder, far above Varjak's head. The man strode into the hallway.

Varjak felt dizzy. He looked down. By the man's shiny shoes, there were two sleek black cats, Stalking into the Contessa's house. They were nothing like the Mesopotamian Blues. They looked much larger and stronger, even than Father or Julius, and there was something frightening about the way they moved. As if they

were two parts of one body, working together perfectly. Too perfect. Varjak glanced from one to the other, and couldn't tell them apart.

They came right up to him, and looked down at him with identical eyes; eyes smooth and black as their fur. He trembled.

'Who are you?' he said. There was flicker of understanding in their eyes, no expression: nothing. They just pushed him aside as if he wasn't even there, and took up positions, flanking the staircase.

And now other men came into the house. Their shiny black shoes clicked past Varjak, one by one. It was all he could see of them. Frozen to the spot, mind spinning, he watched these giants pass the black cats, climb the stairs – and enter the room where the Blues weren't allowed to go.