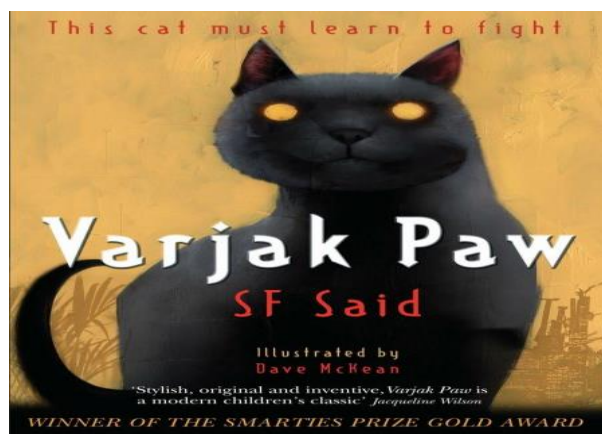


VARJAK PAW - CHAPTER 4



The moment the grown-ups had left the room, Julius turned to Varjak.

‘I know why the Contessa’s not here,’ he said, digging a claw into the toy mouse. ‘It’s because she can’t stand to look at Varjak’s eyes.’

Jasmine, Jay, Jethro and Jerome all stood by Julius’s side. No one stood by Varjak’s side. He was alone and boxed in by the Contessa’s empty armchair.

‘Poor Varjak,’ said cousin Jasmine, but she was smiling as if it was some kind of joke. ‘Why do you always pick on him? I’m sure he’d rather have green eyes like everyone else!’

‘Because they’re different,’ said Jay.

‘The colour of danger,’ added Jethro.

‘He’s not one of us,’ concluded Jerome.

Varjak ignored them. He didn’t even look at them, staring instead into the fire. ‘The Contessa’s not here because she’s properly dead. Didn’t you hear the Elder Paw?’

‘That’s enough, insect,’ snapped Julius. ‘No one asked you. And how dare you speak in a Family Council? You’re a disgrace to the name of Jalal.’

Julius’s tail thudded menacingly on the rug. Very slowly, Varjak looked up and met his brother’s eyes. His own tail started to thud.

‘Is that supposed to scare me? Sneered Julius. He towered over Varjak Paw. His claw’s came out. So did Varjak’s.

‘Fight! Fight! Fight!’ Jay, Jethro, and Jerome crowed round the two of them. Jasmine watched, grooming her fine silver-blue fur.

Varjak shook inside, but he didn’t show it, didn’t back off. He’d never had a real fight, and he knew he didn’t stand a chance against Julius – but it was as if something inside

him was rising up, something old and strong and buried deep. Who did Julius think he was?

‘Julius darling, he’s only a little kitten,’ cooed Jasmine, in her milk-in-the-morning voice.

‘He’s not even a proper Mesopotamian Blue,’ said Julius. He stared at Varjak with devastating green eyes. His pupils were thin slits of scorn, mocking challenging, darling Varjak to move first.

Varjak couldn’t. He couldn’t even hold the gaze: it was too strong, too sure of itself. Whatever it was that had risen up within him had gone. He turned away, and backed down.

It was over.

Julius had beaten him with just one look, as Father had beaten the Elder Paw. In the fireplace, the flames sputtered, and died.

‘You’re the cause of all this trouble,’ said Julius. ‘Apologise for what you’ve done.’

‘I’m sorry,’ croaked Varjak. The words were like hot coals in his mouth.

‘And don’t ever do it again – or I’ll break every bone in your body.’

Varjak sloped away from the front room, humiliation scorching his cheeks. A disgrace to the name of Jalal. That hurt the most. He didn’t care what Julius thought, but Varjak had always felt close to his ancestor, always loved the tales. He couldn’t bear the thought of being a disgrace to him.

You wait, he said to an imaginary Julius in his head. You just wait. One day, I’ll show you.

There was no one in the hallway. It didn’t matter if he was caught going out into the garden now. Things could hardly get any worse. Varjak went up to the back door, nudged the cat flap open, and slid silently out.

The garden was a dark, gloomy place, full of gnarled old trees. They’d bent back on themselves, grown inwards and locked together, making a tangled net of knotted wood. It was hard to see the sky through them.

Beyond the trees lay the stone wall that enclosed the Contessa’s house and garden. It was so high the no one in the family could imagine climbing it – even Varjak, who could sometimes make it half way up a curtain before Mother or father shouted him down.

He drank in the cold night air, peered at the massive wall, the tangled branches – and thought he could see a thin white whisker of moon up there, far, far above.

‘Varjak.’ It was the Elder Paw. He was on his own, at the bottom of the garden, by the crumbling roots of a dying tree. Varjak padded over to join him.

‘I’m sorry, Elder Paw,’ he said. ‘It’s my fault, everything that happened – but it’s true about the black cats, I swear on the name of Jalal it’s true.’

His grandfather smiled sadly. ‘I know that,’ he replied. ‘And it’s not your fault, not a bit of it. It’s them. They don’t even want to think anymore.’

They sat in silence together, in the shadow of the wall.

‘Are you still going to tell me the tale of Jalal’s greatest battle?’ said Varjak after a while.

‘Against Saliya of the North? Not tonight,’ said the Elder Paw. ‘I’m afraid there are more important things to tell you first. You’re still young, but I don’t think we have much time, and you’re the only one who’ll understand.’

Varjak’s skin tingled beneath his fur. Even after what had happened in the council, he was thrilled by his grandfather’s words.

‘I’m ready, Elder Paw,’ he said.

‘Then Listen carefully. Jadal only knows what this Gentleman’s up to – but with the Contessa gone, it’s more than we can manage. We have to get help from Outside.’

‘Isn’t the world Outside full of monsters?’ said Varjak.

‘A monster’s exactly what we need. A monster called dog. The tales say they’re huge, and strong enough to kill a man. Dogs fill the heart with fear, with their foul breath and deafening sound. But the tales also say Jadal could talk to them, so there must be a way to get their help, to scare this man away.’

‘Mother and father say the tales aren’t true. They say they’re only stories.’

‘Only stories.’ The Elder Paw looked at him. ‘And you believe that?’

Varjak shook his head. ‘No’

‘Good. Because I’m going to tell you a family secret now, an old one. It goes right back to the beginning.’ Varjak’s mind raced. This was the first he’d heard of any secret.

‘Is it about Jalal?’ he guessed.

The Elder Paw smiled in the dark. ‘It is indeed. Everyone knows the tale of Jalal – but his Way is a mystery, known only to a few.’

The Way of Jalal. This was something Julius and others knew nothing about. And the Elder Paw was telling him: him and no one else.

‘The Way,’ said the Elder Paw, ‘Has been passed down through the ages from Paw to Paw. Much of it has been forgotten over the years, lost and corrupted through time. Now only fragments remain. Perhaps the Way will help us talk to dogs; perhaps not. I do not know it all, and I fear I won’t have long enough to teach you the parts I know. But it’s all we have left.’

Varjak felt strangely disappointed. Now he knew there was a family secret, he wanted to know it all. What was the point of a secret which was lost? Still, something was better than nothing .

‘Tell me more, Elder Paw.’

‘Come Closer.’ Varjak bent towards him. ‘Closer.’

He Leaned right over, so his ear was by the Elder Paw’s mouth.

‘There are Seven Skills in the Way of Jalal,’ whispered the Elder Paw. His breath was warm in the cold night air. ‘We know only three of them. Their names are these: Slow-Time. Moving Circles. Shadow-Walking.’ He recited the skills slowly, in rhythm, like poetry. ‘Learn these words, and pass them on in turn.’

‘Slow-Time,’ said Varjak. ‘Moving Circles. Shadow-Walking.’ He rolled the words over his tongue like a new taste.

‘Again’

‘Slow-Time. Moving Circles. Shadow-Walking.’ His fur prickled at the strange sounds

‘Never forget this. Keep the Way alive, Varjak Paw.’

Varjak nodded. The words – Jadal’s words – were safe in his head. He would always remember them.

Click

The back door swung open. Varjak and the Elder Paw looked round. The Gentleman was standing there. And by his shiny black shoes, there were two sleek black cats.