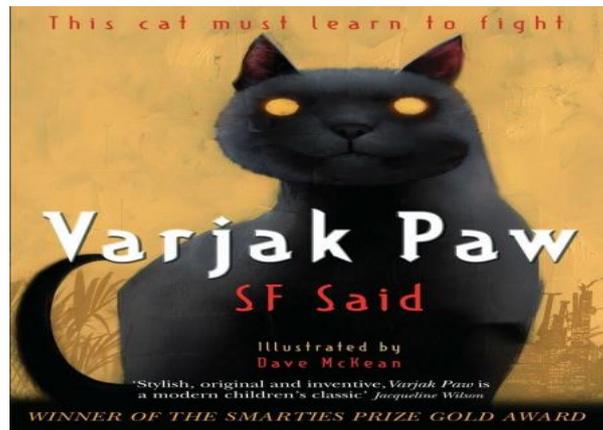


VARJAK PAW - CHAPTER 2



What should he do? Things like this just didn't happen in the Contessa's house.

Tell the family. They'd know what to do.

Varjak rushed down the corridor. He could feel two pairs of identical black eyes watching him – but the cats didn't follow. They stayed by the stairs, guarding the way up.

Fear and confusion scorched through Varjak's veins as he turned the corner. He raced to the kitchen, fast as he could go, faster still. Who were these cats? Who were the men? What did they want?

He skidded to a halt by the kitchen; hesitated by the doorway. Everything seemed so normal. The whole family was in there. They were eating super, munching and crunching from rows of china bowls, neat and regular: bowls of food, bowls of water, round white saucers of full-cream milk.

He felt like a stranger, watching from a distance. They looked so grand, with their perfectly groomed silver-blue fur their green eyes, their tidy little collars around their necks.

'So, you're ready to behave like a proper Blue,' said Father. 'Very good.'

'Have you washed your paws?' said Mother

'There are cats!' shouted Varjak. 'There are black cats in the house, and they –'

'Varjak ...' said Mother.

'- they came with a man-'

'Varjak!' said Father.

'He's gone up to Contessa's room!'

There was silence in the kitchen. The munching and crunching stopped. They all watched him: one great, green, accusing eye.

‘I just don’t understand him,’ muttered Father. ‘Why can’t he be like everyone else?’

‘You haven’t washed your paws, have you sweet-heart?’ said Mother. She came over and started scrubbing.

Varjak bit his tongue. No one believed a word he said. It wasn’t fair. In the middle of his family he felt friendless and alone.

‘Come and eat with us, Varjak,’ said cousin Jasmine. ‘The food’s ever so nice.’ Jasmine’s voice was cool and smooth, like milk in the morning.

‘I don’t want to eat,’ he tried to explain. ‘There are black cats in the house-’

‘Oh, who cares what that little insect does?’ said Julius ‘I’ll have Varjak’s food. You have to eat to build your muscles.’ Julius puffed himself up, and tucked into Varjak’s bowl. Jasmine looked impressed.

‘You hear that, Varjak?’ said Father proudly.

‘Julius is a proper Mesopotamian Blue.’

Varjak bristled. Julius might be the family hero, but Varjak knew something no one else did, something important. How could he make them believe him?

‘Oh Jalal’s name, I swear it’s true,’ he insisted.

‘The cats are guarding the stairs right now. I looked into their eye’s.’ He shivered at the memory. ‘They’re all black.’

‘Enough!’ yelled Father. That’s enough of these –these tales!’ He spat out the word ‘tales’ with particular disgust.

‘Ah, but some tales are true,’ said the Elder Paw quietly. ‘Why don’t you show us, Varjak? Take us to the cats.’

Father scowled at the Elder Paw, but kept quiet. The head of the family always had final say. Varjak’s grandfather was getting old- his fine fur was almost all silver – and he seldom spoke up these days; but everyone listened when he did.

Stomach knotted with nerves, Varjak led them down the corridor. He turned the corner into the hallway, just in time to glimpse a blur of movement by the front door. The first man was holding it open for the others. They were carrying something away. Down by their shoes, two black tails swished out of the house.

The man shut the door as the rest of Varjak’s family entered the hallway. They hadn’t seen the others, or the black cats. All they could see was the man.

‘Why, it’s a Gentleman,’ said Mother.

‘I remember when we were kittens,’ said Aunt Juni, ‘there were Ladies and Gentlemen here every day. The Contessa always had visitors.’

They looked up the stairs. The Contessa’s door was wide open. There was no one in her room. It was empty.

Surprise rippled around the family. Not knowing what to think, they peered up at the Gentleman – all except the Elder Paw, who seemed thoughtful, as if he was trying to remember something.

The Gentleman pointed up at the Contessa’s room, and said something in his voice like thunder, high above their heads. Then he crouched down, bringing himself closer to their level. His wet pink lips smiled at each of them in turn.

Varjak glanced nervously at the front door. The black cat hadn't come back. He hoped they wouldn't.

With a flourish, the Gentleman brought something out of his pocket. He held it out on his waxy white hand, and murmured to the family. Curious, they edged a little closer, to see what it was.

A toy mouse.

Small, grey, furry: it was perfect in every way, so precisely detailed it could almost be alive.

The Gentleman placed it on the floor in front of them. Varjak sniffed the mouse. It even smelled real. A tingle of wonder ran through him. He'd always wanted to hunt a mouse.

'Let me see that,' said Father. He exclaimed the toy. 'Amazing,' he purred, and batted it across to Julius. Julius flipped it stylishly, through the air, to Jay, to Jethro, to Jerome. They giggled. Varjak wondered if he'd get it back. Probably not.

'What a beautiful toy,' said Mother.

It's the best present we're ever had,' cooed Jasmine.

The Gentleman smiled, and stood up to his full height. He waved at them to follow, as his shiny black shoes went clicking towards the kitchen. Jay, Jethro and Jerome raced to be first beside him.

'Come on,' said Father. 'Let's see what he's going to do next.'

In the kitchen, Gentleman was spooning something into their bowls. It was an oily black paste, with a sharp fishy smell. Varjak's nose wrinkled at it.

'Ugh!' he said

'That's caviare,' whispered Mother. 'The rarest, most expensive food in the world.'

'Treats like this are only given to the finest pedigree cats,' purred Father. 'The Gentleman knows how important we are.'

The man put the bowls back on the floor, heaped high with fishy food, and beamed down at them. His pink lips glistened as the cats started to sniff the caviar. He nodded, turned and left the kitchen, smiling all the way.

'What was all the fuss about, Varjak?' Said Father, 'the moment he was gone. 'And the black cat nonsense –'

'I'm calling a Family Council,' interrupted the Elder Paw. 'Now. Everyone is to attend, even the kittens.'

'But Elder Paw,' protested Father, eyeing the bowls of caviare. 'Family Council is only for emergencies. It's –'

'Now,' repeated the Elder Paw. 'Now, in the front room.'

The Elder Paw strode away. Varjak glanced anxiously at Father's face. It was twisted with speechless rage.