

This cat must learn to fight

# Varjak Paw

SF Said

Illustrated by  
Dave McKean

'Stylish, original and inventive, *Varjak Paw* is  
a modern children's classic' *Jacqueline Wilson*

WINNER OF THE SMARTIES PRIZE GOLD AWARD

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## About the Book

*'There are Seven Skills in the Way of Jalal,' whispered the Elder Paw. 'We know only three of them. Their names are these. Slow-Time. Moving Circles. Shadow-Walking.'*

Varjak Paw is a Mesopotamian Blue kitten. He lives high up in an old house on a hill. He's never left home, but then his grandfather tells him about the Way - a secret martial art for cats.

Now Varjak must use the Way to survive in a city full of dangerous dogs, cat gangs and, strangest of all, the mysterious Vanishings.



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Dave McKean

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'There's no place like home.'

*The Wizard of Oz*



# Chapter One

The Elder Paw was telling a story.

It was a Jalal tale, one of the best. Varjak loved to hear his grandfather's tales of their famous ancestor: how Jalal 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.

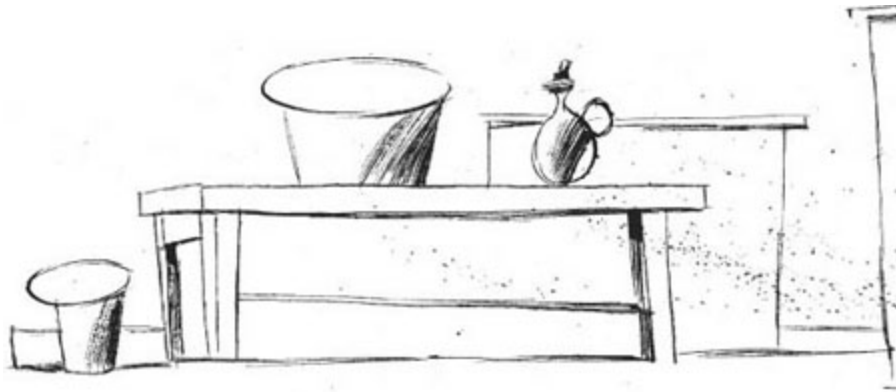
But today, the Elder Paw's tale just made Varjak restless. So what if Jalal had such exciting adventures? Varjak never would. Jalal had ended his days in the Contessa's house. His family of Mesopotamian Blues had stayed here ever since.

The old place must have been full of light and life in Jalal'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 was 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 litter 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 big 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 wriggled 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 litter 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 an embarrassment.’

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

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

‘Varjak!’ said Father. ‘That’s no way to talk to your 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 Father. '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 Jalal 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.

*creeaak*

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 even 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 shadows 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 black shoes, there were two sleek black cats, stalking into the Contessa's house. They were nothing like 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 as smooth and black as their fur. He trembled.

'Who are you?' he said. There was no 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 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.



## Chapter Two

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

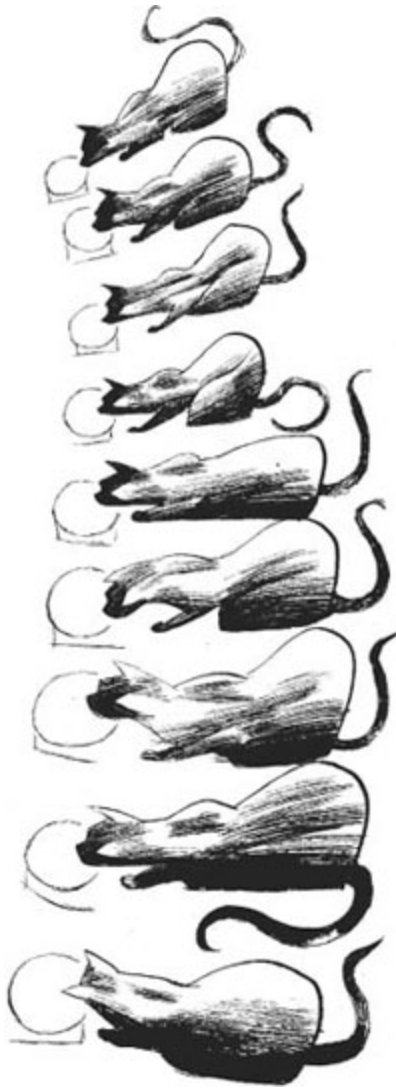
Tell the family. They'd know what to do.



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 supper, 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 the 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 sweetheart?' 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?

'On Jalal's name, I swear it's true,' he insisted. 'The cats are guarding the stairs right now. I looked into their eyes.' 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.

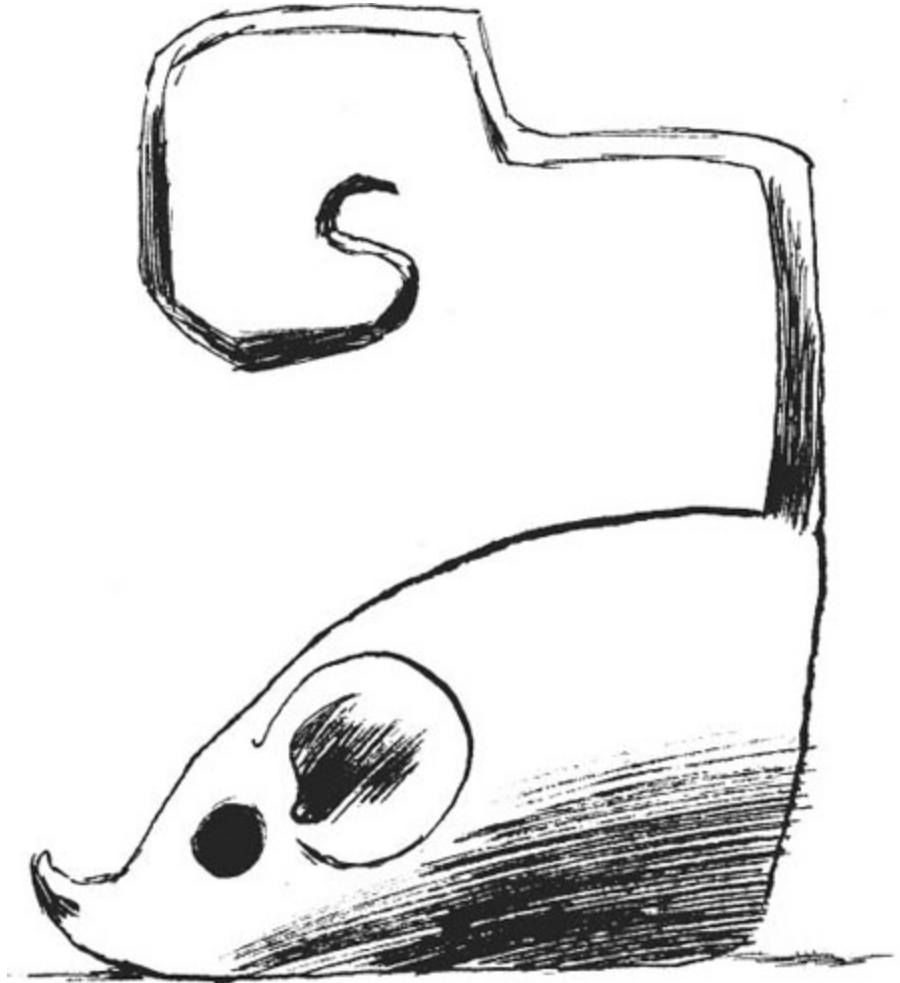
Varjak glanced nervously at the front door. The black cats hadn't come back. He hoped they wouldn't.

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 examined 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've 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, the 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 caviare. 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 that 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.

