Varjak Paw – Chapter 26

**P181**

Varjak awoke. He was sprawled on the ground in the alley. His shoulder screamed with pain. Holly was gone.

The bristly, barking monster towered above him, its foul breath in his face. Its big red tongue lolled out, glistening hungrily. It looked like it was getting ready to eat him. He was wrong to trust his instincts; this creature was worse than a dog. It was the most terrifying monster in the world.

He had to do something! Shadow-Walking, the Sixth Skill: *Think about nothing. Empty your mind of thoughts.*

Varjak concentrated. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

But it wasn’t that easy. The pain in his shoulder filled his mind. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t Shadow-Walk.

Varjak looked up desperately at the narrow brick walls of the alley. It felt as if they were closing in on him. If only he could get to the ledge. He tried to stand up, but it hurt too much.

**P182**

There was no escape now. It was all over. The monster’s drooling mouth opened wide…

‘Cludge,’ it said, in a deep, deep voice. Varjak stared, helpless. It blinked those cloudy eyes. Then it licked itself, once. ‘Cludge,’ it repeated.

Varjak scratched his ears, not quite sure what he was hearing. ‘Is that your name?’ he said. ‘Cludge?’

It panted. A shy smile appeared at the corner of its mouth. ‘Cludge,’ it affirmed.

Varjak smiled back. Maybe Cludge wasn’t going to eat him, after all. ‘Varjak,’ he said. ‘I’m Varjak.’

‘Var Jak? Var…..Varjak. Varjak!’

‘That’s right, Cludge. I’m Varjak.’

‘VARJAK! VARJAK! VARJAK!’ barked Cludge.

**P183**

‘You’ve got it.’

‘VARJAK!’

Varjak gingerly shifted his weight onto his front paws. He shoulder twinged, though not as badly as before, and he flopped back onto the ground.

**P184**

Cludge reached down to lick the wounded shoulder. His big black eyes were cloudy with worry.

‘Sorry, Varjak,’ he sighed. ‘Didn’t mean. To hurt.’

‘That’s OK. I should’ve run, like the other cats.’

‘Cludge was scared. Varjak not scared?’

‘No,’ he smiled. He was beginning to like this great big creature. Cludge looked fierce, but he seemed gentle inside.

‘Cludge alone,’ he sniffed. ‘Everyone run from Cludge. No friends.’

Varjak looked into Cludge’s eyes again. He could see it all in there; he recognised it: his pain, his fear, his loneliness.

‘It’s alright, Cludge,’ he said quietly. ‘You’re not alone. We’ll be friends, you and me.’

‘Friends?’ panted Cludge. ‘Varjak, Cludge, friends?’

Varjak grinned. ‘Friends,’ he said. He tried to stand up again. This time, his shoulder took the weight.

‘Friends!’ barked Cludge. He wagged his tail. ‘Varjak, Cludge, friends! FRIENDS! FRIENDS!’

‘Varjak Paw,’ said a gravelly voice, ’this is a first. I’ve seen a lot of things in this city - I’ve even seen you hit Razor - but this is truly something else.’

Holly jumped down from the wall. ‘You did it. You talked to a dog.’ She shook her head. ‘It’s incredible. It’s unbelievable. It’s - ‘

**P185**

‘A dog?’ said Varjak. Cludge barked.

‘Yes, a dog,’ said Holly, keeping a safe distance from Cludge. ‘What do you *think* it is?’

‘But he’s not like other dogs.’

‘What other dogs?’

‘You know. The metal ones.’

Holly looked baffled. ‘I’ve never seen a dog like that.’

In the distance, a monster shrieked and roared.

‘Those ones!’ said Varjak. ‘The dogs that make that noise!’

Holly shook her head. ‘That’s not a dog. That’s a car.’

‘A what?’

‘Car!’ barked Cludge. ‘Cars are fun. Cludge chase cars.’

‘So they weren’t dogs?’ said Varjak.

‘Let me get this straight,’ said Holly. ‘All the time you thought you were talking to dogs, what you were really doing was talking to *cars*?’

Varjak frowned . He was confused. The metal monsters were dogs - he was sure they were! But had anyone else ever called them dogs? No. Now he thought about it, he’d never known for certain what they were. He’d just assumed they were dogs, because they fitted the Elder Paw’s description from the tales. They filled his heart with fear; they had foul breath and a deafening sound; and they looked strong enough to kill a man.

**P186**

But he had to admit, so did Cludge.

Awareness, the Second Skill: *before you do anything, you must know what you are dealing with. Assume nothing; be sure of the facts.*

That was exactly what he’d failed to do. He’d almost killed himself trying to talk to a car. A beginner’s mistake. Not the kind of mistake a cat who knew the Way would make. He wouldn’t make it now. And he was sure Sally Bones wouldn’t either.

Holly giggled.

‘What’s so funny?’ Varjak demanded.

She pulled herself together, but only just. ‘You,’ she said. ‘Cars aren’t even alive, you moron. You can’t talk to a car!’

‘You didn’t think I could talk to Cludge, either,’ reasoned Varjak.

‘Cludge only talk to friends,’ said the big dog.

‘See?’ said Varjak. ‘Maybe cars only talk to their friends, too.’

Holly couldn’t control herself any longer. Her whiskers started to twitch, her body began to shake, and then she cracked up completely. Laughter streamed out of her and flew around the alley like a flock of birds. It was everywhere, it was contagious. Cludge rolled about on the ground, yelping and panting helplessly, and then Varjak found himself laughing too.

**P187**

He couldn’t help it; he had to join in with them. It was a good feeling, light and free. He saw it all now, how he’d got it wrong. Of *course* cars weren’t dogs: Cludge was a dog!

Cludge was a dog?

Varjak stopped laughing. *Cludge was a dog.* With a dog, he could still save his family from the Gentleman and his cats - if only there was time. ‘Cludge, I need your help. I need you to scare a man. Can you do that?’

Cludge stopped yelping and became very serious. He drew himself up to his full height and bared his yellow teeth. Holly’s laughter tailed away at the sight. ‘Cludge scare everyone,’ the great dog said in his deep voice. ‘Except Varjak.’

‘Then let’s go. There’s no time to waste.’ Varjak turned to Holly. ‘Coming?’

‘Where?’

‘Up the hill. The three of us. We’re going to save my family.’

‘This is mad,’ said Holly. ‘But no one messes with Sally Bones and gets away with it - we’re not safe in this city any more.’ She stood up. ‘So all right, Mr Paw, lead the way. Where you go, I go.’

Something in Varjak soared at that moment.

‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘my friends.’

**Chapter 27**

**P188**

The three friends headed for the hill at top speed. Varjak explained about the Gentleman and his black cats on the way.

**P189**

He hoped it wasn’t too late. With the Elder Paw gone and Father in charge, what would the family do when they faced the Gentleman’s cats? What would the Gentleman’s cats do to them? Anything could have happened. After all the time he’d been away, the house would surely be different.

**P190**

Those pictures in his head - the red velvet armchair, the china feeding bowls - might not even exist any more.

He was sure of only one thing. They’d have to climb the wall to get in, and Varjak remembered it as the hardest climb in his life.

Thunder growled above the city as they reached the foot of the hill. The sky was violet with the threat of another storm.

‘It’s up here,’ said Varjak, leading the way as lightning flashed overhead.

They climbed the hill as fast as they could. Rain began to fall. It came in stinging whips which lashed into Varjak’s nose, his eyes, his ears. He tried to snatch a breath; water filled his mouth, surged down his throat. He choked on it, but kept going, up the hill, one step, two steps, a hundred, a thousand: whatever it took.

The moon stared down at them, a sullen one-eyed sentry in the sky. *Give up*, it seemed to say. *Give up and go away.*

Soaking, straining, panting for breath, they reached the top of the hill as the sky shattered in white light.

What Varjak saw there made his fur prickle. A little stone wall stood before them, half the height of any in the city. It looked old and crumbling, as if it had been neglected for a very long time.

**P191**

Another blast of thunder rocked the earth. Varjak shivered. Could this really be the same wall which enclosed the world he grew up in? The wall that once seemed so high and impossible to climb? Was this the place he had left? Or had everything changed while he was away?

There was a door in the wall. He pushed at it. It wouldn’t budge; it was locked. He circled the wall, seeking some familiar sight. A lightning flash revealed the cracks and fissures in the stone where the wild moss grew. At the top of the wall he could see the gnarled upper branches of some stunted, old trees - and there was that single tree which he’d fallen down the night he left home.

Varjak touched its wet bark, and smiled with relief. He recognised it now. Of course it was the same. The place would never change: it was him who had changed.

‘This is it!’ he shouted happily about the thunder. ‘There are trees inside, we can climb down. I’ll go first, and….Cludge, what’s wrong?’

Cludge was shaking. His eyes were cloudy with fear again. ‘C-can’t climb,’ he stammered. ‘Cludge can’t climb.’

Varjak stared at the huge, powerful dog in disbelief. ‘You can’t?’

‘Of course he can’t,’ snapped Holly. ‘Everyone knows dogs can’t climb - we’d be in big trouble if they could. Isn’t there another way in?’

**P192**

‘Dogs can’t *climb?*’

‘No they can’t,’ said Holly. She frowned. ‘This is the only way in, isn’t it? I can tell from your face.’

It felt like they were falling through the air and never landing. They were so near. But that wall, that old stone wall, stood in the way once again.

‘Cludge sorry,’ said a small, scared voice beside him. ‘Want to help, Varjak.’

Lightning flared up above. Thunder cracked. Rain streamed down Varjak’s face like tears. But it was strange; the storm didn’t scare him as it had before. Instead, it seemed to enter him from whiskers to tail, filling him with its own wild power, so that he and the storm became one.

There was no turning back now. With or without a dog, he was going to find his family.

‘It’s alright, Cludge,’ he said. ‘You wait for us here. Come on, Holly. Let’s go inside.’

They left Cludge cowering under the tree. The two cats stormed to the top of the wall. They clambered over the edge and down the other side, through a tangled maze of twisted branches.

Silently, they stole into the garden. They padded over the wet grass and up to the cat door.

‘This is it,’ whispered Varjak as they slipped through. ‘This is the Contessa’s house.’

QUESTIONS

What is the name of the animal that Varjak meets in chapter 26

Can you describe the way that Cludge talks?

P186 Why do you think the author compares Holly’s laughter to a flock of birds?

What do you think the changing weather in chapter 27 might represent?

P191 ‘a lightning flash revealed the cracks and fissures in the stone’. Can you find out what the word fissure means and write your own sentence to include it?

P192 ‘Dogs can’t *climb*?’ Why do you think the author uses italics here?

Chapter 26 What might Varjak be thinking and feeling when he learns the metal monsters are cars?

Can you describe Cludge with 3 adjectives?

Chapter 27 What might Varjak be thinking and feeling when he begins to climb the hill towards the house?

Chapter 27 What might Cludge be thinking and feeling when he is left at the bottom of the wall?

P191 ‘The place would never change: it was him who had changed’ Explain how Varjak has changed over the course of the story so far.

P187 Why does Holly agree to help Varjak?

Consider how the author reflects dogs and cats differently - summarise your ideas in full sentences.