Varjak Paw – Chapter 34

**P242**

There was silence at the top of the stairs. The Gentleman’s cat was finished. Its body lay stiff and crumpled on the floor. It wasn’t terrifying any more. It looked like what it was: a broken toy.

 Varjak stood up, shaking, exhausted. He couldn’t believe he’d done it. With all his Skills, he was no match for the black cats. He’d fought the fight of his life, yet the truth was, they were better than real cats in almost every way. But they could never be alive like a real cat. That was their strength; it was also their weakness. Somehow he’d made it count.

 The other black cat was staring at the broken toy, as if it couldn’t believe what had happened either. It nudged the crumpled body. There was no response. No movement. No life.

 It stood up, very slowly, and came towards Varjak. He knew what was coming. This one would never let him near the collar. It was going to avenge its twin. It was going to destroy him. And for all the world, he couldn’t think how to stand against it.

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 But it stopped just before it reached him, and looked him in the eyes. For the first time, Varjak thought he saw a flicker of expression there. It looked sad, terribly, terribly sad.

 It wasn’t fighting any more. No, it was holding its neck out. It could beat him, it could beat anyone, but it was holding its neck out, as if it wanted him to cut its collar too.

 Varjak hesitated. After all this time, fearing and hating the black cats, he’d never thought they might have feelings of their own. But the two of them had always been like one; and now, without its other half, even the perfect fighting machine was useless.

 Varjak thought he understood. He leaned towards the black cat. It didn’t move away, didn’t resist. Very gently, he cut its collar. Its eyes widened for an instant -

P244

* and then it, too, ground down to a stop.

It was over.

 ‘He’s done it!’

‘He’s beaten them!’

Everyone was shouting now.

‘We’re *free*!’

Where was Holly? At that moment, she was all he could think of. Where was she? She’d figured out how to stop the cats. She was the one who’d done it.

‘Kind of sad, those black cats,’ said a gravelly voice behind him. ‘Once couldn't work without the other.’

Varjak turned to face her, his heart aching. Would she forgive him?

‘Holly, I’m so sorry. I should’ve come with you - ‘

Her mustard eyes were smiling. ‘I know. But you made up for it. Because you’re not the worst friend in the world, Mr Paw. Not by a long shot.’

They grinned at each other.

‘Varjak - you did it!’ said Tam. She was breathless and her eyes were shining. ‘I told her you’d do it. Didn’t I tell you, Holly?’

‘Tam,’ he said, ‘it's good to see you again!’

Cheers were going up. Some of the cats from the cage were starting to head downstairs.

‘Wait!’ shouted Holly. Her gravelly voice stilled them instantly. ‘It’s not over yet,’ she warned. ‘We have to find a way out. The house is all locked, all the windows, all the doors.

P245

So we’ve got to find another way. We’re going down, but quietly. No one does anything unless we tell you to. We’re not bossing you around; we just know what’s going on here. Understand?’

 There was a ripple of agreement. Varjak marvelled at the way she took control. He smiled to himself as they led the cats down the stairs, in a stealthy, silent column. He had his friends back, both of them. They’d beaten the black cats. They’d done the impossible.

 After all he’d been through, maybe, just maybe, everything was going to come good at last.

 ‘Varjak! Varjak! Help!’

 He looked down. It was Julius, howling.

 Julius, in the Gentleman’s grip.

 The Gentleman, waiting for them at the foot of the stairs.

 The column if cats froze in fear. Varjak could see his family on the edge of the front room, trembling, powerless. They were all powerless before the Gentleman. The black cats were gone, but they were nothing compared to the man who had made them.

 *click CLACK*

The Gentleman dropped Julius and stepped towards the stairs, shouting in a voice like thunder. The column of cats cracked and began to break.

 ‘Wait!’ cried Holly, but no one was listening now.

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The street cats panicked, turned tail, fled upstairs. Julius scurried back to his family. In the space of a heartbeat, Varjak, Holly and Tam stood alone as the Gentleman came for them.

 His shadow stretched out before him. It covered the stairs, draping them in darkness even before he reached them. His shoes shone like black ice. As they clicked closer, step by step, Varjak could see his own reflection, looming larger in their blackness.

 How could he let himself believe that everything would work out? He should have known better. He hated himself for having that moment of hope, because now hope was gone, there was nothing left at all.

 ‘There’s no way out, is there, Varjak?’ said Tam.

‘No.’

‘Looks like goodbye,’ said Holly. ‘We go down fighting?’

The Gentleman’s waxy white had reached out for him. Huge enough to

 break his neck.

Varjak bared his teeth. Ready to bite. To fight to the death. And it

*would* be death. How else could it end?

The hand closed around his neck, and -

CRASH! *The smash of breaking glass. A roar like the sky ripping open:* ‘LEAVE MY FRIENDS ALONE!’

P247

* and the hand let go. Varjak looked up to see the biggest, blackest

monster in the world.

 Cludge, it was Cludge! The great dog had come through! He’d shattered the windows of the Contessa’s house!

 Cludge was ferocious. Even Varjak shook at the sight of him.

P248

 Cludge roared. The Gentleman cowered. He backed way from the stairs, hands in the air, shaking with terror.

 It was something Varjak never expected to see. This almighty man, so vast, so powerful; he’d made the toy cats, the black cats. He was responsible for the Vanishings. He could do anything. And yet even he, with all his power, had something he was scared of, something he couldn’t face. And faced with Cludge, the Gentleman became like a little boy. And faced with Cludge, the Gentleman became like a little boy, lost and frightened and all alone.

 Cludge circled around him, growling and snarling and snapping his teeth.

P249

He forced the Gentleman over to the broken green window, and then he came at him with big blunt claws.

 The Gentleman screamed. He turned and ran, out of the window, out of the house. With a wink at the cats, Cludge leaped after him - and chased him screaming into the night.

CHAPTER 35

P250

The Gentleman was gone. A great cheer went up. The cats from the cage came charging downstairs.

 Varjak Paw slumped to the floor. He should have felt like cheering too, but he didn’t. All he wanted was a quiet rest.

 Some chance.

 ‘Varjak Paw! You did it!’ said Julius.

 ‘Varjak Paw and his friends!’ They were swamped by admiring green eyes. The Mesopotamian Blues swept them up and carried them on their shoulders. Around them, the street cats were taking over the Contessa’s house. They were everywhere, celebrating their release, enjoying their freedom.

 ‘Thank Jalal that’s over,’ said Mother, above the racket. ‘Now how are we going to get back to normal?’

 ‘Good thing there’s all that dry food,’ said Father. ‘It’s not caviare, but it’ll do.’

 Varjak stared at them, shocked. ‘You don’t want to stay here, after everything that’s happened?’

P251

 ‘We can’t go Outside,’ said Father.

 ‘This is our home,’ said Jasmine, ‘the Contessa’s house.’

 ‘But there’s no Contessa any more,’ said Varjak. No more Gentleman. It’s just us. We’re on our own in the world.’ He heard a snuffling noise. It was Jay, Jethro and Jerome. ‘Don’t be scared,’ he said. ‘We’ll start again. We’ll find a new home somewhere. Just like Jalal, when he left Mesopotamia. Except this time it will be ours, because we’ll make it ourselves.

 ‘Var! Jak! Paw!’

 ‘Cludge!’ The family scurried aside as the colossal dog leaped back through the window. Tam turned to Holly, her eyes wide open with wonder.

 ‘I don’t believe it,’ she whispered. ‘He actually talked to a dog? A real, proper dog?’

 ‘He’s called Cludge,’ said Holly. ‘He’s a friend.’

 Cludge’s tail wagged merrily. That cloudy look was completely gone from his eyes. They were the clearest black now, and they sparkled with a new life. ‘Man gone now,’ he panted. ‘Won’t come back.’

 Varjak grinned. ‘You saved us all, Cludge. But how did you climb the wall?’

 Cludge drew himself up to his full height. ‘Wall scare Cludge. But friends need Cludge.’ He shrugged. ‘So Cludge climb wall.’

 More cheers were going up. Some of the cats from the cage had found the Gentleman’s caviare.

P252

They were feasting like they’d never feasted before. Others were streaming through the shattered green windows, returning to their lives Outside, as the sun began to rise after a long, dark night.

 Varjak turned to his family. ‘That’s where I am going,’ he said. ‘That’s where I belong.’

 ‘But - you and your friends, you saved us,’ said Julius. ‘You’re head of the family. You can’t go now.’

 Varjak smiled at his brother. ‘I think maybe it’s time there wasn’t a head of the family any more,’ he said. ‘There must be a better way of doing things.’

 ‘Show us, Varjak,’ said Jasmine.

 ‘I’ll show you how to hunt, to fight, to live Outside - if you come with me.’

 He looked around the family circle. One by one, they all looked down. But he didn’t feel alone. He felt free.

 ‘Varjak, thank you for saving us,’ said Father. ‘You were right about the Gentleman; we were wrong about your friends. We were wrong about a lot of things. But we can’t come out with you. Not yet, anyway.’

 ‘If you ever need us,’ said Mother, ‘we’ll be here.’

 ‘I understand,’ said Varjak. And at that moment, for perhaps the first time in his life, he really did.’

 They said their farewells, and then Varjak turned to Holly and Tam.

P253

 ‘So, do you want to be in a gang then?’ he said. Tam nodded and grinned.

 ‘There’s only one gang I want to be in,’ said Holly, ‘and that’s ours.’

 ‘Cludge too!’ barked the big dog.

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Cludge carried them out. As they went, the friends talked and laughed together about the things they had done and the things they would do. Many of the cats they’d freed from the cage followed them, like they were the leaders of a gang.

 So much lay ahead of them. Anything was possible now.

P255

 It was a beautiful morning. The earth was decked out in dewdrops. The open air was fresh and clean. And up in the clear blue sky, the sun was rising with the promise of a new day, dawning on the wide world, shining bright and amber, like the eyes of Varjak Paw.

THE END!