

**Extract from Varjak Paw, by S F Said**

The Elder Paw was telling a story.

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. In all the years since Jalal, 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 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 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—

'Variak 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.