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Opening extract from

The Outlaw Varjak Paw

Written by

SF Said

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Chapter One

It was winter in the city. The sun was sinking fast. Night was drawing in. Snow whipped down from the sky in icy flakes. It was too cold for snow to melt, so it covered everything in white: the rooftops and drainpipes, the back streets and alleys.

A silver-blue cat with amber eyes raced forwards through the streets. His name was Varjak Paw, and he was running as fast as he could. He loved being out in the city. He'd grown up indoors, a pet in a house. He'd always dreamed about living free and wild. Now his dreams were coming true.

Beside him ran his friends: a spiky black-and-white cat called Holly, a shaggy chocolate-brown one named Tam, and a huge black dog called Cludge. They knew the city better than Varjak; he was still learning how to survive on the streets. And winter was harsh. Food was scarce. They'd been hunting all day with no luck. Now they were going to the city dump, hoping to find some scraps the people had thrown away.

They swerved into an alleyway. A rusting iron gate loomed up before them, rattling in the wind. It was the entrance to the dump. Far away on some main road, traffic rumbled and roared, but here the cars were all broken down. Their windscreens were smashed, their tyres slashed. Fragments of shattered glass stuck out of the snow. They could rip a cat's paws to pieces.

So this is it, thought Varjak. The city dump.

'Can't we keep hunting?' he said. 'I've got a good feeling. We're going to catch a mouse – we've got to!'

'I wish we would,' panted Tam. 'I'm starving.'

'Me too,' said Holly. 'But we haven't even seen a mouse since this snow started. They must be hiding from the weather. Or from *her*.' She shivered.

Above their heads, through swirling snow, an amber street light flickered into life. Day was almost done; nightfall was close. Holly and Tam shifted about on their paws. Even Cludge seemed nervous.

'Let's get it over with,' said Holly, her voice like the crunch of gravel. 'We don't want to be here after dark.'

Tam looked up at the rusty gate and shuddered. 'Er – why don't you and Varjak go first? I'll stay here and keep a look-out – even if I have to eat last,' she said, sounding very noble.

Holly rolled her mustard-coloured eyes. 'I might've

known. Fine. Come on, Varjak. At least now we know who's scared and who's not.'

'I'm not scared!' protested Tam. 'It's just that we need a look-out. What if *she* comes? It's actually braver to go last. It's actually . . .' She paused, and scratched her head. 'Actually, I think I'll come with you.'

'Oh no you don't,' laughed Holly. 'You're right. We need a look-out – and congratulations, Tam, you've got the job!'

Tam's big, round eyes went huge with fright. 'But – but—'

'It's all right,' said Varjak. He could see Holly was joking; but he could also see that Tam was not. 'I'll be look-out. I'll stand guard, with Cludge.'

Tam's fur settled. 'Thanks, Varjak! I'll save you some food – if we find any.'

Holly and Tam crept forwards through the snow, past hulking smashed-up cars, picking their way over shattered glass towards the gate. Chains and padlocks hung from it, clattering in the wind. But they found gaps, cracks, ways through that people would never think of. In moments, Varjak and Cludge stood alone.

thud

thud

thud

Varjak's fur prickled. He thought he could hear something behind him. A cat's tail thumping? Something was moving, someone was watching him.

He turned. Stared into the darkness at the top of the alley. No one there. Just snow. Rubbish. Plastic bags, scraps of paper, swirling in the wind.

thud

Oh. Of course. Now he knew what that noise was.

His own heart, thumping in his chest.

He breathed out, feeling foolish. Tam had made him jumpy. He turned to Cludge.

The big dog wagged his tail. 'Varjak!' he barked. 'Varjak scared of rubbish!' He stretched out a huge paw and swatted away a scrap of paper. 'Not be scared,' he panted. 'Cludge here.'

Varjak smiled. Cludge always made him feel better. After all, what was there to be afraid of when they had a massive dog on their side? Even Holly and Tam were a bit nervous around Cludge, still getting used to the idea of being friends with a dog. Only Varjak had seen the truth: that for all his strength and size, Cludge sometimes felt as scared and lonely as any cat.

'How about you, Cludge?' he asked. 'You OK?'

'Cludge cold,' said the dog. 'Cludge hungry. But Cludge happy with Varjak!'

His tail wagged again, and Varjak felt glad he'd stayed out here, after all. He didn't want to go into the dump anyway. What was the best they could find? Some mouldy old rubbish. That was no way for a cat to live.

He could do better than that – especially if he used his powers. For Varjak knew a secret that gave a cat great power. It was called the Way. There were Seven Skills in the Way. He'd learned them in his dreams, where he'd visited the ancient land of Mesopotamia and been trained by the warrior cat Jalal.

He settled down by a car and closed his eyes. He remembered Jalal's voice, coming at him through the Mesopotamian night. *The First Skill is Open Mind.* Varjak cleared his mind of thoughts. He made himself calm and still, open to everything.

Now the Second Skill: Awareness. He let his senses flow out into the city. He could smell the rubbish rotting, and felt sure there'd be nothing in the dump anyone would want to eat. But his sensitive whiskers also felt a tiny shift in the air currents. Something was moving. Not rubbish; something warm, and near –

A mouse! It was a juicy mouse, hidden just behind that car. His mouth watered; his belly growled. This was what he'd been searching for all day. He imagined crunching into the mouse, sinking

his teeth in, savouring every bite –

No. Don't get carried away. Focus.

Hunting was the Third Skill. *When you stalk your prey, you become your prey. You make it a part of yourself.*

Now he was ready. He tensed his body tight, tight. His muscles coiled –

– and Varjak Paw sprang forwards, a silver-blue blur, diving under the car, towards his prey –

– and *WHAM!* There it was, beneath his paws. Fresh mouse, the finest food in all the world.

Holly slouched back through the gate. 'There's nothing good in there,' she sighed. 'It's disgusting. But hey . . . what's that you've got?'

'What does it look like?' he grinned.

'Oh – Varjak! You found one!' Her mustard-coloured eyes lit up. She licked her lips – and then stopped. 'But how are we going to share it out, between us all?'

Thud.

'What you're going to do,' said a brash, loud voice behind them, 'is give that mouse to *us*.'

Chapter Two

Varjak turned. Oh no.

There were four cats at the top of the alley. Big brawny cats with short bristling fur. They swaggered forwards through the snow, tails thudding behind them.

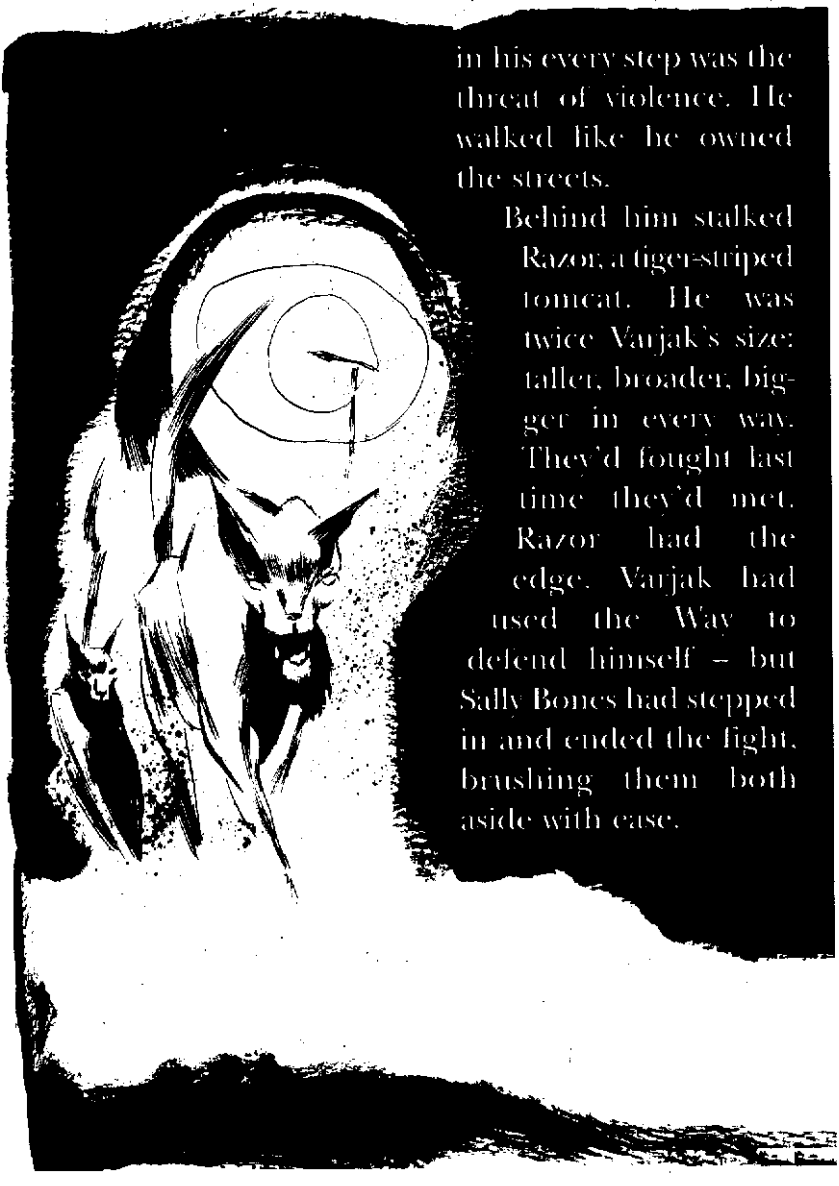
'It's a patrol from Sally Bones's gang!' hissed Holly.

Sirens wailed in the city night. But Varjak and Holly couldn't run. Tam was still in the dump.

'Tam – come on!' urged Holly.

Cludge whined softly, crouching down in the rubbish as the patrol crunched through the snow towards them. Varjak could taste his friend's fear on the sharp, cold air. Or was it his own fear, quickening his pulse, stiffening his spine?

Sally Bones wasn't among them, but Varjak recognized two of her captains. Leading the patrol was Luger, a grey cat with a flat snub nose and emotionless eyes. He looked perfectly calm and poised, but



in his every step was the threat of violence. He walked like he owned the streets.

Behind him stalked Razor, a tiger-striped tomcat. He was twice Varjak's size: taller, broader, bigger in every way. They'd fought last time they'd met. Razor had the edge. Varjak had used the Way to defend himself – but Sally Bones had stepped in and ended the fight, brushing them both aside with ease.

Varjak still remembered the thin white cat's ice-blue eye, burning into his mind; still heard her voice, echoing in his head: *Where did you learn that? Who taught you?* Because that was when he realized the Way wasn't just his secret. She knew it too.

'Varjak Paw,' said Luger, his voice cold as metal. 'And Holly. What are you two doing here? Making trouble again?'

'Oh, no,' said Holly. 'No trouble at all.' Her voice was gravelly as ever, but her whiskers were stiff with tension. Above them, the street lamp crackled and fizzed.



Behind Luger, Razor scowled. His face was covered in scars. 'Hanging round with dogs now, are you?' he said, brash and loud. 'Don't you know how wrong that is? It's enough to make you sick!' The rest of the patrol looked at Cludge, and flexed their claws. The big dog blinked.

'Cludge won't hurt you,' said Varjak, trying to sound calm, though his stomach felt tight and his mouth had gone dry.

'Wasn't talking to you,' snapped Razor. His tail flicked cockily in the snow. 'The Boss has taught us how to deal with dogs. Don't try anything, Doggie, or you'll get hurt!'

Cludge was so much bigger – yet Razor seemed so sure of himself. Don't even look at them, Cludge, thought Varjak. We don't want any trouble. We just want them to go away.

Cludge looked down, very still and silent. Snow settled on his coat.

'Good,' said Luger, cool as ice. 'Now, we're searching for a pair of outlaws. Twin cats: one big, one bigger. Have you seen them?'

'No outlaws here,' said Holly. 'We're just talking.'

'You've been hunting!' said Razor. He licked his lips. 'Look, Luger, they've got a mouse. It's ages since we've had mouse.' His tail flicked. 'Give it over. Now.'

Varjak looked at his mouse. Snow swirled through the alley.

'I said, give me that mouse!' repeated Razor. Luger watched with emotionless eyes. Varjak's heart thumped in his throat. He felt dizzy. He was so hungry. He'd been searching all day for this mouse.

'Give him the mouse, Varjak!' whispered Holly.

'Why should I?' The words slipped out of his mouth before he could stop them. He stared down at the snow. He couldn't believe what he'd said.

Razor's ears twitched, like he couldn't believe it either. Then his fur puffed up. His muscles rippled under his stripy coat. 'You'll do it because it's the law!' he growled. 'If you're not in our gang, you can't hunt mice. You have to eat rubbish.'

The wind whipped into Varjak's face. The law? He'd never heard of this law. He was still so new to the city; maybe Holly knew about it. But she looked troubled.

'Wait,' she said. 'That's the law in Sally Bones's territory, on the West side. No one else would hunt there. No one would even go there. But this is the city centre. It's neutral ground, free for all.'

'Not any more,' said Luger.

'What do you mean?' said Holly. 'What about us cats who live in the centre?'

'You will obey the law,' said Luger coldly. 'Anyone who breaks the law will be taken before Sally Bones and punished. Now, Varjak Paw: give Razor that mouse.'

There was no arguing with Luger. He spoke of the law with absolute authority, in a voice as harsh and cold as winter. Even Holly had no answer to him.

Varjak shivered. He surrendered the mouse without a fight, without even a word. He stood there, silent, and let Razor snatch it away from him.

The gang cats gobbled it down. They licked their lips. Then the rusty gate rattled, and Tam came out of the dump, swinging her bushy tail proudly behind her.

'Hey, Varjak, I found something good to eat, buried at the back!' she said, and then she saw the patrol, and her tail curled up. 'L-L-Luger?' she stuttered. 'Razor?'

'Tam!' said Razor. 'Always thinking about food! Aren't you fat enough already?' The gang cats cackled. Tam tried to laugh along with them, but all that came out of her mouth was a strangled-sounding noise.

'Enough!' snapped Luger. The cackling stopped dead. 'This dump belongs to Sally Bones now. If there's anything good to eat in there, it's ours.' He turned to the patrol. 'Uzi, Shane: come with me. Razor: stay here and guard these cats till we come back. Do it properly this time, and perhaps we'll save you a scrap.'

Luger and the others went through the gate. Tam shuddered as they passed her. Razor stood there in

the snow, tail swishing furiously behind him.

'Right,' he growled at Varjak and his friends, when the others were gone. 'You three'd better not mess things up for me. Tam, you're in *such* big trouble. You were breaking the law. And you know what happens to law-breakers?' The scars on his face twisted up like snakes. 'They get Sally Bones's punishment.'

Tam flinched at the word. 'Please – no!' she gulped.

Razor leaned in close to her. He ran a claw along the edge of her ear. Tam flinched away – but Razor moved faster. He came in low behind her, and bit her bushy tail, hard.

'Stop it!' shrieked Tam. 'Leave me alone!'

Varjak clenched his paws. He was getting angry. All that talk of the law had confused him, but now he knew what was going on. This was bullying. He'd grown up being bullied by his brother, and he didn't like it one bit. He wanted it to stop.

He caught Cludge's eye, and nodded. The black dog stood up to his full height, and shook the snow from his coat.

'Enough,' Cludge growled at Razor.

Razor turned to face him. All around them, the wind was rising, getting colder.

'I'm not scared of you,' said Razor. 'A pack of

dogs – that's scary. But without a pack, a little Doggie on its own is nothing.'

'Cludge got a pack. Got friends. You leave Cludge's friends alone!'

'Your friends are cats,' jeered Razor, as the snow pelted down around them. 'You should stick with your own kind, you stupid, stinking moron! What's wrong – won't the other Doggies talk to you any more?'

Cludge's black eyes clouded over. He began to quake. He leaned in close to Razor, so his muzzle was just above the tomcat's head – and then he roared a mighty, deafening roar, like thunder.

Varjak grinned. Go on, Cludge, he thought. Razor thinks he's so tough. Let's see how tough he is now!

But Razor stood his ground – and exploded into action. His claws arced up, up, and slashed a vicious curve through Cludge's soft, wet nose.

The big dog howled. He twisted away, turning his face left and right and left, spraying blood into the snow. He stumbled back from Razor's claws, and hid behind Varjak, trembling, whimpering, bleeding from the nose.

It was over.

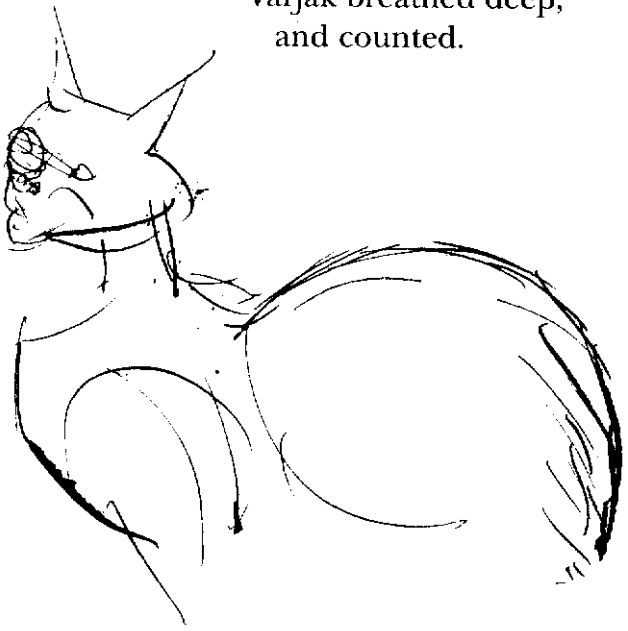
Varjak's stomach turned liquid. Razor strutted before them, tail held insolently high and proud, fur rippling in triumph. 'Who else wants a fight?' he

crowed. 'You. Varjak Paw. You were lucky last time. If the Boss hadn't cut in, I'd have had you. But they never let me forget it – never!' He bared his teeth. 'This time, you're mine.'

And here came Razor. Big. Brawny. Barging towards him through the snow.

No time to think. Only one thing for it: the Way. The fighting Skills.

Fourth Skill: Slow-Time.
Varjak breathed deep,
and counted.



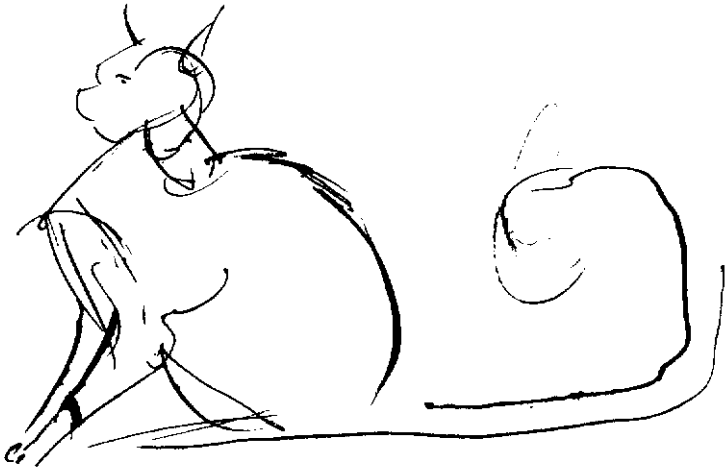


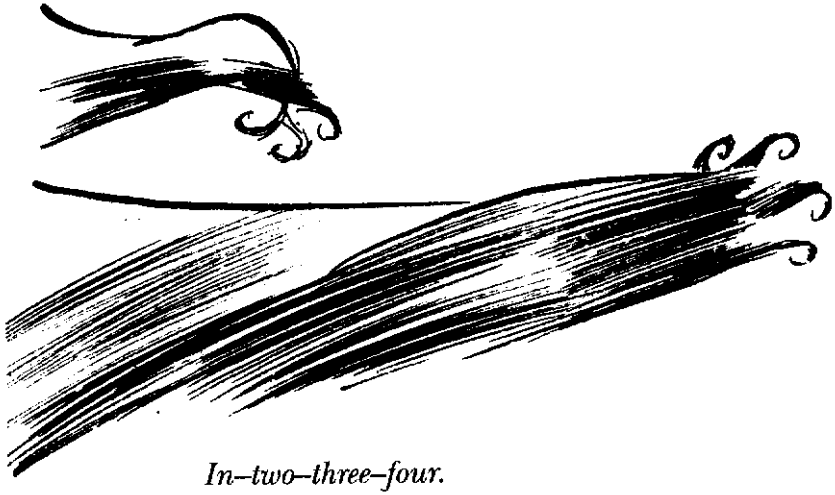
In–two–three–four.

The world seemed to shimmer.

Out–two–three–four.

Everything slowed down.





In–two–three–four.

But Varjak felt fast.