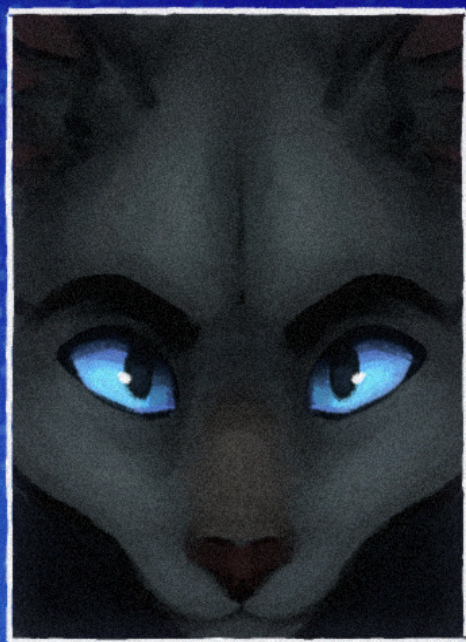


A REWRITTEN VERSION OF

WARRIORS

THE NEW PROPHECY



Midnight

TORAJIRA

BASED ON THE WORK OF ERIN HUNTER

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PROLOGUE

As night falls, the forest does not stir — a moonless night illuminated only by the glittering lights of Silverpelt. The reflection of the stars dances in the pool below, and as fronds of bracken part they unveil the shimmering form of a cat, the inky black of his pelt broken only by the stars that swim through it. Carefully he picks his way down to the water's edge, gait steady despite his twisted paw, and as if summoned, more cats begin to appear, all thronging the rocky descent, and before long the slopes of the hollow fill with starry shapes gazing into the depths of the pool.

Another cat speaks.

"If we're all here," she begins, casting an unreadable expression towards the black tom, whose only response is a flick of his tail. The blue-gray molly rises to her paws. "A new prophecy has come!" The murmur of the gathered cats dies down. "A doom that will change everything has been foretold in the stars."

On the opposite side of the pool, another cat bows his rusty, shaggy-furred head. "I have seen this too," he meows, sharing a look of something unspoken with the blue-gray molly. "There will be doubt and fear. And a great challenge."

"Darkness, air, water, and sky will come together, and shake the forest to its roots," the molly continues, sweeping the gathered cats with her gaze. "Nothing will be as it is now, nor as it has been before. A great storm is coming."

A storm? The question begins to rumble through the crowd like thunder. The blue-gray molly raises her tail in a call for silence. A lean black tom hunched near the water's edge raises his head. "Can nothing change what is about to happen? Not even the courage and spirit of the greatest warrior?"

"The doom will come," the blue-gray molly affirms. "But if the Clans meet it like warriors, they may survive." Her gaze travels from the lean black tom, to the bracken-colored tom — her gaze seems to linger on a blank spot for a moment, but she quickly regains focus. "You have all seen what must befall the forest. And you know what must be done." To the crowd, she yowls, "Four cats must be chosen to hold the fate of their Clans in their paws." She turns to her gathered peers once more. "Are you ready to make your choices before all of StarClan?"

The surface of the pool shivers, the stars within it twinkling, before becoming still once more. The rusty tom steps forward, glancing sidelong to the large sandy tom beside him. "Brother, if I may?" The sandy tom nods, a knowing smile gracing his twisted muzzle. The rusty tom nods in reply. "Then I invite you all to see and approve my choice."

He raises a paw indicatively over the pool, and the water's surface begins to ripple once again in rhythmic, concentric circles, before settling; and in its mirrored surface appears a pale silver shape. The congregation is silent as they look on, until the blue-gray molly speaks once more.

"That one?" she murmurs, furrowing her brow. "Are you sure, Oakheart?"

The rusty tom's whiskers quiver in amusement. "I thought that choice would please you, Bluestar." He tilts his head in affectionate challenge. "Do you not think she was well-mentored?"

Bluestar tuts, lashing her tail once. "She was excellently mentored," she replies, tone laced with haughty offence, before again casting Oakheart a knowing look. Raising herself to the crowd, she calls, "Does the rest of StarClan agree?"

A murmur of assent rumbles through the crowd, and with that the silver shape dissipates. The sandy tom with the crooked jaw raises his head. "And you, Bluestar? Have you made your choice?"

The blue-gray molly dips her head. "Crookedstar," she purrs, "of course I have, old friend." She waves her paw over the pool. "See and approve my choice."

The water's surface ripples again in tight circles, revealing the shape of a dark tabby. A murmur of surprise seems to pass through the gathered crowd, but no cat speaks out. Oakheart shakes his head, a bemused grin plastered on his muzzle. "Bluestar, you never cease to surprise me."

"Why?" she throws back, a slight twitch in the tip of her tail. "He is a noble young cat."

"Yes."

"Fit for the challenges this prophecy will bring."

"Of course." The tom laughs. "Did I say he was not?" A few chuckles emanate from the crowd. Bluestar's jaw seems to hang open for a second, but she shakes her head in amused defeat. "Does the Clan agree?"

The approval comes slow and reluctantly, but it comes nonetheless. She sniffs, then states simply, "ShadowClan."

The lean black tom rises to his paws with effort, and clears his throat before raising his paw. "Here is my choice. See and approve it."

This time the pool reveals the form of a lean, well-muscled tortoiseshell. Oakheart's ear flicks once. "Is that wise? That means two of our chosen cats are kin." Bluestar ignores him, nodding. "She has strength and courage."

"But Nightstar—" comes a voice from the front of the crowd, "does she have loyalty?" The black tom whips his head around, clenching the stone floor with his claws. "Are you calling her disloyal, Cinderfur?"

The thin gray tom shrugs. "If I do, there's reason for it," he replies evenly. "She was not born in ShadowClan, was she? And her father—"

"That will make her a good choice," Bluestar interjects, tone smooth. "If the Clans cannot work together now, they will all be destroyed. Maybe it will take cats with a paw in two Clans to understand what has to be done."

A silence.

"Does StarClan approve?"

The approval again comes slowly, but soon a murmur of agreement emanates from the assembled cats.

As the image of the tortoiseshell rippled away, the inky tom with the twisted paw, who had not yet spoken, rises to his feet. "My turn, I think." Bluestar flicks an ear. "I had expected Heatherstar." "I choose on her behalf." The tom glances sideways at the two tabby brothers, "as Oakheart did for Crookedstar." Bluestar nods. "Very well, Deadfoot."

The inky tom huffs, raising a twisted paw above the rippling water, and rasps, "See and approve my choice."

The pool reveals a smoky gray-black pelt.

The assembly of cats is silent for a few moments.

"*What?*" Oakheart exclaims at last, gaze flicking between the pool and Deadfoot. "That's an apprentice!"

"I had noticed, thank you, Oakheart," the tom replies dryly.

"And he's your son!" says one cat.

"Deadfoot, you can't send an apprentice into danger such as this," another cat calls from the back of the crowd.

"Oh, please," Deadfoot retorts, "the other three are barely warriors. And apprentice he may be," he meows, "but he has courage and skill to match many warriors. One day he might make a fine leader of WindClan."

"One day is not now," says Bluestar, stepping forward. "And the qualities of a leader are not necessarily those that the Clans need to save them now. Do you wish to make another choice?"

Deadfoot lashes his tail and turns to Bluestar. "*This* is my choice," he spits. "Do you—" his gaze sweeps the encircling cats, "or any other cat— dare to say he is not worthy?"

Bluestar looks thoughtful for a moment, then turns to her peers. "What do you say? Does StarClan approve?"

The crowd begins to mutter amongst themselves, every so often glancing at the pool with uncertainty. Deadfoot's neck fur bristles as he watches, and finally the din quiets.

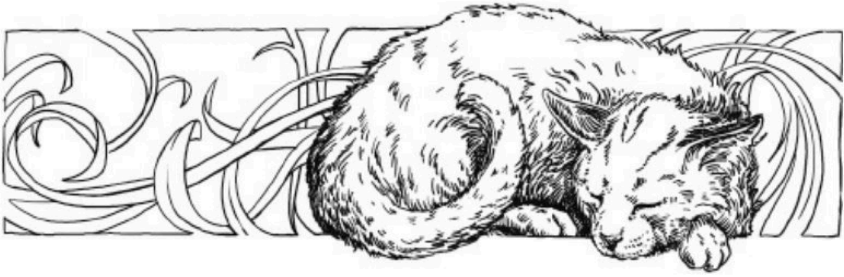
Bluestar asks again. "Does the Clan approve?"

The response is one of reluctance, a low mumble of agreement. Deadfoot growls and sits down at the edge of the pool as the image of his son ripples away, turning his back to the rest of the gathered cats.

"Cats of StarClan," Bluestar announces, drawing herself to full height. "Your choices have been made. Soon the journey must begin, to meet the terrible storm that will be released on the forest." She turns her gaze to each cat in the circle. "Go to your

Clans," she mews, throwing Deadfoot a glare, "and make sure each cat is ready."

She pauses, and takes a breath. "We can choose a warrior to save each Clan, but beyond that we cannot help them." With renewed determination blazing in her starry gaze, the molly calls in blessing. "May the spirits of all our warrior ancestors go with these cats," she calls, looking up towards the sky. "Wherever the stars may lead them."



CHAPTER 1

The moor sighs with the gentle breeze of late greenleaf, abuzz with insects and the scuffle of prey. A young tom, haloed by the moon; light, neat paws wade through the towering grasses, silver under the shining eyes of the stars.

He crests the hill, and before him stretches a clearing he does not recognize, bathed in moonlight. The foliage thins to a flat stone, where another cat waits, pelt glittering with stardust, eyes glowing white.

The young tom hesitates, stiff with knowing fear, but as he recognizes the figure his shoulders slacken. "Father?"

The starry cat does not move, but his eyes seem to flicker for a moment. Then, with a voice much warmer and thicker than it had been in life, he speaks. "My son."

Deadfoot rises to his paws and carefully hops down from his perch, a trail of stardust in his wake. "I have a message for you." The young tom doesn't move, eyes searching the face of his late father. He looks different. Unconsciously he runs a paw over his own gaunt features, inherited from the older tom; he looks

different, he sounds different. *At least call me by name*, the young tom despairs, before drawing himself up to full height.

"I'm listening."

"A great reckoning comes for these lands. A new prophecy must be realized — you have been chosen to meet with three other cats under the new moon. You must listen to what midnight tells you." Deadfoot had been more succinct in life, had he not? The young tom steps forward, the fur on the back of his neck bristling with dread.

"A great reckoning? Father, what do you mean?"

The starry tom's face is expressionless. "All will be made clear to you in time."

Then he begins to flicker.

"Father?"

Holy light bursts from the starry tom's eyes, consuming his whole body; the young tom winces, and as he opens his eyes again his father is gone.

"...Dad?"

The light of the moon quickly begins to fade, consumed by cloud. Thick, black shadows begin to swallow the clearing on all sides.

"Wait, Dad! Come back!"

He feels his paws leave him, his body plunging into the darkness as if he'd been dropped by an owl, until the shadows engulf him completely, and he cries out, paws churning frantically before something prods him in the side, and his eyes fly open.

"Crowpaw!"

The young tom winces. Shafts of golden dawn light squeeze through the gorse roof above him. Leaning over him and silhouetted by the sun, the voice calls out again. "Thank StarClan. You've been thrashing like a poisoned hare for the last five minutes."

Crowpaw extends a wrist to rub at his eyes. "I'm truly touched by your concern, Nightpaw."

The molly snorts, receding from view and flicking his nose harshly with the tip of her tail. "Sooner I'm made a warrior, the better. I hate sharing a den with you."

Crowpaw flips himself over, reaching to yank a burr from his flank. "You're less than a moon older than me," he points out, spitting the burr onto the sandy floor with an exaggerated *ptoo* sound.

"Yeah, but you'll probably be held back." She shrugs decisively.

"What? Why?"

"On account of being so *small*."

He suddenly whips upwards. "Am not!"

"Are too!"

"*Nightpaw!*"

The molly grimaces, slowly pivoting on the spot. A wiry tom darkens the entrance of the apprentices' den. "Leave Crowpaw alone," the tom sighs, tone firm yet exasperated. The molly deflates. "Yes, Tornear." The tom beckons her with a tilt of his chin. "Come on. We're going on a quick hunt with Webfoot and Whitetail to go catch something for Robinwing and her kits."

Nightpaw's defeat is quick to fade, the shift punctuated with a gasp. "Did she have them just now?"

"Last night. Well, the wee hours of the morning, I suppose. The sun was just starting to come up."

"Did she name them yet? Can we go see them first?"

Crowpaw tunes out.

His dream weighs heavy on his mind. Surely StarClan wouldn't pick *him*? He must've eaten something funny the night before. *That's probably why I saw my dad*, he rationalizes with a thoughtful furrow of his brow, *because I don't really know any other dead cats*. He shakes his head to cement the dismissal, before interjecting Nightpaw's *incessant* yammering. "Tornear, is Mudclaw around?"

The tom shrugs. "Think he already took the dawn patrol out." He chuckles. "You know that brother of mine. Always a busy body."

Crowpaw hums in agreement, adding silently, *yeah, and sometimes he's too busy to actually train his own apprentice.*

Tornear noses Nightpaw out of the den. "Why don't you head over to the elder's den or something in the meantime?" he throws over his shoulder, disappearing before Crowpaw can respond. *Yeah, you wish.* His claws clench over a scrap of moss from his nest, and in his frustration he plucks it and starts tearing it up. *Stupid Nightpaw. Stupid dream.*

He strides out into camp, the warm sun baking the clearing under its light. He lets the breeze ruffle his fur for a moment, taking a breath. He catches a glimpse of Tornear and Nightpaw's tails disappearing up the hill after their patrol mates. Oatwhisker and Rushtail share tongues in the centre of camp, soaking up the sun before it gets too hot. Things look peaceful.

So why does the dream still gnaw at his mind?

Maybe he ought to let Barkface know, at least; *if there's anyone in the clan who could figure out this prophecy nonsense, it's him.* But he doesn't know Barkface very well, does he? In fact, he hadn't truly spoken to him since the day of his father's vigil. Barkface had done everything in his power to save Deadfoot, but his wounds were simply too deep after he'd been attacked by a fox. And his only memory of Barkface prior to that was the medic's desperate attempt to save Crowpaw's three littermates as young kits, but they were so weak, and over the course of two sunrises all three had perished. *So is it really foolish of me to think Barkface only ever brings bad things?*

"Crowpaw, is something wrong?"

His instinctual retort is swiftly swallowed upon turning around. "Hi, Uncle." His voice is shrill, high-pitched, unprepared. "Sorry, I was just—"

"Dilly-dallying. Crowpaw, you've been an apprentice for three moons now. Halfway through your apprenticeship. You should know to not be standing around."

"I know." He meets the tom's gaze. "I'm sorry, Onewhisker. Won't happen again."

Crowpaw braces for impact — and on cue, Onewhisker ruffles the scruff of charcoal coloured fur on the top of the apprentice's head. "Good to hear! Keep it up." With that, Onewhisker trots across camp towards the nursery, and as he ducks under the sheltering boughs of hawthorn, something in the air shifts.

The sky had been crystal clear all morning. And yet an ominous shadow rolls over camp like a shroud, covering camp within seconds. Crowpaw throws his head back to look up at the sky, but there are still no clouds in sight; and when he looks down again the shadow is nowhere to be found, and the camp is bathed in sunlight once more.

What?

Bewildered, Crowpaw stands statue still in the centre of camp. Time moves on and the birds still sing above. *A great reckoning...* He glances towards the medics' den, nestled behind a screen of gorse, knowing inside is Barkface doing whatever medics do... *No.* Pointedly, he turns to the elder's den.

I just need to finish out my apprenticeship. Whatever bad omens StarClan has, they can tell some other cat.

Four sunrises pass, and still the skies yield no clouds. At night, the apprentice's sleep is restless, but it's not dreams he's troubled with — it's the heat.

The trek to the gorge is a long one, but with every stream on the moor dried up, it's WindClan's last resort. As he marches behind Mudclaw and Onewhisker, Crowpaw can't suppress the swelling feeling of pride; usually, apprentices aren't allowed within several

tree-lengths of the gorge. An outright excursion directly to it is a dream come true.

It's past sunhigh, yet the sun still grips his dark pelt like a flaming claw, and in ire he realizes he's starting to slow down. Determined to not be outpaced, he presses on, each step more laboured, until finally his panting blows his cover.

"Crowpaw, do you need to stop for a moment?"

Mudclaw is leveling him with an expressionless amber gaze. He debates resisting, but reconsiders, then promptly nods in concession. Mudclaw turns away. "Make it quick. I want to get to the gorge before sundown."

"We'd be there quicker if you hadn't *insisted* on taking your apprentice with you." Onewhisker mumbles, swiping a paw over his muzzle. "No offense, Crowpaw. But there's a reason we don't take young cats to the gorge. It's a long trip. And it's a long way down if you fall, too."

Mudclaw visibly bristles. "We'll need someone small and nimble to get down there."

"You're sending *me* down there?" Crowpaw inquires.

"You're sending *him* down there?" Onewhisker demands over him.

"He'll be fine. The walls of the gorge are dry, so they're easy to climb."

Onewhisker rounds on the spotted tabby, tail lashing wildly, and the two toms' stand nose to nose, tension fizzing in the air. "Are you mousebrained?"

"It is *not* a decision I make lightly."

"It's not a decision you should be making *at all!* What's Tallstar say to this idea?"

"Tallstar doesn't know."

"Oh, *figures*."

"*Shut up!*"

It's out before he realizes. Crowpaw's whole body stiffens, but he stands his ground, large ears pulled back in defiance. "Stop *arguing* over me like a piece of prey! No one's asked what *I* want to do!"

"Because you're nine moons old," Onewhisker points out, and opens his mouth to speak again before Mudclaw dismisses him with a paw to his chest. "So what *do* you want, Crowpaw?"

The stares of both toms bore into him, their pelts tinted orange by the sinking sun, and the young tom's eyes flick between them for a moment. "I want to go to the gorge."

Mudclaw spins on his heel. "That settles it. Come on." Chuffed, Crowpaw picks up the pace.

"And Crowpaw?" Mudclaw doesn't turn his head.

"Yes?"

"*Never* speak out like that again."

Crowpaw grimaces. "Yes, Mudclaw."

They continue in silence, until the familiar grassy terrain turns rocky. Crowpaw feels Onewhisker's tail against his flank as they skirt the edge of the gorge. He cranes his neck to see over the edge, but the dizzying drop plunging below makes him reel back. "StarClan's kits, that's deep."

Onewhisker says nothing, still guiding him with his tail, with Mudclaw stalking along in front. "You have better eyesight than me, Onewhisker," he calls over his shoulder; Crowpaw is briefly shocked that he'd admit any sort of shortcoming to Onewhisker, but quickly surmises that their relationship is something beyond his understanding. Onewhisker nods — the wiry tom is much more cautious approaching the edge than his stockier companion — and peers into the drop below. He looks from side to side, squints with effort, then shakes his head. "It doesn't look good. It looks like there could be a puddle at the bottom, but it might be just the way the sun is glinting on the rocks."

"Then maybe we need to get closer?" Crowpaw pipes up, approaching the two toms from behind, before being halted by Onewhisker's stiff outstretched tail. "No."

"It's okay, Onewhisker," Mudclaw meows, understanding in his tone. "It'll just be to get a better angle. Crowpaw, you don't mind me grabbing you by the scruff?"

He flicks his ears. "As long as you don't tell anyone," he grunts. An uncharacteristic *mrrrow* of laughter escapes Mudclaw's muzzle, before assuring, "your secret's safe with me."

Mudclaw's teeth pinch the nape of Crowpaw's neck, and he winces as Mudclaw dangles him over the edge for a moment — his weight feels like it might pull him hurtling down the gorge and unconsciously he pulls his tail up under his belly, before he feels the rough touch of stone underpaw.

"Straighten yourself out," Mudclaw grunts, and when Crowpaw obliges he's instantly dropped.

He's perhaps a fox-length below the edge of the gorge, but he already feels so removed — the wind howls in his ears just like it's supposed to, and he's out of the way of prying eyes. *This would make a wonderful place to think.*

"Well, Crowpaw?"

"Um—" he shuffles along the edge as it slopes downward. "I think Onewhisker might be right, I think it's just the *sun*—"

He loses his footing; one hindleg slips downward and twists at an uncomfortable angle, and he hisses.

"Get him out of there," comes Onewhisker's stern snarl.

"I can't reach him. You're taller."

"Crowpaw?"

The apprentice winces again. "I'm fine, I've got this. Let me just—" he wriggles, and almost loses his other hindleg.

"Hang on!"

Onewhisker's head bobs up and down over the top of the gorge as he calculates his way down, then comes his teetering paws, shuffling carefully along the rockface for a foothold.

The tom slides suddenly, now parallel to Crowpaw, and he curses under his breath, but manages to sidle over and take Crowpaw by his scruff. The young tom is now even more aware of his weight, and tries his best to make himself smaller — he winces his eyes shut as he feels Mudclaw's breath on his nape now, and just as the deputy's fangs clamp onto his scruff, Onewhisker falls further.

Gruffly placed on the edge of the gorge, Crowpaw instantly turns around to check Onewhisker's status. Mudclaw has a paw outstretched, grunting, "Grab onto my arm!"

But Onewhisker is beyond arm's length. His forepaw slips, and now he's elbowing the lip of the rock and desperately kicking its face with his back legs. "Onewhisker!" Mudclaw shrieks, shuffling forward and narrowly avoiding losing his own footing.

"I can't! I'm—"

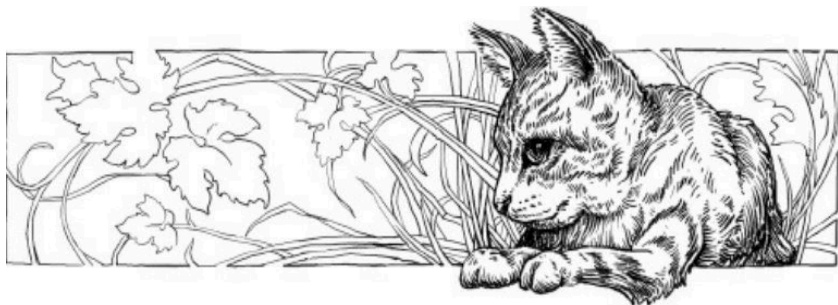
The scratching of claws against rock, and a final yowl as Onewhisker—

Crowpaw winces away. He can't watch.

Mudclaw screams over the edge.

"Onewhisker!"

There is no reply.



CHAPTER 2

"I got grounded."

The brown molly doesn't look up from her work. "Again?" She shuffles the recently dried yarrow leaves into a neat pile, heeding her sister with a single flick of her tail. "What'd you do this time?" "Followed a patrol out without permission," the ginger molly shrugs, but her voice is taut.

"I wouldn't be so flippant, Squirrelpaw."

A gray molly hunches over an array of juniper berries, a hindleg outstretched, a smirk on her face.

"I'm not being— flippy, or whatever."

"Flippant," the brown molly repeats, still expressionless.

Squirrelpaw bristles. "I don't even know what that means," she scolds, briefly patting down her chest fur.

"It means you're not taking it as seriously as you should."

"What? I am taking it seriously. I just think it's not fair."

The brown molly looks up at her sister, and it looks like she might be fighting tears. Just then, a muffled growl of her name sounds from somewhere in camp, and Squirrelpaw winces, then places the body of a mouse at the mouth of the den. "I'm here for some mouse bile."

"On elder duty?" asks the gray molly. Squirrelpaw nods.

"Leafpaw, get your sister some mouse bile."

"Mm-hm."

She grabs the mouse and scoots to one corner of the den, makes a careful incision on the creature's belly with one claw, and sets to work soaking the bile into a flat scrap of moss, all the while her nose wrinkling in disgust.

"Gross," comes her sister's giggling commentary, and she instantly adds with intrigue, "you gotta show me how to do that sometime." She returns to Squirrelpaw with the moss balanced in her jaw and her tongue tucked as far from the foul-smelling gunk as possible.

"Here," she mumbles through her cargo.

"Thank you, m'dear." The ginger molly smiles weakly, her attempt at mock chivalry falling flat, before taking the substance-soaked moss and promptly trotting off in the direction of the elder's den.

Leafpaw sighs.

"I don't like seeing her upset like that."

"Well, if apprentices think they can go off by themselves, without telling any cat, then where would we be?" the gray molly replies firmly, tidying the now counted juniper berries into a pile. "I know." The older molly chuckles. "I'm just glad it's *you* I'm mentoring."

The statement stings Leafpaw, on behalf of her sister, but she knows her mentor means no harm. "Dad says you were a bit of a troublemaker when you were an apprentice, Cinderpelt."

"Maybe I was," she breathes, "but that was before I got hit on the Thunderpath. Knocked some sense into me. I'm hoping it doesn't take the same sort of trauma to knock some sense into Squirrelpaw."

Cinderpelt had trained as a warrior apprentice under Leafpaw's father, Firestar, now leader of ThunderClan, but halfway through her apprenticeship she was hit by a monster on the Thunderpath, permanently injuring her leg. Her time spent healing in the medics' den sparked her interest in herbs and the divine, and

eventually she chose to train under the watchful gaze of ThunderClan's previous medic, Yellowfang.

To change course like that is an idea completely foreign to Leafpaw; the molly had wanted to be a medic since she could walk.

"I'm sure she'll figure things out though. She has the whole Clan behind her, her mother and father. And you, of course," Cinderpelt purrs, touching her tail to Leafpaw's side in reassurance. "It'll all be forgotten tomorrow. Now, did you get any of that mouse bile on your fur? If you did, you'd better go wash it off."

"No, Cinderpelt, I'm fine." Leafpaw's voice strains as she peers out the mouth of the den, craning her neck to see inside the elders' den to check on her sister.

Cinderpelt bumps her head against Leafpaw's. "Oh, cheer up, Leafpaw," she chuckles. "The Gathering is tonight. Would you like to come?"

"The Gathering!" Leafpaw exclaims. "I forgot about it." She spins around to face her mentor. "May I?" She deflates with sudden hesitation. "Squirrelpaw won't be allowed to come, will she?"

Cinderpelt looks affronted. "Certainly not. Not after today's shenanigans. She had the whole *camp* in turmoil, looking for her. Your father was in *bits*. So no, I don't think so."

Leafpaw's ears flatten, but Cinderpelt's blue eyes glint with understanding. She gently tilts her apprentice's chin upwards with a reassuring smile. "Leafpaw, you and your sister aren't kits anymore. And you have chosen a very different path from hers, to be a medic. You will always be friends, but you can't do everything together, and the sooner you both accept that, the better."

Cinderpelt makes it seem so easy.

Leafpool sighs, then nods.

There's a nip in the air as the Gathering patrol make their way to Fourtrees, moon hanging low and full. Every sight and sound makes Leafpaw's tail curl with excitement. The Clans have met

here at Fourtrees, where the four territories converge, every full moon for generations. As long as the moon remains in the sky, so too does the sacred truce of StarClan, and the Gathering provides the opportunity for the Clans to share news and discuss matters that affect the whole forest.

This is Leafpaw's second Gathering, and this time she feels much more prepared for the sheer number of cats milling around the clearing. With a pang of loneliness, she wishes Squirrelpaw were here; thankfully, the cheerful molly dismissed Leafpaw's concerns before she left, telling her she was pleased to get a good night's sleep, saying something along the lines of, *I think I'll be seeing ticks in my dreams tonight!* Smiling at the thought, Leafpaw sticks close to Cinderpelt as they creep through the undergrowth and into the clearing.

The mass of cats is much less intimidating this time around, though still overwhelming; some cats are already seated around the Great Rock in the centre where the announcements are called from, others gossiping and sharing tongues together under the cover of the forest foliage. Others still trot across the clearing to greet old friends — a communion of affectionate headbutting and chirping hellos.

Previously, Leafpaw had sought to meet someone new tonight, but now she searches the crowd for a familiar face, brow furrowed. She spots Graystripe, ThunderClan's deputy, talking at length with a blue-coated molly Leafpaw had met at the last Gathering: Mistyfoot, deputy of RiverClan. Two young warriors stand side by side along with her that Leafpaw doesn't recognize, though Graystripe seems to know them, greeting them affectionately with a nuzzle to their foreheads.

She debates her approach, stepping back and forward as if on a hinge, until Mistyfoot catches her eye and twiddles the tip of her tail in greeting. "Hi— it's Leafpaw, isn't it? Cinderpelt's

apprentice?" Refreshed to get something other than 'Firestar's daughter', Leafpaw nods. "That's right!" she chirps, trotting over. "How are things with RiverClan?"

"We're all well. The Clan is thriving," Mistyfoot replies quickly. "I don't think you've met these two, have you?"

"No," Leafpaw replies, glancing over the two warriors clandestinely. Mistyfoot seems to shine with pride. "This is Stormcloud and Feathertail, Stonefur and I's former apprentices—"

"And my kits!" Graystripe exclaims, gruffly swinging an arm around Stormcloud, despite the younger tom's humoured protest. She should've guessed, really — Stormcloud is a mirror image of his father, with his rounded features and thick gray pelt. The molly, Feathertail, can only be assumed to take after her mother, with her sleek silver pelt and soft blue eyes, but the same rounded broad face as her father. She greets Leafpaw with a mouthed 'hi', and the meeker Stormcloud — having escaped his father's grasp — simply nods.

"Cinderpelt was the one who helped our mother deliver us. We'd be dead without her. She's an amazing medic." Feathertail swishes her eponymous tail excitedly. "You must be proud to be her apprentice!"

Leafpaw nods. "Very proud. But she knows so much, sometimes I wonder if I'll ever learn it all!"

Feathertail purrs, waving a paw dismissively. "Don't be silly! I felt the same about becoming a warrior. I'm sure you'll be fine."

Stormcloud shuffles. "You're Firestar and Sandstorm's daughter too, right?"

"Yeah."

He focuses on something in the distance.

"Cool."

Graystripe leans forward. "You say the Clan's thriving, Mistyfoot," he mumbles with concern, "but you look worried. Is there something wrong?"

Graystripe always seems to have a handle on other cats' emotions, even the more subtle ones, but as Leafpaw glances at Mistyfoot again she's quick to notice the uneasiness written all over her face. She hesitates for a moment, eyes flitting back and forth. "It's... probably nothing, but— well, you'll hear about it soon enough when the Gathering starts." She gestures to the Great Rock with her head. Leafpaw follows her gaze, where two cats already stand: Tallstar, WindClan's world-weary leader, and Leopardstar, leader of RiverClan, whose amber gaze chills Leafpaw to the bone. Shortly after, her father hops up to join them.

"Where is ShadowClan's leader?" comes Leopardstar's scratchy hiss. "Blackstar, what are you waiting for?"

A hulking white tom with huge black paws pounds to the bottom of the Great Rock, surprising Leafpaw with the nimble grace with which he leaps up. "I'm coming, I'm coming!"

With that, Leopardstar throws her head back and yowls, and at once the chatter in the clearing dies to silence.

Feathertail sits herself down beside Leafpaw, offering her a gentle smile, which Leafpaw returns, and settles herself down.

"Cats of all Clans, welcome." Tallstar heads the group, addressing the assembled cats, his voice a soothing crackle. "Who will speak first?"

"I will," Firestar calls, stepping forward. His eyes brim with affection for the old tom. "Thank you, Tallstar." The WindClan leader sits down.

"ThunderClan has faired well this past moon. StarClan has been kind to us." Hearing her father speak with such bravado always makes Leafpaw laugh — if Squirrelpaw were here, she'd probably be doing her best Firestar impression. She flicks an ear, stifling a smile and listening intently.

"We've reason to believe there's a badger nesting at Snakerocks. Do keep your eyes peeled." He looks thoughtful for a moment, then his tail shoots up in a curl of realization. "How could I forget! We welcome a new apprentice tonight in Whitepaw." The gaze of

the Gathering shifts to the little white molly, daughter of Cloudtail and Brightheart, and niece of Cinderpelt. Meekly, she waves her tail in greeting. "And a new warrior in Sorreltail."

A small cheer rises at her name; Sorreltail is well-liked. Besides having personality to burn, she had injured her shoulder during her apprenticeship. It meant missing out on graduating with her littermates, Sootface and Rainwhisker, but it also meant she'd been to more Gatherings than the average apprentice. Silently Leafpaw laments that she missed her warrior ceremony; she'd been out with Cinderpelt getting borage when it happened. She'd have to congratulate her later.

"ThunderClan has no more news to share," Firestar concludes, and steps back in line to let Blackstar take his place. The burly white tom has had a troubled past, but there's no doubt that under his leadership ShadowClan has seen trust from the other Clans that it has not seen in seasons. Still, his battle-scarred pelt and stern face makes Leafpaw recoil even more than Leopardstar does.

"ShadowClan is strong and prey is plentiful," he states simply. "The heat of greenleaf has dried up part of the marshes on our territory, but we still have plenty of water to drink."

Had ShadowClan no water to drink, they wouldn't admit it anyway.

Blackstar says no more, and Leafpaw wonders briefly if he's telling the whole story, before he steps back and invites Tallstar with a flick of his head. The old tom obliges, bowing, then draws himself to full height, though something flickers in his eyes: worry.

"Blackstar spoke truly of the heat of greenleaf. It is many days since the forest saw rain, and the moorland streams on WindClan's territory have been scorched away completely this last quarter moon. We have no water at all."

"But the river borders your territory," someone calls out from beneath the Great Rock; Leafpaw recognizes the scratchy voice as Russetfur, ShadowClan's deputy.

"The river runs through a deep, sheer-sided gorge for the whole length of our border," Tallstar explains. "It's too dangerous to go down there. Onewhisker..."

The old tom seems to deflate.

"Onewhisker fell trying to get down there. We haven't found the body."

Instantly Leafpaw glances to her father; Onewhisker was a good friend of his. Clearly the news is fresh to him too, judging by the barely-tempered expression of haunted shock. Her heart breaks with pity.

Tallstar's appeal continues.

"Our kits and elders cannot manage the climb. They are suffering badly, and I fear that some of the younger kits might die."

"Can't your kits and elders chew grass for the moisture?" someone else suggested.

Tallstar shakes his head. "The grass is parched. I tell you, there is no water anywhere on our territory."

Tallstar turns to Leopardstar, dipping his head. "Leopardstar, in the name of StarClan I must ask that you let us come into your territory to drink from the river there."

Leopardstar remains stone-faced as ever, silent for a beat. "The water in the river is low," she finally admits. "We have not escaped the effects of this drought in RiverClan, either."

"But there is still far more than you need." Tallstar pleads, and in the moonlight Leafpaw notes that his pelt is greasy and ungroomed — they really *are* thirsty. Surely Leopardstar sees that? "That is true," the golden molly mews, tilting her head in consideration. She perches herself on the very edge of the Great Rock. "What do my warriors think? Mistyfoot?"

Just let them drink from the river!

The blue-gray molly rises to her paws, but before she can speak she's cut off.

"We can't trust them! Let WindClan set one paw over our border, and they'll be taking our prey as well as our water!" snarls a black RiverClan tom.

"That's Blackclaw," Feathertail murmurs, leaning down to whisper into her ear. "He's... very loyal, but..." She trails off. *Too loyal*, Leafpaw muses. A cat like that would've had a lot to say about Feathertail and her brother's parentage. The thought makes Leafpaw's nose wrinkle.

Mistyfoot steps forward, something unknown in her gaze, and fixes the tom with a glare. "You forget the times when RiverClan has needed help from other Clans. If they had not helped us then, we would not be here today." She turns to her leader with a decisive curl of her tail. "I say we should allow it. We have water to spare."

Leopardstar looks thoughtful for a moment, and the clearing waits for her response. She dips her head. "Very well, Tallstar. Your Clan may enter our territory to drink from the river just below the Twoleg bridge."

Blackclaw voices his dissent with grunt and a flick of his tail.

Feathertail sniffs. "I don't really know what she sees in him," she mumbles.

"Who?"

"Mistyfoot."

"They're *mates*?"

"Sort of. I'm not really sure what's going on there."

Being privy to such drama makes being a medic that bit more interesting; cats are inclined to tell you things. It's still confusing, though — *they're either mates or they're not!*

"...you will come no farther, and you do not have leave to take prey," comes the last of Leopardstar's terms on the matter. Tallstar bows his head, the wash of relief over him clear. "RiverClan has our thanks, from the oldest elder to the youngest kit. You have saved our Clan."

Leopardstar's face *still* doesn't change. "The drought will not last forever, and you will have water in your territory soon. We will discuss this again at the next Gathering."

"I'm sure they will," mutters Graystripe from behind Leafpaw. "If I know Leopardstar, she'll make WindClan pay for that water somehow." There's a darkness in his tone — did she ever make peace with him after almost sentencing his kits to death?

Leopardstar's sternness isn't lost on Tallstar, and he speaks again with his usual zeal. "Let us hope that StarClan has sent rain by then."

He recedes back and sits down, muttering something to Firestar, and Leopardstar steps to the forefront once more. Leafpaw watches her with intrigue; perhaps now she'd find out what has Mistyfoot so antsy.

"RiverClan fairs well. Dawnflower welcomes Tumblekit, Pebblekit and Minnowkit into the world, and fosters her little sister, Willowkit."

Leafpaw feels Feathertail lean over again. "Willowkit is actually Dawnflower's *mother's* kit," she explains, "but she's pretty old so she's in the elder's den now, and Dawnflower's kits are about the same age as Willowkit." Leafpaw nods, quietly thanking Feathertail for the context.

But surely *that's* not what's worrying Mistyfoot?

"Blackclaw and Stormcloud dealt with a small rat problem at the river. Twolegs left their trash, as usual." Leafpaw feels a wall of fur knock her from behind; she turns her head to find an embarrassed Stormcloud, having just been patted on the back by his heavy-pawed father. "Nice work," she whispers with a smile. Wordlessly, he smiles back, waving a paw that said *it was nothing*. "Some of you may have met two of our older apprentices, Hawkpaw and Mothpaw. While Hawkpaw will continue his journey to warriorhood, Mothpaw has now chosen a different path. She will serve under Mudfur, my father, as a medic apprentice."

Leafpaw hadn't expected the howls of outrage that now rattled the clearing — even more surprising is that much of the dissent is coming from RiverClan. *What's going on?*

"Do I hear protest?" Leopardstar remarks, ears flattening in a growl. "Very well. "I will tell you everything. To stop the rumour mill turning, at least." She draws herself to full height.

"Six moons ago, at the beginning of newleaf, a rogue cat came to RiverClan, with her two surviving kits. Her name was Sasha, and the birth of her kits had weakened her so much that she needed help with hunting and caring for them. For a time she thought of joining the Clan, and we would have welcomed her as a warrior, but in the end she decided the warrior code was not the way of life for her. She left us, but her kits chose to stay." She levels the crowd with a steely glare. "Any questions?"

An uproarious protest fills the clearing once more. "Rogue cats? Taken into a Clan?" roars one cat. "Has RiverClan gone mad?"

"They are strong young cats and they have learned their warrior skills well," Leopardstar snaps over the crowd. "They have sworn to defend their Clan at the cost of their lives, just as all of you have sworn." She turns to Blackstar. "Were not some of ShadowClan's warriors rogues once?" Before he can reply, she swivels to Firestar. "And if a kittypet can become Clan leader, why should rogues not be welcome as warriors?"

"She's right, you know," Graystripe mutters, seeming a little surprised that he was agreeing with her on something. "Is that what's bothering you, Mistyfoot?"

"I know, I know— I'm in no position to criticize any cat for being born outside the Clan, it's just the whole..."

Blackstar's voice rises over the crowd. "I'm ready to admit that a rogue can learn enough of our code to become a warrior, but a medic? What do rogues know of StarClan? Will StarClan even accept her?"

Mistyfoot tilts her head indicatively, a meek grimace on her muzzle. "Yeah, that."

Leafpaw searches for her father's reaction, but he's uncharacteristically silent. Despite being born a kittypet, Firestar had been plagued by dreams from StarClan throughout his youth. Would this be any different?

She remembers her own conviction, when she had been little more than a kit — her duty was to heal and to serve StarClan, and heal and serve she would. Had Mothpaw the same conviction, despite her upbringing?

"If I may," rasps an old spotted tom heaving himself to his paws at the base of the Great Rock; it's Mudfur, RiverClan's current medic. "Mothpaw is a talented young cat. But because she was born a rogue, I am waiting for a sign from StarClan that she is the right medicine cat for RiverClan. Once I have received that sign, I will take her to Mothermouth at the half-moon time. If I act without the blessing of StarClan, then you can all complain—but not until then." With an irritated twitch of his tail, he sits down.

The crowd parts, and finally Leafpaw can make out the young cat crouching beside him; startlingly beautiful, with neat triangular features and a golden pointed pelt. She looks... afraid. "Is that her?" Leafpaw asks, turning her head slightly to Feathertail but keeping her eyes trained on the cat in question.

"That's right. I think the leaders have finished; when the Gathering's over, I'll take you to meet her, if you like. She's quite friendly, once you get to know her."

Leafpaw nods eagerly. There are no other medic apprentices in the forest — hopefully Mudfur gets that sign soon. That way, she has someone to talk to about her training and all the mysteries of StarClan.

The crowd quietens.

"Will that be all, Leopardstar?" Tallstar asks. Leopardstar nods.

"Very well. This Gathering is over. Go in peace."

Slowly the crowd shifts into motion, and Feathertail leaps to her paws. "Come on, before we have to leave." Leafpaw nods quickly and trots after Feathertail, weaving between the groups of departing cats.

"Mothpaw! Hi!"

Feathertail slows to a halt before the molly, tail-tip twiddling in greeting. Leafpaw stops a little ways behind her. Mothpaw glances between the two of them, still hunched over. "Feathertail. Hello." Her voice is deeper than Leafpaw thought it'd be — soft, yet full.

"Mothpaw, this is Leafpaw. She's the medic apprentice in ThunderClan." At Feathertail's introduction, Leafpaw curtsies bashfully. "It'll be great to have someone around your age in the same boat as you! Well, Leafpaw is a little younger, but..."

"That's if I'm allowed to be a medic apprentice at all. Hawk says— Hawkpaw says he's sure it'll work out, but he's... used to everyone liking him. He's sort of magnetic like that. Becoming a medic is way different from becoming a warrior. It's lives at stake." Her amber eyes glimmer with doubt; clearly the stir caused by the news of her plan has shaken her. *So she does have conviction.*

"You'll find a way," Leafpaw says softly. "And StarClan has a plan for everyone. I'm sure Mudfur will receive his sign sooner rather than later. No one will be able to argue with that!"

Mothpaw gives her a weak smile. "I hope you're right."

Pawsteps herald the arrival of another cat, and it's visibly obvious that this is Mothpaw's brother, Hawkpaw. "What a load of fishguts," he grumbles. "All this nonsense about the Clans and their strength and then they rise a fuss because their new medic wasn't born here. They won't care where you're from when you're stitching their flank back together or—"

His eyes sweep over Leafpaw.

"Who's this?"

His tone is flat; he seems almost *offended* by her presence.

"This is ThunderClan's medic apprentice," Mothpaw explains. "She's—"

"Leafpaw, right?" The tom's eyes twinkle with sudden intrigue. "I was just speaking with your father. He told me all this fuss will be forgotten in a moon's time. He might very well be the only sensible cat here." He levels her with a mischievous stare. "Unless you can prove me wrong?"

"Leave her alone, Hawk," Mothpaw scolds. "She's on our side."

"Relax," he coos. He turns to her again. His eyes are a threateningly icy shade of blue, his mouth stretched in a grin. "I'm just messing with her. Right, Leafpaw?"

"Right," she answers flatly, brow furrowed.

"RiverClan, to me. We're going home."

Leopardstar hops down from the Great Rock, likely having finished discussing the particulars of the river deal with Tallstar.

"I guess that's our queue," mews Feathertail, touching her nose to Leafpaw's ear. "Don't be a stranger, okay Leafpaw?" the silver molly chirps, before breaking off to join Mistyfoot and Stormcloud, who both waved their tails to Leafpaw in passing. Returning the farewell with a dip of her head, she turns to Mothpaw. "I'll see you at the half-moon meeting, then?"

"Hopefully!" she replies, amber eyes glowing with newfound enthusiasm.

Something brown and fluffy collides with Leafpaw's nose.

"See ya around, Leafy."

She watches Hawkpaw retreat. Mothpaw throws her an awkward grin, then quickly trots after her brother.

"Of course Firestar's daughter would have to find the most controversial cats in the forest to befriend, hm?" Graystripe purrs, gently bunting Leafpaw on the shoulder. "I'd have expected it from your sister."

"Your daughter introduced me to them," Leafpaw replies matter-of-factly. Graystripe laughs, beckoning her with his tail and sauntering forward. "Okay, okay. Break it up! Home time! Let's go!"

Leafpaw follows the gray-furred deputy, manages a few steps, but catches something in the corner of her eye that stops her in her tracks; Bramblefang hunched over in conversation with his ShadowClan sister, Tawnyspark.

The two had faced a similar prejudice as Mothpaw and Hawkpaw, though not for the same reason — their father was Tigerstar, the tyrannical ruler that sought to destroy the Clans mere moons ago.

The two disband on Graystripe's orders, and Leafpaw follows the rest of her Clan out of the clearing and back into the shadows of the forest.

But as they climb the sloping path back home, their pelts tinted silver in the moonlight, she can't help but wonder what the two have to be so hush-hush about.



CHAPTER 3

The camp hasn't been the same since Onewhisker fell into the gorge. The tom was well loved; the epitome of a true WindClan warrior. His vigil had been a tough one; having nothing to bury only made it sting more.

It's been a quarter moon, and still no rain graces the moor, nor anywhere in the forest. The fields are devoid of prey, having left the dry grasses in favour of greener pastures closer to the river. The ever-dwindling freshkill-pile reflects this shift.

Crowpaw lays with his mother in the centre of camp, dozing in the sun. She'd been visiting Tallstar and Barkface alternately for the last quarter moon, to try and make sense of her brother's death. He'd overheard her, in Barkface's den, say 'he was moons younger than me; it should've been me.' The words stuck with Crowpaw.

The dream still repeats in his head, but what frightens him more is the dark cloud he saw following Onewhisker into the nursery the morning after. Had that been an omen that he'd die? Was he too blind to see it? Too caught up in his own problems? The smoky tom clenches the earth in an angry grimace. *Onewhisker wouldn't*

have had to have saved me if I hadn't been showing off. He'd still be here.

He'd still be alive.

A rising shadow separates him from his musing. "Crowpaw," comes Mudclaw's rasp, "I'm heading to the river. Come with me." Crowpaw nods in wordless response. He and his mentor had only spoken in passing since the day at the gorge. This would be an uncomfortable trip.

"Ashfoot," Mudclaw mumbles, voice gentler than Crowpaw thought possible, "would you like to come too?" He lays a paw on her side to rouse her. Something about the action makes Crowpaw's tail twitch. *She'll say no.*

"Sure! It'll be nice to get out of camp."

Oh. Nevermind.

The heat is much more manageable these days, or maybe he's just gotten used to it — either way, the patrol keeps up a reasonable trotting pace, with Crowpaw keeping up the rear behind his mother.

It's sudden, but nonetheless he's pleased to see some of her old fire return.

"You'll be ten moons soon," she says distractedly as they descend the last hill to the bridge. "Sorry!" she chirps as he stares incredulously back at her, shaking her head. "Just thinking aloud. You were born on the new moon. I just sort of forgot that time was passing, you know?"

The new moon. Right.

Crowpaw laughs, skidding down a particularly steep part of the hill. "Yeah, it's been a weird few quarter-moons."

Mudclaw indicates his intention to halt with a sudden upright stiffening of his tail. A beat. "Border's quiet."

"We're allowed here, are we not?" Crowpaw asks.

"Yes. But I don't want to meet any RiverClan warriors."

"Why?"

"Because they're snide and they smell."

"Got it."

Ashfoot scowls, joining them at the river's edge. "You shouldn't be teaching my son *your* prejudices."

Mudclaw stops lapping to lift his head, expression and tone equally droll. "It's healthy. Don't want him getting buddy-buddy with some dolt from another Clan. Or worse!" he swivels to face Crowpaw, eyes widening in mock outrage, "*padding after* someone from another Clan."

Crowpaw's tail lashes indignantly. "I don't plan on padding after *anyone*, thank you!" he barks, feeling hot to the tips of his ears. Pointedly, he sinks to a hunch, taking what he thinks is a decisive conversation ender; an exaggerated drink of water. Leaning down beside him, his mother chuckles. "Your father was just the same as an apprentice." She mocks a younger Deadfoot with a teeter of her head. "I'm going to be *deputy*, and *deputies* don't *need* mates!" *And Dad sure as shrubs didn't need kits, either.*

Crowpaw stops lapping, rolling his eyes and flicking his head towards Mudclaw indicatively. "Indubitably."

Mudclaw seemed to stiffen at the remark. *I must've hit a nerve.*

The deputy swipes his tongue around his muzzle, then sniffs the air. His voice is airy and dangerous: "vole."

There's a silent and desperate solidarity among the three cats; *hunger*. Ashfoot appeals to Mudclaw weakly, whispering. "We're not supposed to hunt."

"Which is stupid," he growls. "If we have no water then it's obvious we have no prey either. Tallstar's happy to lie down to Leopardstar." He sets off across the bridge to begin tracking the scent, stopping to grumble with finality, "I'm not."

Ashfoot's eyes flash with worry, leveling her son with a pleading glare. He shoots back with her very same blue eyes: *I'm going with him*. Reluctantly, she nods.

Mudclaw's wily nature is what makes him such a good deputy, Crowpaw decides as he skirts the edge of the river behind the spotted tom. *That tenacity will bring WindClan to greatness.*

"There," Mudclaw whispers, almost soundlessly. The foliage along the bank quivers and, sure enough, a vole crawls along the water's edge, stopping every few steps to nibble the blooms of marigold blanketing the bank. Mudclaw taps his tail against Crowpaw's side. The young tom bristles. "You want *me* to catch it?"

"Yes."

"But we're starving and we can't afford to lose it. What if I mess up?"

"What if, what if, what if. Hop to it."

Crowpaw swallows.

He takes a moment to calculate his approach. Legs tucked, tail level, and the wind is blowing towards him. He creeps closer, maintaining his posture, trying desperately to ignore Mudclaw's stare burning into his back, and with a soft rustle he sails forward, rolling over the vole with his fangs pierced into its neck. He curses under his breath. "Sorry. I lost my balance."

"I saw."

"He still caught it," Ashfoot meows, now approaching from behind Mudclaw. The sun is reaching its peak in the sky; there would likely be a RiverClan patrol soon. "Now let's *go*. We're not supposed to be here." Her voice is taut with worry.

"I never knew you to be such a worry-wart," Mudclaw protests, nodding to Crowpaw to take his vole with him. The apprentice furrows his brow. *How much do you know about my mother?*

Mudclaw beckons the two of them with a flick of his tail, rounding the edge of the border to lead back up the river towards the bridge. No cat speaks for a spell, the shuffle of their paws in the grass filling the air. The sun beats down on their backs like a fiery shroud — the trees on the other side of the bridge should offer

some respite. Padding over its hot stone surface, the patrol ducks under the canopy, sharing a sigh of relief.

"We'll creep along here for as long as we can, but this is technically ThunderClan territory," Mudclaw warns, scratching an itch behind his ear. He flicks his head, beckoning, before weaving his way through the undergrowth. Crowpaw obliges without question, though wonders briefly if this is such a good idea.

"This is a terrible idea."

Apparently his mother mirrors his concerns.

Crowpaw opens his mouth to agree, but suddenly remembers what Mudclaw said to him about talking back, and reconsiders.

"You already made Crowpaw catch that vole so if either Clan sees us, the blame is on *him* rather than *you*." *Wait, that's not why he did that! He was letting me catch it to test me!* "Now you're leading us along the ThunderClan border like sheep to the slaughter?"

Mudclaw turned. "What?"

Challenge glints in Ashfoot's eyes. *That old fire's back, alright.*

The spotted tom growls. "I'm trying to keep us from *roasting* to death. And I *let* Crowpaw catch the vole as practice, and he happens to be a very good hunter. Good to know you have no faith in your son."

"I have the *utmost* faith in my son." She glared at him. "It's *you* I have no faith in."

Mudclaw bares his teeth, ears flat to his skull. "*Say that again.*"

Ashfoot's neck fur stands on end. "I just find it a little unusual that my brother died on a patrol with just *you*."

Huh?

"Mother, I was on that patrol too."

Ashfoot whips around, a little threatening at first, but her gaze softens for her son. "You were?"

"Yes."

Okay, good. Now that we're in agreement—

A blur of grey fur, and Ashfoot has Mudclaw pinned to the forest floor. "You sent my kit to the gorge?" she spits in his face. "Why? Did you use him as bait for Onewhisker? Is that what you did?"

What's she talking about?

"No, Ashfoot! You've got it all wrong! It was an accident, I swear—"

"Whatever quarrel you had with Onewhisker— was it worth his life?"

Mudclaw struggles under her grip. "I had no quarrel with Onewhisker! Sure we've had our *differences*, but you *know* I—"

Both cats stiffen, and Ashfoot loosens her grip.

"Head for the border," Mudclaw wheezes. "I smell ThunderClan."

"I'm not surprised."

A dark tabby tom rises from the undergrowth. Mudclaw flips himself over, drawing his lips back in a throaty snarl. A burlier tom steps up beside the first, followed by a little red molly, somehow *smaller* than Crowpaw, on the other side.

"What are you doing on our territory?" the first tom demands, before rolling his eyes. "As if I need to ask."

"We're not stealing prey," Mudclaw retorts, crouching defensively. *He lies so readily.*

"Then what's that?" the little molly asks, flicking her tail towards the vole at Crowpaw's paws. He steps over it protectively.

"It's not a ThunderClan vole," Ashfoot explained gently. Damage control. "It ran across the border from RiverClan." *That's not true either!*

His mentor and deputy, and his mother, both *grovelling*.

"Even if that's true, you're stealing it from RiverClan," the bigger tom points out. There's a righteousness in his tone that makes Crowpaw itch. "You're allowed to drink from the river, not to take prey."

That's it.

"Mind your own business!" Crowpaw launches himself across the grass at the bigger tom. He knocks him over, rolling over the huge tabby and sinking his teeth into his scruff. The tom yowls, then twists around, raking his claws down Crowpaw's back. In retaliation Crowpaw scrabbles at the tom's belly with his hind paws, before the tabby beast rears upwards with a screech and dives for Crowpaw's neck—

And then suddenly he's pulled away. "That's enough, Crowpaw!" His mother stands over him, blocking him from his opponent. "Attacking a ThunderClan warrior when we're trespassing on their territory? What's next?"

Crowpaw heaves, catching a glimpse of the big tom's angry amber eyes between his mother's legs. "He called us thieves!" he snaps, the adrenaline already fading to pain in the scores down his shoulder.

"And he was right, wasn't he?" She turns to the smaller, older tom. Crowpaw watches as the big tabby scrambles to his feet. *I didn't even get a proper hit on him.* "I'm sorry, Dustpelt," Ashfoot continues, dipping her head. "It is a RiverClan vole, and we shouldn't have taken it, but there's hardly any prey in our own territory. Our elders and kits are hungry, and—" She stops. She's said too much. "What are you going to do?" she ventures.

Dustpelt grunts. "The vole's between you and RiverClan. I see no need to tell Firestar about this— unless it happens again. Just get out of our territory, and stay out."

Piece of work. Is that what Mudclaw sounds like?

Suddenly he's nosed to his feet by Mudclaw. Grabbing his vole, he throws that big tabby a defiant glance— did that little molly just stick her tongue out at him?

It takes everything in him to follow his Clanmates and not sprint back to bash those two's stupid heads together.

The journey home is a silent and shameful one. Crowpaw hasn't been scolded; no, worse. They're letting him ruminate on it.

But he knows why he did what he did. Because Mudclaw isn't telling him everything. His mother's sentiment rumbles in his mind like thunder; did Mudclaw really lead Onewhisker to his doom on purpose? Is Crowpaw a pawn in his game? There's no way. His mother is just blinded by grief. That's all.

Although, maybe that's not Blockhead of ThunderClan's fault.

The next few days pass and the rain does not come. The clan grows weaker by the day, and the poster child of this change is none other than Tallstar. Crowpaw wonders with a pang how long the old tom has left.

As the moon wanes, Crowpaw meticulously keeps track of its shape, scratching a note of it every night on the sandy floor of the apprentices' den. He cannot miss his chance at getting some answers. "Since when," mutters Nightpaw, question broken by a yawn, "are you so obsessed with the moon?" He's lucky to have an answer.

"I'll be ten moons when it's new."

"Oh." Nightpaw licks a paw, then grins viciously. "Happy birthday."

Tonight's the night.

There is no wind; ordinarily, it'd be a difficult night to sneak out. The open air of the moor amplifies the lightest paw steps. But as Crowpaw steps over his denmate's sleeping form, Whitetail, who is on guard, looks ready to crumple up with exhaustion. *I guess the drought is good for something*, he muses darkly.

Journeying to Fourtrees alone is an unusual feeling; a *wrong* feeling. It feels like he's the only cat left on earth. Suppressing a shudder, he presses on, the oh so still night lit only by the eyes of Silverpelt.

Finally, he sees oak forest ahead.

He weaves through the unfamiliar terrain with newfound zeal. *Finally*, he'd figure what on earth is going on. *Finally*, there'd be answers.

Voices echo through the trees. *She's heard pretty much everything, so she might as well stay*, some cat says. The undergrowth rustles gently as he ventures closer. *You should have been more careful. Letting an apprentice track you!* says another. He peers over the foliage into the clearing. A big tortoiseshell, a silver cat and a gray cat...

And that big huge tabby and his stupid little apprentice.

No fucking way.

"What's going on?"

Crowpaw steps out of the cover of the undergrowth, sweeping them with a quick headcount. "This can't be right—" he grunts, "Deadfoot said there was only supposed to be four of us."

The big tabby spins around, and Crowpaw half-wonders if he'll pounce, so he readies himself to retaliate — but the big tom's eyes fly open in shocked outrage. "You!"

"Yes, me," Crowpaw retorts, bristling.

"This is a WindClan cat, right?" said the big tortoiseshell, looking him up and down with a droll sneer. "Undersized specimen, isn't he?"

Crowpaw hisses in defense. *Dad could've mentioned they'd all be from different clans!*

"He's an apprentice," explains the big tabby in that same pompous tone. "His name's Crowpaw." He turns to him. "Right?"

"What's it to you?" Crowpaw snarls, and very poignantly wonders why he even came.

"You had the dream too?" came a significantly gentler voice; the silver cat from RiverClan. He gives her a curt nod. "I spoke with our old deputy, Deadfoot. He told me to meet three other cats at the new moon." *Not five.*

"Then that's one cat from each Clan," she meows, facing the rest of the group. "We're all here."

"Now we just have to wait for midnight," the big tabby states. Crowpaw turns to the silver molly again; she's the only one of them that's been kind to him so far — apart from the other RiverClan cat, the gray tom he can only assume by filial resemblance is her brother, who's only apparent purpose is standing still.

"Do you know what this is about?" he asks as gently as he can.

"If it were *me*," blurts a shrill voice before the silver molly can even answer, "I'd be a bit less quick to believe in these dreams. If there was really trouble on its way, do you think StarClan would come to you first, before the Clan leaders or medics?"

She has a point. It's her *delivery* that bugs him.

"Then how do you explain it?" the big tabby asks, an edge of defensiveness in his tone.

"Maybe you've all been stuffing yourselves with too much fresh-kill?" There's a nonchalant smirk on her face that makes his blood boil. She shrugs. "Just an idea."

"Who asked you, anyway?" Crowpaw growls.

"I can say what I like." The molly cocks her chin up. "I don't need your permission. You're not even a warrior."

She's got to be maybe two moons younger than him. "Neither are you," he snaps. "What are you doing here, anyway? You didn't even have the dream." He narrows his eyes dangerously. "No cat wants you here."

"I don't see them falling over themselves to welcome you either." Blood roars in his ears. She doesn't know when to quit, does she? *Brat*. His whole spine burns, rising in an angry arch.

"There's no need to get angry," mews the silver molly.

Oh, I'm beyond angry.

At once, he launches himself at the red molly, claws outstretched, then something collides with him and he's throttled to the ground.

The big tabby tom's paw clasps his throat. "Back off," he hisses. Crowpaw tries to wriggle under the pressure, but the tom's amber eyes blaze in the darkness, and for once he's a little frightened. He slackens, the light of battle dying from his eyes. The tabby lets go, and Crowpaw scrambles to his paws, giving his ruffled fur a quick grooming.

"Thanks for nothing!" the red molly barks, but it's not at Crowpaw — it's at the big tabby. "I can fight my own battles." *I bet you can*, he muses, the annoyance that he couldn't rake his claws down her flank resurfacing.

The big tom hisses, exasperated. "You can't start fighting here. There are more important things to think about. And if these dreams are true, then StarClan wants the Clans to work together." Crowpaw rolls his eyes, and then there's a silence; all six cats stand and *wait*. A breeze is picking up, making the trees surrounding them heave and creak. The air is dry. A fox barks, miles away. The stars say nothing.

"It must be midnight now," the big tortoiseshell meows. "I don't think StarClan is coming."

"But they have to come!" the silver molly cries, blue eyes rounded with anxiety. "Why did we all have the same dream, if it wasn't true?"

"Then why is nothing happening?" the tortoiseshell argues. "Here we are, meeting at the new moon, just as StarClan told us. We can't do any more."

That settles it, then.

"We were fools to come." Crowpaw sweeps the group with a hard stare. "The dreams meant *nothing*. There's no prophecy, no danger," he rhymes off, unblinking, "and even if there were, the warrior code should be enough to protect the forest."

He spins on his heel. *Just as I thought things were going to start making sense*. He stalks across the clearing to the slope leading out of the trees and back onto the moor, hoping that with his back

to the group his upset would be hidden. "I'm going back to camp," he throws over his shoulder.

"Good riddance!" the red molly yowls. He doesn't answer.

Good riddance indeed.

He has more important things to worry about than prophetic dreams. He needs to figure out what's up with Mudclaw. He needs to be there for his mother. He needs to focus on his apprenticeship.

Leaving the treeline and picking his way across the windswept fields of home, a clammy breeze slowly rises. It's subtle, at first, but as he reaches the crest of the big hill just overlooking Fourtrees, it blows into his face and all around him, ruffling his fur and threatening to buffet him off the ground altogether. He pulls his head back to peer up at the open skies — and to his surprise, clouds are beginning to gather and mumble overhead, and he can hear it; the rumble of rain.

A droplet. Another one. One by one, two by four, the heavens open wide, and rain drums the hills and batters his pelt.

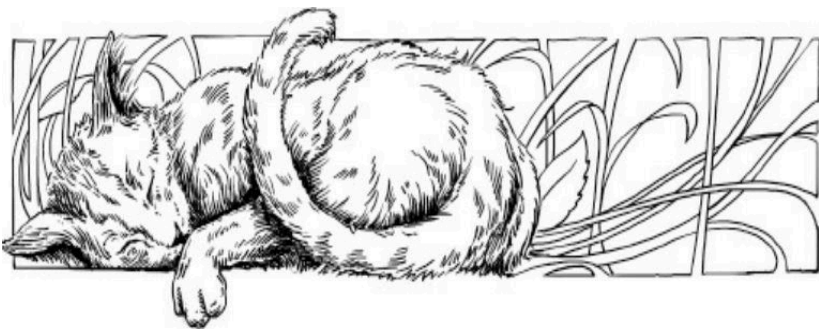
That's it. That's StarClan now.

He smiles incredulously, then begins to chuckle. And then he laughs, unabashedly. This is what they wanted. They *wanted* that ragtag group of cats to meet at Fourtrees.

He lets the rain soak his pelt for a moment, closing his eyes, and when he's finished he sets off towards home with a sprint.

StarClan, I will carry out your bidding, he swears.

But let it be known I don't like the company you've given me!



CHAPTER 4

The downpour begins to ease a little as dawn breaks. Leafpaw lays with her paws tucked into her chest at the mouth of the medics den, watching the clouds thinning and spilling pale gray light across camp. Her sleep had been broken, disturbed by unusually vivid dreams; racing through the forest towards Fourtrees, the scent of all four Clans, the heat of battle and the cold touch of the rain. She's not sure how, but she knows the source of these dreams — it's Squirrelpaw. Had it been her sister weaving through the trees last night? Why could Leafpaw see it?

The molly grows restless, and with a final glance at the sleeping Cinderpelt curled at the back of the den, she pushes through the fern tunnel into the center of camp.

She wants to confirm her suspicions, to see what silly shenanigans Squirrelpaw had been up to this time — but to her surprise, when she scans the clearing, there's no sign of her sister. *Shoot.*

Worse still, all three of Squirrelpaw's denmates are standing right there, crouched and eagerly lapping at a newly formed puddle. *Hm.*

The warrior apprentices have always been intimidating to Leafpaw. They talk about hunting and brawling and who's padding after who, and somehow Leafpaw never feels part of it.

She studies the three of them for a moment, eyes running over the two brothers and landing on Whitepaw; the little white molly is her kin through her cousin Cloudtail. *Perfect!*

"Whitepaw? Have you seen Squirrelpaw around?"

Spiderpaw snorts before Whitepaw can answer. "Oh, are we not good enough for a hello?" Leafpaw grimaces. "Er, sorry, Spiderpaw, I just didn't want to bother you..."

Shrewpaw elbows his brother. "Be nice."

Whitepaw licks her lips and turns to Leafpaw, flicking her tail politely. "I haven't. I think Dustpelt took her out on patrol."

"Maybe he's dumping her off in Twolegplace for some peace."

"Hey!" Leafpaw pleads, stamping with a forepaw.

"It's-a-joke," Spiderpaw sneers, cupping his paw around his muzzle to enunciate each word. Shrewpaw flicks him with his tail.

"She's just worried about her sister." The brown tom turns to her, expression sober and eyes twinkling with conviction. "I think it's very noble." Leafpaw can feel the heat climb to the tips of her ears, pleased with the acceptance, and it only worsens when Shrewpaw flashes her a soft, genuine smile.

Something moves at the mouth of the gorse tunnel leading into camp, and Leafpaw whips around. It's not Squirrelpaw, and once she realizes the newcomer lacks a ThunderClan scent at all she almost calls out; then she recognizes their sleek black pelt. It's Ravenpaw — he had once been an apprentice here in ThunderClan, but now they live on the farm on the edge of WindClan's territory with their partner, Barley. He visits ThunderClan from time to time, and hunts by night to avoid the Twolegs that live so near him... if anyone had seen Squirrelpaw last night, it'd be him.

Skirting a few deep puddles, Ravenpaw crosses the clearing carefully and gracefully; their warrior training is still evident all

these moons later. Delicately shaking his paws of rainwater, he angles his ears toward the apprentices in greeting. "Leafkit— or I suppose Leafpaw now, huh?" They smile, sweeping the group with a look. "Leafpaw, Shrewpaw, Spiderpaw, Whitepaw..." they mumble, before curling their tail in the air with glee. "All four of you are apprentices now? Gosh! Where do the moons go?" Whitepaw giggles, while Shrewpaw and Spiderpaw look a little bashful.

Ravenpaw marvels briefly at the puddles around camp. "That was some storm, huh? I'd have been soaked through if I hadn't managed to shelter in a hollow tree. Still, the forest needs the rain." Leafpaw hums her agreement, opening her mouth to ask the dark-pelted jack if they'd seen Squirrelpaw either — before being promptly interrupted by the cacophony of Ferncloud's quickly approaching kits. The biggest of the three skids to a halt, directly in front of Ravenpaw, and takes a huge whiff of his scent. "Ew. New cat," she growled. The loner dips his head in greeting, tail tip flicking back and forth in amusement.

"Hollykit, this is Ravenpaw," Shrewpaw explains. "They live on a Twoleg farm, and every day he feasts on more mice than you three have seen in your life."

Hollykit's eyes grow huge. "*Every* day?"

Whitepaw nods solemnly. "Every day."

"Oh!" calls the littler tom beside her. "*I* want to go there! Can we? Now?"

"When you're bigger, Birchkit," Ferncloud promises, coming up to join them. "Welcome, Ravenpaw. It's always good to— Hollykit! Larchkit! Stop that at once!"

One of the little mollies has her paws clenched around Ravenpaw's tail, while the other bats its twitching tip with outstretched paws. Ravenpaw winces. "Don't do that, little kits," he scolds gently. "It's my tail, not a mouse."

"Ravenpaw, I'm so sorry," Ferncloud meows. "Apparently these three haven't learned how to behave properly yet."

"Don't worry, Ferncloud," Ravenpaw replies, though Leafpaw notices him draw his tail closely against his side, out of harm's way. "Kits will be kits."

"And these particular kits have been out for long enough." Rainwhisker greets the group with a gentle nod, and swishes their tail around to gather their nieces and nephew together. "Say Goodbye to Ravenpaw now." The kits mew goodbye and scamper off toward the nursery. Ferncloud wordlessly thanks them and heads off. Rainwhisker turns to their apprentice. "Whitepaw, with me." She nods. "Spiderpaw, Mousefur wants you to join us for training. See if you can show Whitepaw something new."

"Of course I can," he scoffs in response, following the gray jack, and faintly Leafpaw thinks she can hear Whitepaw mutter something under her breath.

"Can we do anything for you, Ravenpaw?" Shrewpaw asks politely. "Would you like some fresh-kill?"

"No, I ate before I left home, thank you," Ravenpaw replies. "I've come to see Firestar. Is he around?"

"I think he's in his den," Shrewpaw tells him. "Would you like me to—"

"I can take you there, if you want!" Leafpaw blurts. She's getting increasingly anxious to ask Ravenpaw about her sister, and the distractions are beginning to frustrate her.

"Great!" Shrewpaw chirps. "We can go together."

Ravenpaw chuckles incredulously. "I don't think it'll take *two* of you to escort me. Don't worry, I can find my own way to the leader's den. I grew up here, remember?"

Leafpaw nods reluctantly, and the black cat turns to creep his way towards her father's den.

Leafpaw thumps her tail in worried annoyance. Now what? But just as her frustration threatens to bubble over, the entrance to the gorse tunnel shivers, and to Leafpaw's relief Squirrelpaw emerges, dragging a rabbit through the mud.

Squirrelpaw is making her way to the medics' den as Leafpaw bounds toward her. The red molly stops to wait, dropping her catch at her paws. Despite both Squirrelpaw and her catch being soaked to the skin and plastered with mud, the molly's green eyes glint with triumph. "Not bad, huh?" she announces, nodding towards her catch. "It's for you and Cinderpelt."

"Where have you *been*?" Leafpaw hisses. "I've been worried sick about you!"

"What?" Squirrelpaw looks dejected. "Why? Where did you think I'd gone? I... I only slipped out to hunt, when the rain started to ease off."

Without giving Leafpaw a chance to respond, she snatches up her rabbit and plunges into the ferns leading to the clearing housing the medics' den.

Leafpaw hesitates, unsure whether to be relieved or infuriated; *she's okay, at least, but she's definitely lying to me.*

This would be the first time Squirrelpaw had *ever* lied to her. And if her dream is anything to go by, she'd definitely done more than chase a rabbit around for a few minutes.

As Leafpaw ducks through the ferns, Squirrelpaw has already dumped the rabbit at the mouth of the den. Leafpaw furrows her brow. "What were you *really* up to?"

Squirrelpaw glances at her with equal contention. "What's *with* you?" She leans to one side, head cocked, heightening her voice: "Gee, Squirrelpaw, thanks for the rabbit!" Then she leans to the opposite side, her voice returning to normal, "oh it's nothing, just doing my job!" Finally, she glares at Leafpaw expectantly. Leafpaw sighs sharply. "Your rabbit is great! Thank you! It's very big and rabbit-y!"

She takes a few steps closer.

"But I know that's not why you were out," she insists.

Squirrelpaw searches her face, tail swishing in indignant defense.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because I just know! I had... a dream."

"A dream?" Squirrelpaw's defenses seem to dissolve.

"Yeah. I was running in the forest towards Fourtrees but when I looked down at my paws they weren't mine. I had one white paw instead of two."

Squirrelpaw doesn't look convinced.

"And I had this weird excited feeling like I wasn't supposed to be there. And then there were a bunch of cats at Fourtrees and then I was attacked I think." She... sort of lost her point. "Does any of this sound familiar?"

"You're *crazy*." The statement would hurt if it didn't sound so blatantly forced. *I'm right on the money. Why is she still hiding it?*

"Squirrelpaw!"

Cinderpelt emerges from her den, carrying a leaf-wrapped packet in her jaw. She ambles across the clearing, rubbing against the apprentice affectionately and setting the packet down in front of Leafpaw. "That's a splendid rabbit. Well done!"

Squirrelpaw scuffs the ground with a paw. "Aw, shucks. Thanks, Miss Medic!" *Don't act all sweet now!*

"Good morning Leafpaw," Cinderpelt purrs, giving her apprentice a quick lick to her forehead. She nudges the packet with a paw.

"Could you take that to Dappledawn? It's poppy seed to help her sleep, because her teeth are aching so badly. Mind you tell her to go easy on it."

Leafpaw nods. "Yes, Cinderpelt."

She picks up the packet and hurries out of the clearing, glancing over her shoulder for her sister one last time.

But she'd already gone.

As she made her way to the elder's den, every hair on her pelt prickling with foreboding. In her peripheral vision she spots her father emerging from his den underneath the Highrock, with Ravenpaw following closely behind. "Twolegs are always doing strange things," Firestar says as the two come into earshot. "I'm grateful that you came all this way to tell us, but I really don't think it's got

anything to do with us."

Ravenpaw seems to hesitate. "I know Twolegs often act without reason, but I've never seen anything like this. There are far more of them on the Thunderpath than before, walking along the edge with shiny, bright-colored pelts. And they have new kinds of monsters—huge ones!"

"Yes, Ravenpaw, so you said." Firestar sounds faintly impatient with his old friend, and Leafpaw can understand — though Firestar seems to never have an ill word on anyone, her mother, Sandstorm, has often said that Ravenpaw can be... *reactive*. "We haven't seen any of them in our territory.

But I'll tell you what..."

Leafpaw can no longer hear them as she enters the elder's den.

"Hi, Dappledawn."

The old molly's flank twitches, but she doesn't lift her head. "Good morning, Leafpaw," she says softly, her speech obviously laboured. Leafpaw plops the packet beside Dappledawn, nosing the leaf wrap open. "I have some poppy seeds to help you sleep."

"Thank goodness," she croaks, leaning over to lap up one, two—

"Go easy on them!" Leafpaw barks quickly, a little shocked with her own sternness. Dappledawn stops and laughs. "Okay, okay. You're the medic."

"Sorry for yelling."

"Don't worry. Sometimes a medic needs to do a little scolding." She chuckles, then nudges the packet away and settles herself into her nest again. "She died before you were born, but Yellowfang was one prickly badger. And she was one of the best medics this forest has ever seen. Mind you, Cinderpelt can be a right grump sometimes too, can't she?"

Leafpaw giggles. "Sometimes."

Dappledawn rests her chin on her paws and closes her eyes.

"Thanks for the meds, kit. You know, I bet you'll be one of the finest medics this Clan'll ever see, too."

Leafpaw gives her chest fur a quick lick. "You don't really mean that."

"I do," the elder replies, opening one eye to cast the apprentice a look. "You just need to stop doubting yourself. You've nothing to fear."

Leafpaw sighs, then smiles weakly. "Thank you, Dappledawn."

Blinking in the sun, now released from its cloudy prison, Leafpaw watches her father trot towards the warriors' den with purpose, and still Squirrelpaw is nowhere to be found.

Ravenpaw is still here, muttering about something along with Bramblefang.

Bramblefang has the same unreadable expression as he did when he was talking to Tawnyspark at the Gathering.

Squirrelpaw is hiding something.

Bramblefang is hiding something, too.

Surely they're not connected?

Determination flashes in Leafpaw's eyes. Her investigation begins; and the first step is finding out whatever it was Squirrelpaw was doing at Fourtrees last night, no matter what.

"Leafpaw?"

Now what?

She turns to the source — Shrewpaw is standing a few fox-lengths away from the apprentices' den, a quizzical expression plastered across his face.

"Did Squirrelpaw really sneak out last night?"



CHAPTER 5

The moorland streams still have yet to flow — Crowpaw waits in his den for the last river-patrol of the day.

Battle training with Nightpaw had gone well. She's still more muscular than him, and she probably always will be, but he's finally beginning to match her speed. She even congratulated him on it. The newfound amiability is convenient — because he's realized if he wants to know more about these cats he's being forced to work with, then the best cat to ask would be the biggest gossip in WindClan.

"Nightpaw?"

"Mm-hm."

"You... know cats, right?"

"I do."

"Can you help me out? I met some ThunderClan cats the other day that kind of twisted my tail." He's only partially lying. "I wanna know who it was."

The black molly is laid on her back in her nest with her eyes closed. "Describe."

Crowpaw quickly scratches an itch behind his ear, thinking carefully about how to proceed. "Okay, um... there was a big brown tabby. *Very* big. Huge paws, shaggy fur, orange eyes—"

"That's Bramblefang. He's Tigerstar's kit."

Crowpaw's mouth turns dry. "*What?*"

Nightpaw snorts. "Yeah. Supposedly he's—" she raises her paws, flicking her wrists in air quotes, "*nothing like his father*, but I dunno." She grunts. "I'll believe it when I see it. He's got a sister in ShadowClan, too. Tawnyspark."

"Big tortoiseshell?"

"Yeah." She furrows her brow. "How did you... nevermind, it doesn't matter. Who else was there?"

Crowpaw suppresses a growl at the very thought of her. "His apprentice, I think, or maybe the other cat's apprentice. Sort of a dark ginger colour. Very small."

"Smaller than you?" she ventures, a tease in her mew.

"Yes, actually."

Nightpaw rolls over, stretching her forepaws and yawning. "I don't know her, but it sounds like you're talking about Squirrelpaw. Piece of work, from what I hear."

"You're telling me!" he groans. "She needs a *serious* attitude adjustment. A good throttling oughta do her."

Nightpaw glares at him. "You didn't tackle her, did you?" Her voice sounds sincerely grave. Crowpaw hesitates. "Not her. Bramblefang."

Nightpaw looks about ready to explode. "*You tackled Bramblefang?*" She shakes her head. "What on earth is wrong with you? Weren't you on *his* territory?"

"Yeah, but he was being a brute."

"You're an *idiot*."

A voice calls from outside. "Crowpaw? We're going to the river now."

"Coming, Gorsetail!"

He picks himself up, leaning close to Nightpaw, voice low and frantic. "The other cat that was there. Dustpelt, I think—"

"Another piece of work, yes," she confirms, nose curling at his closeness.

"He's not their deputy, is he?"

"What? No, of course not. Jeez, Crowpaw, have you never been to a Gathering?"

"I haven't, actually. Stuff kept coming up." *I kept getting into trouble.*

Nightpaw rolls her eyes. "*Graystripe* is their deputy. He's nice. Definitely not deputy material."

Nightpaw's previous impatience seems to melt away; her eyes light up yellow with the prospect of scandal. "Did you know he has kits in RiverClan?"

"Really?"

"Mm-hm. Stormcloud and Feathertail."

The brother and sister. Of course.

"Crowpaw, we're leaving!"

"I *know*, Gorsetail! I'm trying to get a burr out of my tail, just gimme a second!"

He lowers his voice again, urgently. "A gray tom and a silver molly, right?"

"Why? Surely *they* weren't on the ThunderClan patrol. Crowpaw, what's going on?"

"Just answer the question!"

"*Yes!* Stormcloud is a clone of his dad and Feathertail is silver with black stripes. You've seen them at the river. Happy?"

Crowpaw deflates with relief. "Yes. *Thank you.*"

He rushes out of the den, pretending he doesn't hear her mutter '*weirdo*' under her breath, and bounds to Gorsetail's side with a sharp exhale. "Sorry about that."

The tom shakes his head. "Gossip isn't a good enough excuse to hold a patrol back. Just saying."

"I wasn't *gossiping!*" Crowpaw pleads, trotting to keep up as Gorsetail crests the hill out of camp. "I was... *investigating.*" Gorsetail shakes his head again, an amused smirk on his face. But to Crowpaw's relief, he says no more, giving the apprentice ample time to think on his way to the river.

Tigerstar's son from ThunderClan, and his daughter from ShadowClan, then the ThunderClan deputy's two kits, and an apprentice from ThunderClan too...

With a flash of frustration, Crowpaw feels like biting down on something. *They all know each other! They're all connected!*

The sun is setting, casting the moor with an orange haze, and the breeze promises more rain. *It all comes back to ThunderClan as usual*, he muses, casting a glance towards Fourtrees. *So why didn't they just pick another cat with a ThunderClan connection?*

He thinks about his Clanmates, thinks about any cross-clan kin they have, any friends in ThunderClan...

Onewhisker.

Crowpaw stops walking.

It was supposed to be Onewhisker.

He'd been such close friends with Firestar, after he'd helped bring WindClan back to the forest, moons before Crowpaw was born. He'd always talked about his trust in ThunderClan...

"Crowpaw, come on! What's with you today?"

He hurries on, catching up to Gorsetail once again, grunting an apology. He shakes his head, dispelling the thought. *I received the dream before Onewhisker died, though. Unless that in itself was an omen? That I'd take his place?*

He suppresses a tearful snarl. *This is all so confusing!*

"Gorsetail, Crowpaw!"

At the top of the hill, silhouetted by the sinking sun, Tallstar heads a small band of warriors, and he twiddles the tip of his tail in greeting before slowly climbing down the slope towards them. He's followed by Webfoot, Darkfoot, and Mudclaw. Gorsetail dips his head in greeting. "Everyone else back at camp went on the last water patrol. It's just us now."

"Great! Thank you, Gorsetail."

Mudclaw approaches, and luckily Crowpaw has enough time to recompose himself before his mentor asks any questions.

Since the altercation at the border, Crowpaw has little interest in speaking with Mudclaw beyond training. His mother's sentiment still rattles in his brain; he'd half-expected the doubts to shrink again, but now they threaten to consume him, gnawing at him to the point where he can't bear to look the tom in the eye.

"I didn't see you after training," the tom states. In front, Tallstar says something to Gorsetail, and the patrol sets off again towards the RiverClan border. "I hurt myself a bit when I was sparring," he lies.

"You never did get that scratch seen to, did you? After Bramblefang clawed you."

Crowpaw winces at the memory. "I didn't," he mews, this time truthfully. "I didn't want to bother Barkface about it."

"That's a foolish thing to say," Mudclaw grunts. He slows down in front of Crowpaw, temporarily halting him. "A word of advice, Crowpaw," he breathes. "You'll never get anything from being a martyr."

With that, he trots ahead, leaning into some joke Gorsetail is telling, and laughing along.

Crowpaw's blood runs cold. *What is that supposed to mean?*

The sun has set by the time they reach the river, with only a sliver of red light streaking across the horizon. The patrol splits off, each cat taking their place on the riverbank to drink. Crowpaw falls into the rhythm of lapping, still uneasy, until someone approaches and plops down just a whisker beside him.

"Hi."

He glances sidelong — it's Feathertail. *The odds.* Before he can speak, she quickly continues. "Don't make a scene. We need to talk to you again."

Crowpaw stops drinking for just a moment, suppressing the doubt behind his eyes. "Okay. Gimme a second."

The molly nods, shaking water from her whiskers and padding off towards the trees, towards ThunderClan's border...

Don't tell me.

Remaining inconspicuous, he keeps his head lowered, keeping his gaze transfixed on his Clanmates. Everyone has their back to him now. His heart flutters a little with the rebellion of it all, and finally, he speeds up the bank and hops into the foliage where Feathertail disappeared.

The leaves rustle gently around him, and now he is in close proximity with Feathertail, Stormcloud and *Bramblefang*. "I thought I could smell ThunderClan," he mutters hotly. "What is it?" *I shouldn't even be here, should I?*

Bramblefang glances to Feathertail, then levels him with a look of... apprehension. The expression is most unbefitting.

"I've had another dream," the burly tom breathes, swallowing nervously. *Of course you did. ThunderClan this, ThunderClan that.*

"What sort of dream?" The question is arbitrary. "I haven't had one. And apparently neither has Feathertail. Why would StarClan send you a dream but not us?"

In the corner of his eye, he sees Stormcloud raise his hackles, but the ever gentle Feathertail soothes him with a touch of her tail-tip. Bramblefang looks like he's suppressing something ugly, then sighs. "I don't know."

Crowpaw grunts. *Go figure.*

But there's something earnestly bare about Bramblefang this time around. *Maybe he doesn't want this either.* "Okay," Crowpaw mews. "Go on."

Bramblefang hesitates, then puffs up his chest and begins. "I was drowning. In a river— no, bigger than a river. And the water was salty, coming in big waves, crashing against rocks and cliffs and

the water just went on forever. But I could see the sun setting, and it was as if the water had..." he swallows, seeming a little embarrassed, "eaten it. And it sank into the water and made this huge... pool of fiery blood."

Crowpaw quirks his lip. "Sounds like a load of haredung. Did you eat something weird?"

He suddenly realizes that Squirrelpaw had said the exact same thing the night before, and he fights the temptation to eat his own tail off. *Where is that runt, anyway?*

"Ravenpaw, the loner who— you know who they are. They visited our camp yesterday and they told me that this... sun-drown-place is real. I... I think StarClan is telling us to go there. And we should go soon, all of us, in case the rest of the prophecy comes true and the Clans are in too much trouble to be saved."

"*What?*" Crowpaw hisses, aware that he's almost blown their cover. "I can't believe I'm

hearing this. Saving the Clans is one thing, but you're asking us to leave our Clans and go trekking off into the unknown— StarClan knows how far!— just because you've had a dream that none of the rest of us had?" Salt water, the sun drowning, leaving the Clans when disaster is right under their paws? "That's insane! Who died and made you leader?"

"I'm not trying to be leader," the tom stammers, uncharacteristically meek. "I'm just telling you what I think StarClan wants."

"I'm willing to go," Feathertail adds. "Even though I haven't had another dream." *Seriously?*

"Then you're even more mouse-brained than he is," Crowpaw retorts. The apprentice huffs. "I'm not going. I'm not leaving so close to the end of my training. What would my Clan think?"

There's a silence. Then Stormcloud, usually so stoic, pipes up. "Maybe they'll honor you." There's a glint in his yellow eyes, as if he'd been sitting on this for a while. "Think, Crowpaw! If trouble is really coming, worse than anything we've seen before, what will the Clans think of the cats who help them? They'll understand how

much faith we had to place in StarClan, that they were leading us on a genuine mission, and they'll know how much courage it took to do this."

I'd be a hero...

"But you weren't chosen," Crowpaw meows pointedly.

"Maybe not," replies the gray tom, "but I'm coming anyway."

These cats are insane.

"And the reason StarClan isn't giving us clear instructions is because they want us to show faith and courage." Bramblefang looks convinced. "Those are the qualities that a true warrior needs."

Crowpaw hesitates. Does StarClan really want them to leave? If danger is truly coming to the forest, shouldn't these star-chosen cats stay? He feels his ears flatten — none of this makes any sense.

"Please, Crowpaw!" Feathertail's eyes flash bright blue in the halfnight, and she places a paw on him. He stiffens. "The mission might fail without you. Remember that *you* were chosen—the only apprentice singled out by StarClan. They must believe that you can do this." *No, I was their last resort.*

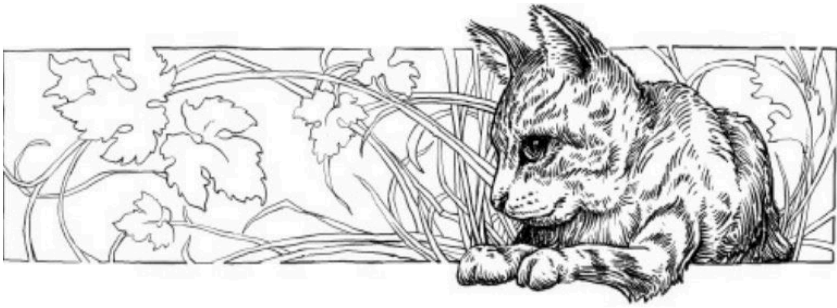
The sun has set, and the sound of paws scuffing grass alerts him that his Clan is leaving again. He'll have to join them before they notice he's missing.

"All right," he breathes at last, shrugging against Feathertail's touch. "I'll come." He narrows his eyes, giving Bramblefang a hard stare. "Just don't start telling me what to do. Dreams or no dreams, I'm not going to take orders from you!"

Bramblefang bristles, biting back a retort of some sort. "Meet us at Fourtrees on the half moon."

Crowpaw turns and climbs out of the bush without a goodbye and, following the patrol back home under the cover of twilight, he feels like wailing out.

What on earth did I just sign up to?



CHAPTER 6

Oh no.

Leafpaw's eyes flicker from side to side. "Oh, uh— No, she was just out hunting."

Shrewpaw looks unconvinced. "That's not what I heard."

Forcing her fur to lay flat, Leafpaw probes. "Okay then. What *did* you hear?"

The tom smirks, looking very like his brother for a moment. "That you had a weird medic dream where you were Squirrelpaw and she was going to Fourtrees to meet up with a whole load of cats in secret and—"

Leafpaw shuffles closer, fur bushed to twice her size. "Not so loud!" she hisses, ushering him to the side, into the bushes bordering camp.

Shaded by the foliage now, she rounds on him. "You were eavesdropping on us!"

"I wasn't!" he protests, then rolls his head. "Well, not intentionally."

Leafpaw groans.

"What can I say?" he jibes nervously. "Shrews have good hearing."

Lowering her guard, Leafpaw sighs, tone flat. "Who have you told?"

"No one. I *swear*." Shrewpaw's voice trembles with sincerity.

"Not even Spiderpaw?"

"Of course not. Spiderpaw has no *tact*. If I'd told him, the birds in the trees would know by now."

Leafpaw is satisfied that she can trust him... at least for now. "She was out. I don't know what she was doing, though. And I intend to find out."

"Cool. Do you need an assistant?"

"*What?*"

Shrewpaw is purring with excitement. She almost hesitates. "No. Not happening."

"But—"

"No. This is important."

"I know."

Shrewpaw levels her with an orange-hued stare — suddenly he seems so much older, more serious. "Squirrelpaw is one of my best friends. I want to figure out what's up with her. Please let me help."

Distantly, Leafpaw hears Cinderpelt calling her name. She lashes her tail indecisively, looking over her shoulder, then back to Shrewpaw. "Fine. But not a word, okay? To anyone. Not Spiderpaw, not Brackenfur, and *definitely* not my dad."

Cinderpelt calls again, and Leafpaw glares at Shrewpaw expectantly. He puts a paw to his muzzle indicatively. "My lips are sealed."

The sun beats down on her back as she follows Cinderpelt through the narrow, fern-shaded track. "Snakerocks is the best place in the forest to find chervil," she explains, "But we can't go there just now, thanks to that wretched badger."

"It's still there, then?" Leafpaw asks, stopping to sniff at a sprout — with the recent rain, the whole forest has come alive again.

"So the dawn patrol said," Cinderpelt replies, hopping lightly down a particularly steep part of the slope. Leafpaw gives a quick trot to keep up. "Keep your eyes open for— Ah!"

Cinderpelt swerves into the ferns and up a sandy slope, where several clumps of a strongly scented herb are growing. Padding up the slope, Leafpaw notes that the flowers are gone, but the large, spreading leaves and sweet scent reveal it to be chervil.

"Tell me what we use it for," Cinderpelt quizzes, blue eyes alight with enthusiasm as she begins to gnaw one of the stems at its base. Leafpaw narrows her eyes in thought. "The juices in the leaves are good for infected wounds..." She curls her tail in recognition. "And if you chew the root it's good for bellyache."

"Well done!" Cinderpelt purrs, touching her nose to Leafpaw's ear. "Now, you can dig up a few roots— not too many, though, or there'll be no more in seasons to come."

Leafpaw nods. Cinderpelt continues snipping the stems with her teeth while Leafpaw obediently begins to scrape at the ground to uncover the roots. The smell of chervil surrounds them now, making her feel a little lightheaded, but after a few moments she begins to scent something else.

An acrid tang; it reminds her of the Thunderpath, but sharper. She glances upwards, and spots a thin grey ribbon of smoke wreathing up from a clump of dead bracken a little ways down the slope. She furrows her brow, confirming what she's seeing, then murmurs, "Cinderpelt, look."

Cinderpelt lifts her head and freezes, neck fur bristling. "Great StarClan, no!" she gasps, scooting down the slope towards the burning bracken. Outpacing the limping medic, Leafpaw reaches the clump of bracken first, wincing as something combusts in searing light. Now, orange heat erupts from the bracken, a billowing pillar of black smoke emanating from it, and behind it is a spiky lump of Twoleg trash shining like a sun... *it's directing the sun to the bracken.* Another *pop* and a surge of heat causes Leafpaw to recoil, her eyes pinched shut.

Feeling Cinderpelt by her side, she gingerly opens her eyes again, and the medic is standing before the fire, unmoving. *Is she frozen in panic?*

Her mother had once told her of the terrible fire that once swept through their very own camp — *that's how Yellowfang died, saving Bramblekit from that fire. He still has the scars to prove it.* But as Leafpaw takes a step closer, she realizes Cinderpelt's wide eyes are not of fear, but something else. Gazing upwards at the wall of scarlet and orange as it engulfs the undergrowth with seemingly endless hunger, something more divine seems to take a hold of Cinderpelt; and Leafpaw realizes with a shiver from her nose to her tail-tip that StarClan is speaking to her.

As quickly as it was born, the fire dies. The blaze sinks to embers, then begins to wink out, leaving the bracken to disintegrate into flecks of ash.

Cinderpelt takes a step backwards, even more unsteady than usual — Leafpaw darts forward to press against her side, and helps her to sit down.

"Did you see it?" the gray molly whispers.

"See what, Cinderpelt?"

"In the flames... a leaping tiger. I saw it clearly. Its huge head, the leaping paws, stripes as black as night along its body..."

Her voice is hoarse. She stares solemnly at Leafpaw. "An omen from StarClan, fire and tiger together. It must mean something, but what?"

Leafpaw shakes her head. "I don't know," she admits.

Rising shakily to her paws, the medic gives her pelt a shake. "We must go straight back to camp," she mews simply. "Firestar should hear about this at once."

Firestar is alone in his den when they return. Cinderpelt pauses outside the curtain of lichen draped over the entrance. "Firestar? I need to talk to you."

"Come in."

Firestar is curled up against the far wall, clearly having been napping. Raising his head, he yawns, then picks himself up in a laboured stretch. "Sorry, I was dozing. What can I do for you?"

Leafpaw stays at the entrance while Cinderpelt pads towards the tom with a dip of her head. "StarClan has sent me an omen." She describes how the Twoleg trash had caught the sun's rays and set fire to the bracken. Her voice is grave — Leafpaw has never seen her mentor receive a message from their ancestors before, and the airy fear in the smoky molly's voice is unsettling.

"In the flames I saw a leaping tiger... fire and tiger together, devouring the bracken. Such power, unleashed, could destroy the forest."

Firestar is silent for a moment, crouching in front of the medic with his paws tucked under him. His eyes are fixed on Cinderpelt so intently that Leafpaw almost expects her mentor's fur to start smoldering just like the bracken burning under the hot sunlight. With a twitch of his whiskers, he speaks. "What do you think it means?"

"I've been trying to work it out," Cinderpelt replies, sitting down.

"I'm not sure I'm right, but... in the old prophecy... *fire alone will save the clan...*" She flicks her tail. "*Fire* meant you."

The ginger tom deflates. "You think it refers to me now?" Clearly he didn't want to be the subject of any more prophecies. "Well, perhaps," he concedes, "but what about the *tiger* part? Tigerstar's dead."

Leafpaw shudders. Her father's casual mention of a cat that shed so much blood to get what he wanted...

"His son still lives." Cinderpelt levels him with a blue-eyed stare.

"Bramblefang?" Firestar exclaims. He tilts his head incredulously.

"Are you saying *he's* going to destroy the forest? Come on, Cinderpelt. He's as loyal as any warrior in the Clan. Look at the way he fought for us in the battle against BloodClan."

Firestar's affection for Bramblefang is clear — and it'd be heartwarming, if Leafpaw wasn't so sure that Bramblefang was up to something. She says nothing; it's not her place.

"Firestar, use your head." Cinderpelt flicks him with her tail. "I didn't *say* that Bramblefang would destroy the forest. But if the tiger doesn't mean him, then who else could it be?"

Firestar doesn't answer, brow knitted with worry.

"And maybe... if the tiger is Tigerstar's son, then maybe the fire is—"

"My daughter," he murmurs breathlessly.

Leafpaw flinches.

"Oh, not you," Cinderpelt meows, turning to Leafpaw with faint amusement gleaming in her eyes. "I'll keep an eye on you, don't worry." Glancing back to Firestar, she adds, "No, I think it more likely means Squirrelpaw. She has a flame-colored pelt like you, after all."

The medic apprentice stares at her paws.

Sure, Squirrelpaw has certainly been up to something unusual, as has Bramblefang, but a danger to the Clans?

Her sister is a bit of a troublemaker — hardworking, sure, but headstrong to a fault. Bramblefang is just a reserved know-it-all. *There's no way they're dangerous, right?*

Her father looks even more troubled. He's silent for a long spell, then helplessly asks, "What do you think I should do?"

Cinderpelt sighs, shaking her head. "That's your decision, friend. I'm sorry. I can only tell you what StarClan has shown me. Fire and tiger together, and danger to the forest." She touches her nose to his head. "But I'd advise you not to tell the Clan yet, not until I receive another sign. They'll only panic, and that will make things worse."

Squirrelpaw and Bramblefang would be ostracized...

Suddenly, her eyes are fixed on Leafpaw with an icy stare. "Say nothing about this, on your loyalty to StarClan."

"Not even to Squirrelpaw?" Leafpaw ventures nervously.

"*Especially* not to Squirrelpaw."

"I need to tell Graystripe."

Firestar rises with a jolt. "And Sandstorm— StarClan knows what Sandstorm will think about this!"

Cinderpelt nods solemnly. "That would be wise, I think."

"And it might be as well to keep the two of them apart," Firestar murmurs, more to himself than anyone else. "She's an apprentice, he's a warrior; it shouldn't be hard."

But they're really good friends...

"We'll make sure they have enough to do, and not in each other's company," he mutters frantically, then turns back to Cinderpelt. "Maybe StarClan will send another omen to tell us when the danger is past?" he suggests.

"Maybe." But Cinderpelt's tone is doubtful. She rises, beckoning Leafpaw with her tail. "If they do, you'll be the first to know."

She dips her head, backing out of the den; Leafpaw makes to follow her, but hesitates, and rushes across to her father to bury her nose in his pelt. He rasps his tongue over her head. "Dad..."

"I know. Keep an eye on your sister." He meets her gaze, a deep sadness stirring behind his green eyes. "Can you do that for me?" She nods.

He rests his chin on her head for a moment. "I'll figure this out. I promise."

Cinderpelt calls her, and the moment is over. She dips her head to her leader, and leaves him alone, to wait for further news about the destiny of his cats.



CHAPTER 7

Having delivered the elders' daily medication, laid all the necessary herbs out to dry, eaten, had a drink of water, and checked on Ferncloud and her kits, Leafpaw still feels like she needs to be working, despite the ache in her paws — anything to keep her mind occupied.

Crouched at the entrance of the apprentices' den, she takes a moment to herself, closing her eyes and feeling every breath draw in and out of her lungs. *Everything will work itself out. Everything will work itself out. Everything will—*

"Hey, you."

It's Shrewpaw. She acknowledges him with a flick of her ear, keeping her eyes on the comings and goings in the clearing. Bramblefang is crouching just a few paces away from the fresh-kill pile, tucking into a plump starling. Leafpaw glances across to the opposite end of the clearing, where her father is sharing a meal with her mother and with Graystripe, and giving Bramblefang a hard stare. She swallows.

Squirrelpaw trots over from the elder's den. Shrewpaw crouches beside Leafpaw and leans close, voice a whisper. "Did you tell on Squirrelpaw?"

Leafpaw bristles in outrage. "What? No!" she hisses, then her brow furrows solemnly. "Why?"

The brown tom shuffles his paws. "Watch this."

"Bramblefang!" the red molly calls, snatching a mouse from the fresh-kill pile and bouncing toward the warrior. "Whew!" she exclaims, dropping her mouse and flopping down. "I thought I'd never finish feeding the elders. Longtail has the appetite of a starving fox!" She takes a bite of her mouse. "So what's happening?" she asks, then lowers her voice, muttering something, and Bramblefang hisses. "Ssshhh, not so loud."

The molly asks him something again, even quieter this time, but Bramblefang doesn't answer, chewing slowly as if playing for time. *What on earth is going on there?*

"I thought they were working together," Leafpaw whispers. "I guess not."

"Keep watching," Shrewpaw urges, shouldering her gently.

In the corner of her vision she spots Firestar looming over the two of them. "Squirrelpaw, I want you to go out with Rainwhisker," he orders. "They're going to show Whitepaw the best hunting places near Fourtrees."

Squirrelpaw takes another gulp of her mouse. "Do I have to? I've been up there with Dustpelt loads of times."

The tip of Firestar's tail twitches back and forth. "Yes, you do." His tone is icy. "When your leader gives you an order, you obey it."

Squirrelpaw rolls her eyes at Bramblefang, before picking up the last of her mouse and swallowing it.

"*Now*, Squirrelpaw."

To hear her father so stern is alien. Leafpaw looks on in bewilderment. The ginger tom flicks his head to Rainwhisker, who's trotting across camp with Whitepaw in tow.

"You could at *least* let me finish my mouse in peace." *Oh, Squirrelpaw, please don't argue...* "I've been on my paws all morning,

chasing after the elders."

"And so you should be!" Firestar barks. "That's what being an apprentice is all about. I don't want to hear you complaining."

"I'm *not* complaining!" Squirrelpaw leaps to her paws, pelt bristling defiantly. "I only said I wanted a bit of peace and quiet to eat. Why are you always nagging at me? You're not my mentor, so stop acting like you are. Or are you just afraid that I'll let you down, and not live up to our great leader's shining example? Is that what it is?"

Leafpaw winces. *Ouch.*

Squirrelpaw storms off without waiting for a response, and Leafpaw notices something — when she approaches Rainwhisker, the jack looks a little surprised, like they hadn't expected her. *Of course... Dad's trying to get her out of camp, away from Bramblefang.*

She feels Shrewpaw's elbows nudging her as he folds his paws under his chest, quirking his brow incredulously. "Do you have *any* idea what that's about? It's been going on all morning." His ears flatten. "I've never known Firestar to be so..."

She realizes poignantly that he's censoring himself.

"...like that."

Nice save. "I don't know," she lies. "She must've did something."

Shrewpaw's voice is low, grave. "There's something you're not telling me."

Leafpaw looks away.

"It's okay. I won't pry."

"Hey— what do you think you're doing?"

This time it's Mousefur's voice — the little molly is glaring at Bramblefang as he returns to the fresh-kill pile, and the big tom freezes, his jaw hovering open over a fat vole.

"I've been watching you," Mousefur meows, tone shrill. "You've already eaten. You haven't hunted enough today to take any more prey."

Bramblefang looks embarrassed. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"So I should think," Mousefur snaps.

"He's trying to compete with Graystripe," Cloudtail teases with a purr, "Looks like one big eater isn't enough for ThunderClan." The sentiment amuses Leafpaw — her fluffy-pelted cousin had an appetite to spare, and he could probably out-gorge Graystripe *and* Bramblefang any day.

Something surges in Leafpaw, suddenly. A deep discomfort — pangs of baseless rage cause her to clench her teeth and dig her claws into the earth, and suddenly she's on patrol outside Fourtrees, her claws angrily raking down the trunk of a birch, tears streaming her cheeks, and an angry yowl splits through her ears—

"Leafpaw? Hey, Leafpaw, what's going on?"

The voice is faint, then she feels paws clutching her shoulders and she's jostled. "You're freaking me out. Hello? Earth to Leafpaw?" Shrewpaw's face is floating inches from hers. "Oh, thank goodness. You spaced out. What happened?"

She blinks. ThunderClan camp.

"Cats are staring," Shrewpaw hisses, then unceremoniously drags her into the apprentices' den, and the air whirring through her ears brings her back to earth.

"What happened?" Shrewpaw repeats, a little more frantically. Leafpaw waves her paw. "Don't fuss, I'm okay. I think I just—"

He's not supposed to know this. But he's glaring at me.

"I had another... Squirrelpaw dream."

"But... you were awake," he mutters.

"But I was awake," she confirms, looking up to meet his eyes.

"What did it look like?"

He looks away, laughing nervously. "I won't lie, it was gross. You weren't blinking."

"Ew."

"Right?"

The two apprentices laugh together, for a short moment. Then Shrewpaw's smile fades. "What was she up to this time?"

Leafpaw deflates. "She's upset. Really upset."

"And do you blame her? Firestar ripped her to shreds!" he exclaims, tail twitching. "Whatever she's up to, I don't think it warrants *that* kind of treatment." *Me neither.*

Shrewpaw looks sullen for a moment, then suddenly he perks up. "What if..."

He turns to her. "Do you think there's a way you can control when you have these... whatever they are? I mean, if you can see through Squirrelpaw's eyes, you can figure out why she's acting weird, and then maybe you can get your dad to lay off."

Leafpaw frowns. "That feels like spying. She deserves her privacy." She shrugs. "Besides, I don't really... *see* through her eyes. I just feel her thoughts, feel her feelings. Like just now, she's so *angry*, that it felt like *I* was going to lash out."

Shrewpaw winces. "Yeesh. I was in the firing line, huh?"

Leafpaw snickers. "I don't think I could do much. These paws are for healing."

Shrewpaw smiles. "I bet you could pack a punch if you tried," he chuckles, nudging her. There's a light of encouraging challenge in his orange eyes.

Leafpaw grins. "Then watch out."

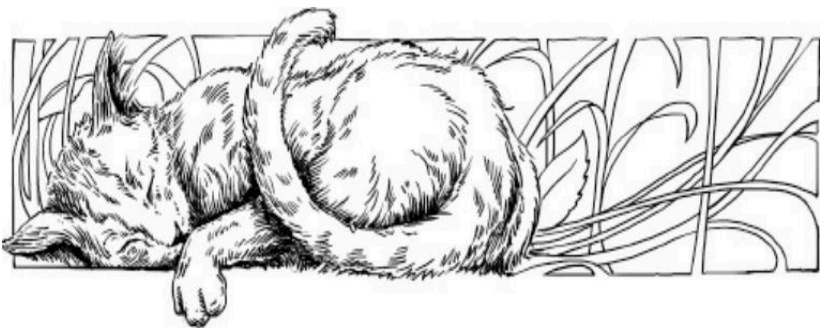
"Leafpaw!"

Cinderpelt is calling.

"I should go." She pushes through the foliage out of the den. "I'll... let you know if anything happens."

Shrewpaw nods, and with that she strides back out into the clearing towards Cinderpelt's yowl.

And her pelt still itches with uncertainty.



CHAPTER 8

Prey delivery. Bedding change. Tick removal. Rinse and repeat. Sure, maybe she'd spoken out of turn a few times. Maybe she's a bit of a troublemaker. But if this is to be Squirrelpaw's penance, she finds herself wondering if warriorhood is worth it at all.

Her first hunting patrol in what felt like moons had been a disaster. She felt like her mind was stuck back in camp and her paws were searching through the undergrowth on their own — unfocused, uncoordinated.

And then, on her way back to camp, Shrewpaw merely floated in front of her like an apparition, clearing his throat periodically, as the two apprentices followed Brackenfur without so much as a mew. *You're supposed to be my friend*, she laments inwardly, *why are you acting so weird?*

Why is everyone acting so weird?

Her moment of respite by the mouth of the apprentices' den is interrupted by the thrum of paws towards her, and dejectedly she awaits another command until she realizes who it is.

"I want to talk to you," Bramblefang pants.

"Okay," she replies, "but not here."

Mind racing, she works her way to the nursery in a separate direction from him, then scrambles into the sandy hollow behind. The nettles shiver, and he enters, burly form blocking the light.

"Bramblefang, I—"

"You've told your father something, haven't you?" he interrupts.

"After you promised to keep your mouth shut."

Outraged, Squirrelpaw draws herself to full height. "I have *not*! I haven't said a word to any cat. Not even Leafpaw."

"Then why is he so determined to keep us apart?"

Her voice softens. "You've noticed too, have you?" She fights to keep her voice steady — and fails. "I don't *know*! I promise I didn't tell him anything! But he keeps looking at me like I've done something wrong and I *haven't*! I mean it's nothing I can't handle and Leafpaw's upset too even though she hasn't said anything I *know* she is but she won't talk to me *either* and we're supposed to be in this *together* but we're *not* and Shrewpaw keeps acting *weird* around me and—"

"Woah, hey, Squirrelpaw..." Bramblefang soothes, and in that moment she realizes she's crying. Desperately wiping her nose with her elbow, she gives one hard, embarrassed sniff. "Sorry for crying," she grunts. "I just don't like not knowing what's going on."

"I know. I get it."

Bramblefang looks thoughtful for a moment, staring out at the thorn walls surrounding camp, before glancing back to her with a start. "Perhaps we should ask him?" he suggests. "If he told us what the matter is, we might be able to put it right."

Before she can answer, the nettles around them rustle again, and she whips around to see her father, with Graystripe in tow, the latter of the two looking awfully apologetic.

"So." Firestar steps forward between the two of them. "Spiderpaw said I'd find you here." *That mouseheart!*

"We weren't doing anything wrong!" she blurts, curling her tail around her paws protectively.

"But I wonder what you think you *are* doing." The ginger tom gives her a hard stare — such an uncharacteristic expression —

then sweeps the same stare to Bramblefang. "Wasting your time, for one thing, when there's work to be done."

Bramblefang dips his head respectfully, but his voice tremors with something unspoken. "We've worked hard all day, Firestar."

"That's true, they have," Graystripe adds, but Firestar only shoots him a quick glance in response.

"Does that mean you think there's nothing more to do?"

Bramblefang begins a response, but it comes out a simple bleat at Firestar cuts him off again.

"If you're so sure," the ginger tom drawls, went "then take a look at the elders. Frostfur got burrs tangled in her pelt today. You can help her get them out."

Squirrelpaw sees Bramblefang subtly stiffen, and she studies his face, his flaring nostrils — *rage*. His concession sounds like claws on stone. "Yes, Firestar."

He pads off, and Firestar spies him go — there's a deep regret in his green gaze. *He doesn't want to do this... so what is it that's more important than the happiness of his warriors?*

"Squirrelpaw—"

His own daughter?

"—You must have better things to do than hang about with an inexperienced warrior like Brambleclaw. Stay with your own mentor in the future."

"Yes, Firestar." She dips her head, voice strained.

Slipping out of the nettles and passing Ferncloud and her kits with a subdued greeting, Squirrelpaw's mind fills with confused musing.

Will Bramblefang have to go against his leader to fulfill this prophecy?

The next morning, gray dawn light filters through the canopy as Dustpelt leads Squirrelpaw down a narrow descending track towards Tallpines. "The Twolegs aren't finished there yet," he

explains, "but the prey they've displaced will be coming this direction." Squirrelpaw nods numbly. "Now," he meows, halting. "Tell me what you can scent."

"Vole," she rhymes off instantaneously.

"Good job. Dappledawn mentioned a hankering for one, didn't she? Go ahead and see if you can catch one. Without my help this time."

She nods, and darts off.

Some tree-length or two from Dustpelt, she locates her quarry. Sinking to a hunter's crouch, she watches the rodent's every move...

Firestar is just stressed about something else.

She shakes her head. *Focus!*

She creeps closer, pawstep by pawstep...

I hope Bramblefang isn't too mad at him. Apprentice duties for a warrior is pretty demeaning though...

A twig snaps underpaw, and she curses as the vole scuttles away. *No. I am not embarrassing myself again!*

She sails forward, giving chase to the creature and expertly avoiding every root and ditch along the way. Her speed is blazing, dizzying even, and she's less than a fox-length away and she stretches out her claws—

Enclosed.

Tendrils of gorse wrap around her body, and she's suspended with all four paws in the air. Watching the vole scramble away along the forest floor, she slackens in defeat. *Great.*

Now what? Logically speaking, she'd call out for Dustpelt, but the thought of such a thing makes her want to stay tangled in the bush for all eternity. She gives a wriggle, then another, but the twigs stab at her belly and the branches don't budge. A frustrated yowl erupts from her lungs. *This is just swell!*

"Having fun?"

Bramblefang rises over the foliage, lips pursed in a stifled laugh. While relieved that it's *him* and not anyone else, the ridicule proves too much to handle with clarity. "That's right, have a good laugh, you stupid furball!" she snaps. "Then maybe you'll have time to get me out of here!"

He strolls over with obvious delight, tail curled. "How'd you manage to get so stuck?"

"I was chasing a vole," she grunts. "Dappledawn said she fancied one, so I thought I'd better oblige, seeing that Dad seems to want me to feed the elders, like, forever. It ran under here, and I thought there was room for me to run after it."

"There isn't," Bramblefang points out helpfully.

"I know that now, mouse-brain! Do something!"

"Keep still then."

Approaching the bush, Squirrelpaw winces as Bramblefang teases the worst tangles out of her fur, plucking each thorn with a careful claw. She wriggles periodically, until she starts to feel freer. "Hang on," she murmurs, "I think I'm loose."

With one last thrash, her front paws meet the forest floor, and she scrabbles at the earth, trying to drag her hindquarters clear of the gorse bush, until finally she's free. Giving herself an irritated shake, she glowers at the tufts of red fur left behind. *That's gonna take a while to grow back.* "Thanks, Bramblefang," she purrs in relief.

"Are you hurt at all?" he asks her. "Maybe you oughta have Cinderpelt have a look at—"

"Squirrelpaw!"

Both cats wince. The call is closely followed by the march of pawsteps heralding the arrival of her father. But to her surprise, his icy gaze lands on Bramblefang first. "Is this how you obey orders?"

The tabby bristles. "I'm not disobeying orders, Firestar."

"Oh? I'm sorry." The ThunderClan leader's voice is as dry as a sun-scorched rock. "I thought you were supposed to be on a hunting patrol, but I must have heard wrong."

Bramblefang sounds desperate. "I *am* on a hunting patrol."

Firestar makes a great show of looking around. "I don't see Mousefur or Spiderpaw."

Oh for goodness sake. Knowing Spiderpaw he's probably halfway to ShadowClan by now, and Mousefur's probably on her last nerve trying to wrangle him. That's not Bramblefang's fault!

"Spiderpaw went off after a squirrel." Bramblefang points with his tail. "Mousefur went after him." There's a simmering anger in his voice... She'll have to pick which tom to quell, and quickly.

"Why are you being so horrible?" Squirrelpaw spins, glaring at her father. "Bramblefang isn't doing anything wrong." *Not this time, anyway.*

"Bramblefang isn't doing what he was told," Firestar growls simply. "That isn't the warrior code as I was taught it." *Oh, don't bring the warrior code into this!* She springs forward, nose to nose with her father, back arched. "I was stuck in the bush! Bramblefang *helped* me! It's not his fault!"

"Be quiet!"

Squirrelpaw steps down, a pang of dejection racking her body. *Everyone's always telling me to shut up.*

I never thought you'd do it, too.

"This has nothing to do with you," he continues, pelt bristling. Swallowing her hurt, Squirrelpaw stands her ground. "It looks like it has," she argues. "You growl at Bramblefang every time he so much as glances at me—"

"*Silence!*"

There it is again. Squirrelpaw pouts. *Just because I'm an apprentice doesn't mean I don't get to speak! I hate being an apprentice! I hate it!*

Graystripe thrusts into the clearing, a vole dangling from his jaws. "Firestar?" he meows, dropping his prey. "What's going on?"

"What's going on?" Squirrelpaw shrieks. "*He's—*" she indicates her father with a flick of her tail, "being really unfair and mean!" She almost recoils at her juvenile language, but maybe it will help her case for how upset she is. Both Bramblefang and Firestar are bristling, though Firestar quickly straightens himself up, and

Bramblefang seems to make a conscious effort to relax the fur on his neck.

Graystripe looks at Firestar, then to Squirrelpaw and Bramblefang, eyes glinting with understanding. "Oh, right." He pads closer. "Come on, Firestar," he soothes, nudging against his friend's shoulder. "These two aren't doing any harm."

"And not much good, either," Firestar retorts, shrugging Graystripe away and stepping forward. "My decisions, and the orders I give, are for the good of the whole Clan. If you can't understand that, then maybe you aren't fit to be warriors."

Squirrelpaw's heart sinks to her paws. "What?" Her father silences her with a hiss. *When I said I was sick of being apprentice, this isn't what I meant!*

Firestar has never been this cruel. He's never even been a stern parent — that's Sandstorm's job. Tears prick the corners of Squirrelpaw's eyes, but she swallows, determined not to cry again.

"You," he growls, flicking his tail at her, "take that vole of Graystripe's to the elders, and then carry on hunting for them. You," he goes on, flicking to Bramblefang, "find Mousefur and see if you can possibly bring back some fresh-kill before dark. Do it now."

Without even waiting for a response, he whips around into the bushes. Graystripe pauses before following him. "He's... got a lot on his mind," he whispers apologetically. "Don't take it too much to heart. Everything will work out okay — you'll see." He gives them a wink, then a yowl of "Graystripe!" comes from the direction where Firestar had disappeared. Graystripe nods in farewell, and hurries off.

Threat neutralized, Squirrelpaw flops to the ground with a huff. "I can't do anything right!" she wails, curling her tail around her muzzle. "You heard what he said. He thinks I'm not fit to be a warrior. He'll never give me my warrior name."

She stares into space for a long moment, until she realizes he hasn't responded. When she looks up, he's the same as he was in the nettle patch — seething.

"... Bramblefang?"

He snaps out of it, and his amber gaze softens.

"Go on," he meows roughly, nodding toward the dropped vole.

"Take that back, or he'll have another go at you."

"And what about you?" she ventures, noting something unspoken in his gaze. He searches her face. "I..."

You what?

"I'm leaving."

"*Leaving?*" she echoes, stepping toward him. "Leaving ThunderClan?"

"Not *leaving*-leaving. I—"

She tilts her head.

"Squirrelpaw, listen. I... had another dream. About drowning in this... endless water that tasted like salt. And then there was the cave — oh, blast it! I forgot to tell Crowpaw about the cave — this cave with pointy teeth like a dog..."

As she listens, her eyes not leaving his face, her tail begins to droop. *A second dream... endless water... Crowpaw?*

"Ravenpaw says it's a real place. I think StarClan is telling me to go there, and the other cats agree. We're starting at sunrise tomorrow."

Now that he's finished, Squirrelpaw bristles. "You told them and not me? You told *Crowpaw* and not me?" she wails. "Bramblefang, you *promised!*"

"I know!" he exclaims. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. I was going to but then all this trouble with Firestar started— StarClan knows why, and if they do, they're telling me even less about it than they've told me about the prophecy." His voice trembles. "I'm *really* going out on a limb here. And I don't know why they've picked me, okay?" His eyes glimmer, then he shakes his head. "Just forget it. I'm going to the sun-drown place no matter what."

"But you don't even know how far it is."

"None of us do," Bramblefang admits. "But Ravenpaw has spoken to cats who have seen the place, so it must be possible to get there." He levels her with a stare. "I'm not coming back to camp. I'll spend the night somewhere in the forest, and meet the others

at Fourtrees in the morning. Please, Squirrelpaw, I—" He shuffles his paws, shoulders sinking. "Don't give us away. Don't tell any cat where we've gone."

Now as she listens, her ears prick up, and a grin crawls across her muzzle.

"I won't breathe a word to any cat," she promises, paw raised. "I can't, because I'm coming with you."

"Oh, no, you're not!" Bramblefang retaliates, "you're not one of the chosen cats. You're not even a warrior yet." *Oh, please.*

"Crowpaw isn't a warrior, either," she points out, eyes closed in haughty authority. "And I'd bet a moon of dawn patrols Stormfur is coming. He'd never let Feathertail go without him. So why do I have to be left out? I didn't tell any cat about the first dream, Bramblefang. I never said a word. Not even to Leafpaw."

With a pang she wonders if her sister will be okay, then flicks her tail decisively. "You promised."

"I didn't promise you could come," he reminds her. "I promised to tell you, and I've done that."

"You *can't* leave me behind."

"Why not?"

"I'm not dealing with my dad's attitude by myself! And if I don't know what happens next, my fur will fall out from wondering!"

"It's just too dangerous, Squirrelpaw!" he growls. "Can't you see that? The prophecy is a heavy enough weight for me to bear, without having to look after you as well."

Oh, please! Times two!

"Look after me!" she scoffs incredulously. "I can look after myself, thank you." She levels him with a serious, hard stare, the hardest she can muster. "I'm coming, whether you like it or not. And if you won't let me come with you, then..." She shrugs. "I'll just follow you."

He looks unconvinced. She sighs sharply. "Think about what happened today. I don't want to go back to camp and be told off for nothing, over and over again, any more than you do!"

She watches the cogs turning inside his brain, amber gaze flickering indecisively, until he heaves a sigh of concession that

seems to have come from the tips of his toes. "Alright, Squirrelpaw. You can come."



CHAPTER 9

All night long, secondhand excitement pulsed through Leafpaw, keeping her inches away from sleep. Dawn is just beginning to sweep camp, and carefully she picks her way over Cinderpelt's sleeping body. A single, definitive thought permeates her mind — *Squirrelpaw is leaving*. Creeping to the herb stores, she files through with her paw... *sorrel, daisy, chamomile, burnet, sorrel, daisy*... She repeats the combination in her mind, searching for each individual herb—

Cinderpelt grunts, and Leafpaw freezes, turning slowly — but the molly is still asleep, twitching. Suppressing a sigh of relief, Leafpaw quickens her pace, and eventually manages two packets of travelling herbs, neatly wrapped in two big dock leaves.

She hurries across camp. Passing the apprentices' den, she imagines Shrewpaw's sleeping form... *he can't know*.

Cloudtail is watching camp, but he's dozing. She slips past him without much effort, but she speeds away as quick as she can — her cousin is the best tracker in the Clan, and if he catches her scent she's done for—

"Leafpaw?" the white tom yawns. "It's early. What are you doing?"

"I'm just out for a stroll. I like the quiet of the morning." She hates lying.

"And the herbs?"

"They're starting to rot," she explains. "I'm taking them out of camp because they'll stink by tomorrow."

"I'm not stupid. Those are travelling herbs."

Right. Best tracker in the Clan. Good nose.

She winces, but he waves a paw dismissively. "Don't worry about it," he purrs. "Whatever it is you're up to with that sister of yours, just be careful, okay?"

She takes a step, then hesitates. "You're not gonna tell Firestar?"

Cloudtail shakes his head, long cheek fur swishing. "Please. I snuck out of camp all the time, and so did he, and so has every apprentice ever." He smiles gently for a moment, then his voice turns grave. "But seriously — be careful. I'll be the first cat your dad comes to if anything happens to you kids, and I don't exactly want to feel the heat of *ThunderClan's very own raging fire*," he laughs, waving his paws with theatrical marvel. Something rustles in the warriors' den. "Go," he mutters urgently. "Now."

Leafpaw obliges without protest, picking up her herb bundle and scrambling through the gorse tunnel.

Clear of the ravine, she sails through the undergrowth. Shrewpaw's words echo in her mind; *maybe I can tune into Squirrelpaw if I focus*. Calming her mind, she pictures her sister in her mind's eye. The image swirls and blurs... *a monster?* She's not in danger, because that feeling of excitement is still flickering in her heart, unambiguously so. No, the monster is dead... and the scents around her... the Thunderpath!

With reckless abandon, she races towards the border, and she's almost upon the two of them before she scents them — her sister, and Bramblefang, just as she thought. *Smart*, she thinks, *going where their scents are harder to track*.

She weaves through the foliage, stopping on a cliff at the edge of the Thunderpath and peering over the bushes at both cats.

"Squirrelpaw!" hisses Bramblefang. "Get out of sight!"

But the molly simply turns, locking eyes with Leafpaw, an unspoken apology written on her face. Leafpaw skirts down the slope towards them, plopping the herb packets at Squirrelpaw's feet. "I brought you some traveling herbs," she murmurs. You're going to need them."

Bramblefang stares at Leafpaw then back to Squirrelpaw, nose wrinkling. "I thought you said you hadn't told any cat!" he roars. "How does she know? You've been lying to me!" *Brute.*

"I have not!" she spits.

"No, she hasn't," Leafpaw says gently. "But she didn't need to tell me anything. I just knew, that's all."

Bramblefang shakes himself, appearing a little friendlier. "You mean, you know everything?" he asks. "About the dreams, and the journey to the sun-drown-place?"

The what? She stares at him, bewildered. "No," she mews simply, "only that Squirrelpaw is going away." She hesitates, closing her eyes briefly. "And there will be great danger."

Something stirs in the burly tom, and then he rounds on her. "Who else knows?" he demands roughly, hackles raised. "Have you told your father?"

"No!" Leafpaw snaps. "I would *never* tell on Squirrelpaw, not even to Firestar." The lie tastes bitter; *Shrewpaw knows.*

"She wouldn't, Bramblefang."

Even more bitter.

Bramblefang looks sceptical at first but, slowly, he nods.

Leafpaw sighs. "I almost wish I had. Perhaps I could have stopped it all, and kept you here. Squirrelpaw, do you really have to go?"

"I must!" her sister chirps. "This is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me. Don't you see? It's a command from *StarClan*, so it's not like we're going against the warrior code."

StarClan? Leafpaw furrows her brow. "What?"

Squirrelpaw spills everything — a dream, a cat from each Clan, a place where the sun drowns... Finally, an answer; but not exactly

an answer she was expecting. "But—" Leafpaw stammers as Squirrelpaw finishes, "but *you* don't need to go! You haven't been chosen."

"I've been telling her that..." Bramblefang mutters, singsong.

"Well, I'm not going back," Squirrelpaw states, flicking her tail against Bramblefang's face in rebuttal. "I can't do anything right, as far as Dad is concerned. Did you know he even told me I might not be fit to be a warrior? I'll show him whether I'm fit

or not!" *He said that? That's harsh.* "Squirrelpaw..." *I can't tell her about the prophecy.* She bows her head solemnly. "You might not come back. What will I do without you?"

"I'll be okay, Leafpaw." Squirrelpaw presses her muzzle against Leafpaw's side, purring. "I've got to go," she says softly. "You do see that, don't you?"

Leafpaw nods.

"And you won't tell anyone where we've gone?" Squirrelpaw presses.

"I don't know where you're going—and neither do you," Leafpaw deadpans. "But no, I won't say anything. Just remember that... Dad does love you. He just... he has things on his mind that you know nothing about." She draws in a shaky breath. "Now take the herbs and go."

She watches them lap up the herbs in earnest. "Even if you don't have a medic with you, you can still find herbs as you go along. Don't forget marigold for wounds," she meows rapidly. "And tansy for coughs—

oh, and juniper berries for bellyache. And borage leaves are best for fever, if you can find any—"

"Leafpaw," Squirrelpaw soothes. "We won't forget. I promise." Finishing the herbs, she swipes her tongue around her lips. "Come on, Bramblefang."

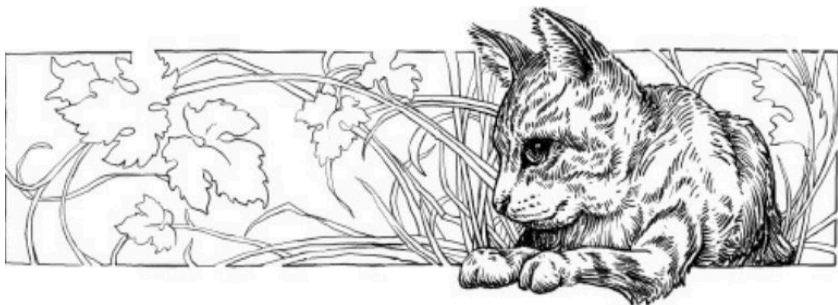
The tom dips his head. "Goodbye, Leafpaw. You— and the rest of the Clan — take care. If trouble is really coming to the forest, we... we might not be back in time to help you fight it."

Her gaze is somber. "That's in the paws of StarClan. I will do my best to be ready, I promise."

As the two begin to depart, Bramblefang calls over his shoulder, "and don't worry about Squirrelpaw. I'll look after her." *Yeah, real soothing, Mister Made-A-Warrior-Three-Moons-Ago.*

"And I'll look after him!" Squirrelpaw beams, grinning devilishly. Her ears perk up in realization, as if she's forgotten something — she hurries towards Leafpaw and touches noses with her. "We *will* come back."

With that, Leafpaw dips her head, sadness clouding her vision as the two of them are engulfed by the undergrowth.



CHAPTER 10

"Mother?"

"Yes, Crowpaw?"

The apprentice shuffled. "Do you really think Mudclaw killed Onewhisker?"

The night was crisp, empty. Most cats had gone to sleep — Ashfoot was on night-watch. She looked thoughtful for a moment, powder-blue eyes glistening, then she shook her head. "No," she conceded, gazing at her son. "I... I was just looking for someone to blame, I think. I'm sorry. It wasn't fair to scare you like that."

"No, no. It's okay. I'm old enough to learn these kinds of things now." *Do you think it's my fault?* Crowpaw furrowed his brow.

"He's been acting odd lately anyway, so..." He shrugged.

Ashfoot closed her eyes. "Cats deal with grief in different ways."

"Mudclaw is grieving for Onewhisker? They never got along."

"They did. Once. They still did before your uncle died. Just... in a different way."

She paused, then chuckled softly. "You'll understand when you're older."

Crowpaw rose to his paws, tail lashing, but his anger for once was well-tempered. "I hate when cats say that."

Ashfoot soothed him, touching her nose to his ear. He flinched, but remained. "Get some sleep," she whispered.

That was last night.

Crowpaw had followed his mother's command — he'd gotten *some* sleep. But he spent most of the night tossing and turning in trepidation. He managed to slip out undetected just before the dawn patrol went out.

And then he ran.

He's running across the moor like an unleashed dog, his paws scarcely touching the ground. All the while, there's an angry and pitiful buzz inside his head. He's even more confused now; if Mudclaw didn't let Onewhisker die on purpose, why is he acting so strange? How were they ever friends? There's so much unspoken... so much he isn't privy to.

And now, sailing up the hill towards Fourtrees, he might never be.

He stops shy of the clearing, parting his jaws to drink in any unwanted scents — the coast is clear. He parts the foliage and steps into the clearing.

"Crowpaw."

He almost leaps out of his pelt.

The tortoiseshell looks unfazed, rasping her tongue over an outstretched paw. Crowpaw heaves a sigh of relief. "It's just you."

"Oh, it's *just me*? If you're disappointed, you can go home again," Tawnyspark says simply. He ignores her. "How long have you been here?"

"A little while."

"I didn't scent you."

"ShadowClan secret." She shoots him a wry grin. "Or WindClan aren't as good at tracking as they say they are."

He opens his mouth to retaliate, but she shoots him down with a guffaw. "I'm joking. You need to learn to take a joke."

He growls. *She's just grown-up Nightpaw. Great.*

"Tawnyspark! Crowpaw! Hi!"

Feathertail approaches with a rumbling purr, touching her nose to Tawnyspark's shoulder. The foliage rustles as Stormfur joins them, brushing his tail against his sister's side. "You want every cat in the forest to know we're here?" His tone is brusque, but panicked. Crowpaw glances at him, expressionless. "They're gonna know anyway. It won't be long until they notice we're missing."

"Then we should get a move on," Tawnyspark grunts. "Where's Bramblefang?"

Stormfur shrugs. "He's *your* brother."

"Doesn't mean I know what he's up to every waking moment. Besides, he'd probably be passing the *RiverClan* border on his way here," she retorts, glaring pointedly at Stormfur. The tom bristles, but he's still laidback as ever. "I'm telling you, I haven't seen him." Feathertail hums, sitting down and drawing her tail around her paws. "Okay then. We'll just have to wait. Does anyone have any stories?"

"No," says Tawnyspark.

"No," says Crowpaw.

Stormfur shuffles, looking hesitant. "I have the one about me and Blackclaw getting rid of the rats."

"Wow," Tawnyspark drawls, dripping with sarcasm. "I think she means *actual* stories. Y'know. *Interesting* ones. Doesn't RiverClan love storytelling?"

The gray tom doesn't meet her gaze. "Not all of us are good at it." With that, all four cats are silent.

And for a long while, there's nothing. Crowpaw begins to pace. *ThunderClan as always, making a scene.* The sun climbs ever higher, and though he'd never admit it, his marching to and fro is just as much out of anxiety as it is out of anger. *They probably already know we're gone by now.*

Finally, the undergrowth shivers and unveils a big brown tabby.

"At last!" Tawnyspark springs to her paws as Bramblefang enters.

"We thought you weren't coming." Bramblefang dips his head. But trotting in behind is...

"What's *she* doing here?" Crowpaw spits, glaring at the red molly. The fur on Squirrelpaw's neck bristles as she shoots back, "I can speak for myself, thanks. I'm coming with you." *StarClan, have mercy.*

"What?" Tawnypelt stiffens. "Bramblefang, have you lost your mind? You can't bring an apprentice. This is going to be dangerous."

He gets the impression that the statement actually *isn't* directed at him, and stifles a prideful smirk.

"*He's* an apprentice!" Squirrelpaw hisses, and though he isn't facing her, indubitably she's gesturing to him wildly with her tail.

His nose wrinkles in the beginnings of a snarl. "I was chosen by StarClan," he points out simply. "You weren't." Satisfied, he licks a paw and swipes it over his ears. *At least if she's here, I get to outrank someone. It makes a change from home.*

"He wasn't chosen either," Squirrelpaw protests, flicking her focus to Stormfur. "Don't tell me he's here just to say good-bye to his sister!"

For the love of all things starry, shut up!

"She's coming, and that's that. Now let's get going." *Ugh.*

Flicking his tail and turning his back to Squirrelpaw, Crowpaw jeers at Bramblefang. "Pity you can't leave your Clan without dragging along a burr in your pelt."

Slinking along just in front, the big tabby says nothing, and behind them follows the RiverClan siblings and Squirrelpaw. Feathertail mutters something to the little red molly that Crowpaw doesn't care to hear and, like clockwork, the six cats set off.

They skirt along the edge of WindClan's territory, and he relishes the springy grass underpaw, the howling of the wind through his fur... and with it, a pang of regret. A pang of guilt. *Will things ever be the same again? Will I ever return home? Will any of us?*

"What are we waiting for?"

The six of them are crouched neatly beneath a hedge, looking down on the cluster of Twoleg buildings. Crowpaw shuffles his paws impatiently.

"That's the barn where Ravenpaw and Barley live," Bramblefang replies, flicking his tail towards it indicatively.

"I know," Crowpaw grunts. "Mudclaw took me there when I made my apprentice journey

to Highstones. We're not stopping there now, are we?"

"I think perhaps we should," Bramblefang meows thoughtfully.

"Ravenpaw knows about the sun-drown-place. He might be able to tell us something useful."

"And his barn is crawling with mice," adds Tawnyspark. Bramblefang nods. "We could do worse than spend the night there. A couple of good meals will help to build up our strength."

Glancing briefly at the sun hanging at its peak in the sky, Crowpaw furrows his brow. "But we could easily make Highstones before dark if we keep going."

"I still think it might be best if we stay here for the night," Bramblefang insists, sounding a little more tetchy this time. "This way we'll get to Highstones early next morning, with most of the day to get a good start in unknown territory." *Makes sense, I suppose.*

"Would you rather sleep on bare stone with no prey," mutters Stormfur with a tilt of his shaggy head, "or warm and comfortable with a full stomach? I vote for Barley's barn."

"Me too!" Squirrelpaw chirps.

"You don't *get* a vote," Crowpaw retorts, but the other apprentice is unfazed. "Let's go!"

She springs to her paws but is stopped short by Feathertail. "No, wait. There are rats

around here. We have to be careful."

"Dogs too," Tawnypelt adds.

"Oh— okay." *Mouse-brain.*

"That's what we get for inviting a *kid*," Crowpaw snorts, shuffling closer to Bramblefang with a flick of his tail.

"Oh, get off your Great Rock," Squirrelpaw spits. "You're what, two moons older than me? Get over yourself."

Tawnyspark quietens the two of them with a hiss. Bramblefang's ear inclines to one side for a second, towards the distant bark of a dog. "Get on, if we're going," Crowpaw mutters.

Bramblefang approaches the barn cautiously, giving the gap at the bottom of the door a good sniff, before gingerly nudging his head underneath. "Ravenpaw?"

"I smell ThunderClan," pipes a familiar voice. "Come in, and welcome."

Bramblefang slips through the gap, his size giving him a little bit of trouble. Crowpaw follows hastily. He's having fun being second-in-command.

"I took your advice, Ravenpaw," says Bramblefang. The dark-pelted jack sits down, ears perked. "I think StarClan sent me the dream because they want me to travel to the sun-drown-place. These are the cats StarClan

has chosen to go as well." *Hmph.*

"Or some of us are," Crowpaw mutters. A glint of amusement flashes in Ravenpaw's eyes — Crowpaw has always felt an unusual kinship with the jack, and the way he has chosen his own path despite everything.

A few paces behind, Ravenpaw's partner, Barley, crouches uneasily, eyes widened. As Bramblefang introduces the group, the black and white tom dips his head and wordlessly slips into the shadows of the barn.

"Don't mind Barley," Ravenpaw meows softly. "It's not often we have so many visitors all at once."

They crouch, curling their tail around their paws with a small purr.

"It's an honor to welcome some of my closest friends' children as guests," he beams, sweeping his gaze along Squirrelpaw, Feathertail and Stormfur. *Of course*, Crowpaw muses, *Ravenpaw was an apprentice along with Firestar and Graystripe before he left the Clans.* "I was just speaking with your sister when I was visiting Firestar the other day," says Ravenpaw, turning to

Squirrelpaw. *She has a sister? StarClan's kits, imagine two of them.*

"You've grown so much! Last time I saw you, you were still in the nursery. It wasn't too long after Sandstorm had you, in fact. I said then that you would look just like your father, and now I see I was right."

For once, Squirrelpaw looks taken aback; bashful, even.

"What does Firestar think about the journey?" the jack asks. "I'm surprised he let

Squirrelpaw go so far when she isn't a warrior yet."

The two ThunderClanners exchange an uneasy glance, and Crowpaw feels a devilish smile creep across his face. "It... wasn't quite like that," Bramblefang admits. "We left without telling him." *I don't think any of us told our leaders...*

Ravenpaw's eyes widen with shock, then he shakes his head. "I'm sorry to hear that you couldn't tell him what's going on," he meows.

"Perhaps you'll tell me more when you've eaten. Are you all hungry?"

"Starving!" Squirrelpaw exclaims. *Shut up.*

Ravenpaw laughs, and he waves his tail in invitation. "Feel free to hunt. There are plenty of mice."

And plenty there were.

No time later, Crowpaw is curled up in a bundle of straw, so well-fed that his body feels like a warm flame. No wonder Ravenpaw and Barley look so healthy — he'd never admit it, but he's glad they didn't continue onto Highstones tonight.

Red sunlight filters through the holes in the roof of the barn, and still all around is the scuffling of mice. *They have it good here, that's for sure!*

"If you don't mind, we'll sleep here tonight and leave first thing in the morning," Bramblefang proffers. Ravenpaw nods. "I'll come with you as far as Highstones. There are even more Twolegs than before around the Thunderpath. I've been keeping an eye on them, so I know the safest ways to go."

Crowpaw squints. "Why do you have to come with us? Are you just gonna run back and tell Firestar as soon as we're gone?"

Bramblefang stiffens, and Squirrelpaw lifts her head in the beginnings of a hiss, but Ravenpaw flicks an ear dismissively. "Don't be angry with him," they meow gently. "That's good thinking, Crowpaw. Thinking like a warrior, in fact. Where you're going, you must trust nothing and no cat without very good reason."

The praise warms the apprentice to the tip of his tail, and he purrs soundlessly. Squirrelpaw looks fit to be tied.

"But you can trust me," the black cat continues. "I may not be able to do much to help with the rest of your journey, but at least I can see that you get to Highstones safely."

Wind throttles the group of cats as they clutch desperately to bare rock. The summit of Highstones. Beyond them stretches miles of unknown territories. Even now the sun has only barely risen, casting the sky a soft blue hue.

"You'll avoid that tangle of Thunderpaths," Ravenpaw calls over the wind, pointing with his tail to a gray smudge in the landscape. "Just as well. That's the place where WindClan took refuge when Brokenstar drove them out; a little before any of your times, I think. It's full of rats and carrion."

"I know about that!" Squirrelpaw interjects. "Graystripe told me how he and Firestar went to fetch WindClan back." *Shut up.*

"There are many smaller Thunderpaths to cross," Ravenpaw continues. "And Twoleg nests to avoid. I've traveled that way now and again—not far, but far enough to know that it's not a place for warriors."

Squirrelpaw glances nervously at Ravenpaw. "Is there no more forest at all?"

"Not that I saw."

"Don't worry," Bramblefang meows. "I'll look after you." *How patronizing.*

Squirrelpaw rounds on him, green eyes blazing with fury. "How many times do I have to tell you, I don't *need* looking after!" she

spits. "If you're going to behave like my dad all the way to the sun-drown-place, I might as well have stayed at home."

"Oh, don't we wish," Crowpaw coos. He's not looking forward to listening to *this* all the way.

Tawnyspark glances between the two ThunderClanners curiously, her gaze eventually landing on her brother. "Are you going to let an apprentice talk to you like that?" Crowpaw notes that the statement is a reflection of Bramblefang's character, not Squirrelpaw's, and admittedly he stifles a chuckle.

"You try stopping her," Bramblefang retorts. Tawnyspark rolls her eyes.

"ThunderClan!"

Bramblefang ignores her, turning back to Ravenpaw. "Thank you for everything. It makes a difference that you understand why we are doing this."

The loner simply dips his head. "Think nothing of it. Good luck, all of you, and may StarClan light your path."

He steps aside and, one by one, the six cats pick their way down the slope. The sun is rising now, casting long blue shadows before them.

Now, their journey truly begins.



CHAPTER 11

"That Bramblefang is a lazy lump!"

As Leafpaw emerges into the camp clearing, Mousefur is griping by the fresh-kill pile, muzzle contorted with contempt. "It's well past sunrise and he *still* isn't up yet. I want him for a hunting patrol." Spiderpaw is sitting behind his cranky mentor making an almost identical expression. Carefully, Leafpaw deposits a vole — she'd caught it on her way home, so if anyone had seen her they'd think she had just been out on an early morning hunt — and bowing her head she catches Brightheart's eye, twinkling with amusement. "I'll wake him." She rises and pads to the warriors' den. A knot of unease writhes in Leafpaw's stomach. It won't be long until they figure out he's missing.

She spots Dustpelt striding over near the apprentices' den where Whitepaw is sunning herself, with a notable lash of his tail. "Hi," he greets her, a little stilted. "Have you seen Squirrelpaw? She's not ill, is she? She's usually raring to go by now — before I've even had time for a piece of fresh-kill."

Whitepaw furrows her brow. "I haven't seen her. She didn't sleep in the den last night."

Dustpelt rolls his eyes. "What is she up to now?"

Leafpaw spies him go, muttering something about how he's supposed to mentor an apprentice who's never where they need to be. Her mouth goes dry, and she's still hunched over the fresh-kill pile when someone quietly hisses her name.

"Leafpaw! Psst!"

Following the voice, she glances upwards to find Shrewpaw crouching parallel at the mouth of the apprentices' den, eyes rounded like an owl's. He beckons her frantically with a flick of his tail. Swallowing a lump, she creeps over.

"I've been looking for you all morning!" he whispers. "Last night—"

"Dad says you can't have a crush on a medic."

Whitepaw is still lounging outside the den, leaning lazily over her shoulder to speak to them. Leafpaw feels her pulse in her paws.

"This doesn't concern you," Shrewpaw scolds icily through gritted fangs, ears flicking in tandem. "I don't have a crush on Leafpaw. Go away."

Whitepaw giggles. "If you say so." The apprentice rolls onto her paws and saunters off.

Leafpaw clenches the earth. "You were saying?"

"Squirrelpaw didn't sleep in here last night."

"I know."

"I *know* you know." Shrewpaw looks stern for a moment, then sighs. "She's gone, isn't she?"

Leafpaw hesitates, then nods. "Bramblefang too." She lashes her tail once. "You can't tell anyone."

"I won't. Did you see them off?"

She nods again.

"Where are they going?"

She searches his face. "Shrewpaw, I... I can't tell you."

"What?" He rises to his paws, taking a step back. "After— You—" He appears to have been holding his breath, because he exhales suddenly and rescinds his back step. "After everything. You won't tell me?"

"Not 'won't'. *Can't*."

"Why not?"

She searches this time for a reason. "By my oath to StarClan as a medic."

"Like that's ever stopped you 'til now!" he barks, tail lashing. His fire reminds her most miserably of her sister. She's about to retaliate, but realizes with a start that he's not angry. He's hurt.

"I'm sorry, Shrewpaw," she breathes. "I've already told you too much."

Shrewpaw sniffs, rubbing his wrist against his nose, but he doesn't answer for a moment. "It was partially my fault. I pestered you."

"That just means I'm too easy to pester."

Shrewpaw smirks, weakly.

"And—" Leafpaw ventures, "that was before I realized how serious this would be. I didn't know they'd leave."

"Are they coming back?"

Leafpaw frowns. "They're *supposed* to."

"But will they? Can't you—"

"I don't know, okay? I can't see into the future, Shrewpaw."

Defeated, the tom crouches, curling his tail around his paws. Leafpaw plops herself down beside him.

Looking out the mouth of the den now, she sees Brightheart reappear. "Bramblefang's not there," she reports. "What?" Mousefur looks surprised. "Where is he, then?"

Brightheart shrugs. "He must have gone hunting on his own. Never mind, Mousefur. Cloudtail and I will come with you."

"Fine."

Both cats disappear from view. Shrewpaw shuffles beside her. "Leafpaw?"

She swivels an ear towards him.

"You don't... you don't think Squirrelpaw is padding after Bramblefang, do you?"

She whips her head towards the tom. "What? Ew, no. He's way too old."

"No, I know that. I just mean... sometimes apprentices like cats older than them but it doesn't mean it's gonna go anywhere."

Spiderpaw never shuts up about how pretty *Mistyfoot* of all cats is."

Gobsmacked, Leafpaw draws back. "As in, deputy of RiverClan?"

"Who else?"

"That's hilarious!"

"Right?"

At least I know how to get back at Spiderpaw if he gives me a hard time again! Shrewpaw snickers — obviously this is the first time he's shared this burdensome secret. If only her own secrets were so simple. Shrewpaw's mirth fades, and something wild and unspoken stirs in his amber eyes for a moment.

"I like Squirrelpaw."

Leafpaw blinks. "You... you do?"

Shrewpaw gives a nervous chuckle. "You sound surprised."

She is surprised.

For some reason, she thought he liked *her*.

"I am a little, I suppose." She folds her paws under her chest uncomfortably. "But it makes sense. She's great. She's talented and she's funny and she's—"

"Pretty," Shrewpaw whispers. He stiffens suddenly, sitting up.

"Not that you're not, or anything," he adds hastily. "But you're a medic."

And if I wasn't?

"It doesn't matter now anyway," he says solemnly, glancing at her. Then he smiles. "It's not a big deal. It's just a crush. I just hope she's okay. Her *and* Bramblefang."

"Yeah," she sighs, her breath trembling. "Me too."

The two sit in silence for another moment, until Brackenfur comes into earshot. "Shrewpaw!"

The apprentice stands up. "I should go."

She nods, and he steps out of the den.

By midday, the camp is ablaze with gossip. Leafpaw has been sent to the fresh-kill pile for a reason, this time — even so, she takes her time picking the perfect meal for Cinderpelt's lunch. Having just

dismissed Longtail and Ashfur to search near Fourtrees yet again, Firestar stands beside himself, tail lashing with annoyance.

"I can't think what they're up to," he mutters, a growl rumbling in his throat. "I'll have something to say to both of them when they come back."

Both Ashfur and Longtail dispersed, streaming around her and leaving her father and mother alone. Crouching down, Leafpaw inclines an ear to listen.

"You know," Sandstorm meows, "Graystripe told me what happened last night, when you found them hunting alone. It sounds as if Squirrelpaw and Bramblefang haven't been back since. From what Graystripe said about the way you spoke to them, I'm not surprised they want to get away for a while." *Close, but no mousetail.*

Firestar suddenly looks meek. "Surely I didn't upset them that much?" He flicks an ear anxiously. "Not enough to leave the camp?"

Sandstorm turns to him, wide-eyed in a green stare that reminds Leafpaw so much of her sister. "I've told you over and over again that you don't get anywhere with Squirrelpaw by criticizing her and ordering her around. She'll do the opposite just to be difficult." Leafpaw stifles an affectionate chuckle.

"I know." Firestar lets out a heavy sigh. "It's just this—" he waves his paws, seemingly looking for the word, "this prophecy... fire and tiger together, and trouble for the forest. I thought after we dealt with BloodClan the Clans would be at peace."

Sandstorm shakes her head, pressing her muzzle against her mate's cheek. "We've had many moons of peace. All thanks to you."

"Graystripe dealt with BloodClan last time, actually," he corrects her. She gives a small, amused snort. "If there is more trouble to come, it's not your fault."

Mother always makes things sound so simple.

"You know," she continues, drawing back slightly from Firestar. "I've been thinking about that omen." She glances around, making sure none of the warriors are in earshot. Leafpaw gives a guilty

start, and considers stepping away. But she would only draw attention that way — and if Sandstorm had already seen her, she's not paying any attention to her. *Besides, I already know about the omen.*

"It mentions fire and tiger, and trouble, sure," Sandstorm continues, "but it doesn't say that fire and tiger will *cause* this trouble, does it?"

Firestar furrows his brow. "You're saying..."

"The prophecy might mean they'll *save* us from whatever it is that's coming."

The ginger tom's eyes suddenly blaze like two emeralds, and briefly Leafpaw wonders if this is a glimpse into what he'd been like when he was Fireheart, ThunderClan's tenacious deputy. "You're right!" he exclaims, butting his head against his mate's with a roaring purr. "Then it's even more important to get them back!" With newfound determination, he draws himself to full height. "I'll lead a patrol myself."

"I'll come with you," Sandstorm adds almost immediately. She raises her voice a little. "Leafpaw?"

Oh, shoot.

"You've had time to sniff every piece of fresh-kill on that pile. Cinderpelt will be waiting— and remember that you *promised* not to say anything to any cat about this omen business."

Leafpaw nods. "Yes, mother."

Hastily, she plucks a vole from the fresh-kill pile and jogs off.

On her return to the medic's den, the vole delivered, her mentor keeps her busy going over their stocks of herbs, sorting out what needs to be replenished before leaf-fall sets in for good. The weight of so many secrets threatens to pull her under. The journey to the sun-drown place, the tiger leaping from the fire... something quirks at her lips. *I suppose Shrewpaw's crush counts too.*

The sun is setting — soft red light kisses the floor of the den, and the air grows cold, laden with the scent of damp leaves.

Both cats prick their ears to the sound of pawsteps outside. "It's your father," Cinderpelt meows, glancing out the mouth of the den. "You carry on with that. I'll see what he wants."

Leafpaw is thankful to stay hidden at the back of the den, counting juniper berries, but all the while she keeps her ears pricked.

"There's no sign of them anywhere," comes Firestar's voice. She can tell that he's pacing. "I tried to follow their scent, but the rain last night must have washed it away. They could be anywhere. Cinderpelt, what do you think I should do?"

"I don't see what else you can do, except stop worrying." The smoky molly's tone is brisk but sympathetic. "I remember hearing stories about a couple of apprentices who were always sneaking off for one reason or another. No harm ever came to them."

"Me and Graystripe? That was different. Squirrelpaw—"

"Squirrelpaw has a strong young warrior with her. Bramblefang will look after her." *I hope so.*

There's a short silence, and Leafpaw risks another glance to see her father sitting with his head bowed, utterly defeated. Her stomach twists in pity, but there is no comfort she can give him without running the risk of breaking her promise to Squirrelpaw.

"It's my fault," he goes on, and his voice is low and shaky in a way Leafpaw has never heard before. "I should never have said what I did. If they don't come back, I'll never forgive myself."

"Of course they'll come back," Cinderpelt replies coolly. "The forest is safe at the moment. Wherever they are, they will be well fed and sheltered." Leafpaw swallows. *But they're not in the forest.*

"Maybe." Her father doesn't sound convinced. She hears him sigh, thanking Cinderpelt quietly, before stalking through the fern tunnel out of the clearing.

Cinderpelt returns with a sigh. "Leafpaw," she meows, giving her apprentice a level stare, "do *you* know your sister is now?"

Leafpaw, not wanting to meet her mentor's gaze, chases a juniper berry that has rolled across the floor. She answers without deceit: "No, Cinderpelt. I don't know where she is."

It's true; I have no idea where she is... she could be anywhere!

"Hmm..."

Leafpaw looks up, but Cinderpelt's blue eyes hold no anger — only wise understanding. "If you did know, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?" She tilts her head in earnest. "A medic's loyalties are not the same as other cats', but in the end we are all loyal to StarClan and the four Clans in the forest."

Leafpaw nods.

Seeming satisfied, Cinderpelt touches her nose to Leafpaw's forehead and turns away to examine their stock of marigold leaves.

I didn't lie to her, technically, but it feels like I did. Oh, Squirrelpaw, Why did you have to go?



CHAPTER 12

"You'd think they'd never seen a cat before."

Stormcloud lifts a paw out of a divot in the ground with effort, steering away from the creatures that now surround them; sheep. Crowpaw is familiar — he sees them from time to time in the fields on the outskirts of WindClan's borders.

"Maybe they haven't," Tawnyspark replies flatly. "There's no reason for cats to come here. I haven't had so much as a sniff of prey since we left the barn."

The skies above are gray and tired, and Crowpaw has grown increasingly restless since leaving the barn. Now beyond Highstones, his surroundings are no longer familiar. All the while, Bramblefang leads the way with his head bowed, and it's starting to bug him. Stormcloud and Feathertail are a few moons Bramblefang's senior — shouldn't one of *them* lead? Instead of this... fluffy ThunderClan know-it-all?

"Tit for tat. They've never seen a cat before, and *I've* never seen a sheep before." Squirrelpaw eyes the creatures curiously. "That's what they're called, right?"

She's talking to me?

"Sheep, yeah," he breathes.

She trots up to one of them, pausing shy of a tail-length, and sniffs. She draws back, nose wrinkled, almost immediately. "Yuck! They might look like fluffy clouds on legs, but they smell horrible!" *I could've told you that. Mouse-brain.*

They continue their way through the field wordlessly for another while — it's Feathertail that breaks the silence. "I wonder why StarClan is sending us all the way to this sun-drown place." She hops a rock gracefully. "I mean, why couldn't they have told us what we need to know back in the forest? And why do we have to hear the message at *midnight*?"

Crowpaw snorts. "Who knows?" He gestures to Bramblefang's hulking figure in front. "Maybe the ThunderClan warrior can tell us. After all, he's the only one of us who has seen this place. Or so he *says*."

Truth be told, Crowpaw had only pointed him out to get an answer — and it worked. Through gritted teeth, Bramblefang speaks for the first time in a few hours. "You know as much as I do." He doesn't turn his head. "We just have to trust StarClan that it will all be clear in the end."

"Easy for you to say," Crowpaw retorts.

"Leave him alone!"

Before he can continue, Squirrelpaw has planted herself in front of him, stopping him dead in his tracks. "Bramblefang didn't ask for the second dream. It's not his fault StarClan chose him."

Crowpaw narrows his eyes. "And what do you know about it?" he growls. "In WindClan, apprentices know when to keep their mouths shut."

"Oh, so you'll be quiet from now on?" Squirrelpaw grins, dripping with cheek. "Good."

With a snarl, Crowpaw stalks around her and carries on. *The most annoying part is that I totally walked into that.*

A heavy silence settles after that, broken only by occasional muttering between Stormcloud and Feathertail. Without

Squirrelpaw's yammering, Crowpaw allows himself to get lost in thought.

It's been about a day since they left. His disappearance would be known by now. With a twinge of guilt, he thinks about his mother. She'd already lost a brother, and now her only son is missing, too. Would she blame Mudclaw? Would she blame herself? Wincing, he focuses ahead.

Before long, the party encounters their first Thunderpath. Now sunhigh, its dark, smooth surface glints with recent rain. *It'd be pretty if not for the stink.* He mocks a gag. "Foul stuff. Why do Twolegs spread it all over the place?"

"Their monsters travel on it," comes Stormcloud's mew.

"I know *that*," Crowpaw retorts, "but *why*? What do they need the monsters for?"

"Dad says they use them to get around," Squirrelpaw ventures gingerly. Her father's former life as a kittypet is often a point of contention, even contempt — perhaps she's unsure if she should bring it up.

"Really?" Feathertail interjects. "Has he ever been inside one?"

Inside one?

"Yeah!" Squirrelpaw chirps, spurred on by Feathertail's curiosity.

"When he was a kit. Twolegs take kits to the, uh..." Her tail tightens into a little ball as she gropes for the word. "Twoleg medic. There's a word for it, but I can't remember it."

"Why do they do that?" asks Stormcloud.

Squirrelpaw shrugs. "Something called *vacks-eens*."

Crowpaw decides Firestar truly is the bravest cat in the forest if he could handle whatever *that* was.

"We'll cross here." The suddenness of Bramblefang's bellowing voice from almost a tree length away gives Crowpaw a fright.

"Why there?" Squirrelpaw inquires. He wonders if it's in curiosity or in challenge.

"It's our best bet if we want to see the monsters coming," Tawnyspark explains, trotting up to join them. "See the sharp bend there? It may seem like the shortest route, but a monster

could come speeding around that corner any second. We'd be mousemeat. So we have to cross at the straight part with plenty of space either side. That way, we have a fighting chance."

"Wow!" Squirrelpaw mrows. "You know a lot about crossing Thunderpaths, Tawnyspark!"

The tortoiseshell chuckles, but Bramblefang appears to bristle. "She's had plenty of practice." *What's his problem?* "Before we cross—" the tom raises his voice for all to hear, "I think we need to decide what we're going to do on the other side, what with that big hedge."

He flicks his tail indicatively at the other side of the Thunderpath, where a short rise in the land leads to a wall of foliage.

"I can't even smell anything beyond it with that Thunderpath reeking like that," Crowpaw replies.

Stormcloud steps forward — an unusual sight, really — and speaks up. "Let's cross straight through the hedge, and find each other again on the other side. If there is anything dangerous through there, the six of us together should be able to deal with it."

Drawn to full height, Stormcloud is almost as tall as Bramblefang, Crowpaw realizes. The big brown tabby seems just as surprised.

"Is that okay, Bramblefang?" Stormcloud probes earnestly.

"Y-yeah." *What was that?*

"Cool. You give the word."

"Right." The brown tabby shuffles to a crouch. Crowpaw mimics the position.

"When I say 'now', *run*."

Two monsters speed past, their thundering paws churning hot, reeking wind, then another bigger one comes the opposite direction, and the cacophony is almost too much to bear. But once they disappear, and their growl falls to a distant rumble, the air holds only birdsong and the distant bark of a dog.

"Now!"

The next few seconds are a blur.

The hard surface of the Thunderpath burns his paws. The scent makes his eyes stream. Then the stabbing thorns of the hedge consume him, and he tumbles through onto the grass on the other side.

Winded, Crowpaw blinks tears and grit from his eyes. He clutches the earth to ground himself and, slowly, he heaves himself upwards.

The grass here is short and thick, with no flowers or weeds. Some distance away sits a Twoleg nest, a tree-length or so tall. The sun seems brighter here, but in a garish and unnatural way. He looks around. *Where is everyone?*

Behind him is the hedge. In front of him is the Twoleg nest. On either side are tall, bright orange fences. *I'm trapped!*

"Bramblefang!" he calls out. No response. "Bramblefang?" His next call is accompanied by an exasperated wince. "Squirrelpaw?"

"Would you *stop* that *yowling*?"

Trotting along the fence on his left comes Tawnyspark. At a familiar face, he slackens. She lands lightly beside him. "Seems like we all got split up. I took a peek over the fence," the tortoiseshell gestures over her shoulder with a flick of her head, "but I can't find anyone."

"Hare-dung," Crowpaw mutters. "What now?"

"We'll check the other side," she replies coolly, striding across the garden to the opposite fence. "Stay behind me."

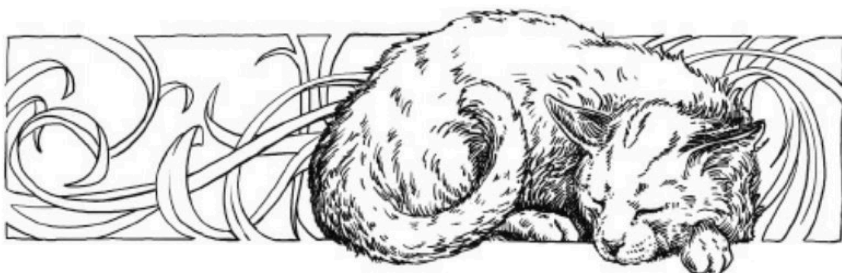
Walking along the wooden slats takes practice, but soon he's able to trot at an ample speed to keep up with Tawnyspark. Even so, she keeps an even pace, and waits for him when he stumbles.

She's a very large cat, he notes. Her ThunderClan heritage is evident. Her *father's* heritage is evident. *It must hurt to be weighed down by such a heavy shadow.*

There's a cacophony of yowling just ahead.

Tawnyspark jerks, exchanging a frightened look with Crowpaw, and the two of them speed along the fences towards the sound, only a garden away.

Tawnyspark freezes. There's a dog in the garden. Stormcloud and Squirrelpaw are crammed up a spindly birch, the dog hopping and snapping at their dangling tails. "Tawnyspark!" Stormcloud shrieks, eyes wide as he clings desperately to one of the tree's thicker limbs. It makes a horrible creaking sound. As it snaps, Crowpaw is already upon the dog's back, giving the fallen Stormcloud enough time to latch onto its muzzle with all four paws. The grey tom drags his claws down the dog's cheeks, and the beast yelps and throws him aside. Crowpaw clings on as it rears, sinking his teeth into the nape of its neck. The dog reverses, stumbling backwards towards the fence and slamming Crowpaw's body against its wooden surface. Twice. Three times. His head feels fuzzy and his claws loosen from the beast's pelt. His vision fades.



CHAPTER 13

She can see flashes of gnashing yellow teeth, feel fear pulsating through her body like a roaring river. She can hear yelping and snarling and jaws snapping and—

"Leafpaw, keep up!"

The molly's eyes snap open, and she's standing in the middle of the path to Fourtrees. Shadows of deep indigo soak the forest as the leaf-fall sun begins to peak over the horizon.

Cinderpelt stands several paces ahead, blue eyes glinting in concern. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Leafpaw lies. "I just got lost in thought." Forcing her fur to lay flat, she trots up the rise to meet her mentor's side.

Cinderpelt remains still, brow furrowed. "Leafpaw," she says gently, "I've been your mentor for just over two moons now, and I've known you all your life before that, too." She levels her with an even stare. "I can tell when something is bothering you." Whisking her tail to beckon her apprentice, Cinderpelt continues down the path. "You're worried about Squirrelpaw."

"Yes," Leafpaw admits.

"There's no shame in that. She's your littermate. I'd be lost without Brightheart — Thornclaw and Brackenfur too."

Leafpaw nods.

"Leafpaw. You know where she is, don't you?"

Leafpaw folds her ears back, searching the trees.

"She's far away, isn't she?"

"I don't know *where* she is," Leafpaw replies, truthfully this time.

"But— she is— she is far away. Bramblefang too. And I don't know when they'll be back."

Cinderpelt looks thoughtful for a moment. "Are they safe?"

"I don't know!" Leafpaw bristles, then flattens to the ground. "I don't know! Everyone keeps asking me hard questions and I just don't know! I'm only an apprentice!" she shrieks, claspings her paws over her head.

"Hey, hey!" Cinderpelt soothes, crouching to the apprentice's level and resting a paw on her head. "It's okay. Breathe."

Breathe.

"Breathe," Cinderpelt repeats, softer.

Breathe.

"I'm sorry. A lot is expected of you," Cinderpelt whispers. Leafpaw stays silent. "It's part of growing up. But it doesn't make it fair."

Raising her head, Leafpaw sighs. "I didn't realize so much of being a medic would be just *keeping secrets*."

Cinderpelt chuckles lightly. "It's part of it, sure. But it's not the *point* of it." Rising to her paws, Cinderpelt beckons with her forehead. "C'mon. We don't want to be late."

Nodding, Leafpaw clicks into motion, and they're walking for a while before she speaks something that's been on her mind since her sister left.

"What is the point?"

Her own lack of conviction floors her. Was it not her conviction that brought her here in the first place? Is it not the very thing that separates her from her peers? Or did something else other her?

She expects Cinderpelt to be angry, offended even, but the tortoiseshell remains calm, retaining her swinging gait. "That depends on you. Every medic is different." They breach the ThunderClan border, and the scent of ShadowClan causes Leafpaw brief alarm, before Cinderpelt chirps a greeting and tilts her head indicatively. "Take Littlecloud here."

The little tom chuckles incredulously. "What about me?"

"What's being a medic about to you?"

The tom tilts his head. "Where's this coming from?"

"Leafpaw's having some doubts," Cinderpelt replies. Leafpaw feels like she's going to shrivel up from shame. But Littlecloud simply blinks, a gentleness brushing his soft features. "I was once a warrior," he begins, hopping lightly onto a felled oak as they continue along the length of the border towards Fourtrees. "Not long after I got my full name, I got very sick. Do you know what Carrionplace sickness is?"

She nods.

"The whole clan was hit. This wasn't long after your father helped drive Brokenstar out, so we were very weak... me and my friend, Whitethroat, came to ThunderClan. Yellowfang turned us away." He looks wistful for a moment, before smiling. "I know *why*, of course. It's highly contagious. She was just being a smart medic." *She would've recognised the sickness from her time in ShadowClan*, Leafpaw muses.

Approaching the rise before Fourtrees, Littlecloud continues. "I thought we'd die. But despite everything, Cinderpelt looked after us. She took us to a secluded spot by the RiverClan border and spent days nursing us with everything she had." His eyes shine with fondness for the molly, and in return she bunts his shoulder. "I was never a great warrior. I was apprenticed too early and I didn't learn the skills I should've... Brokenstar only taught us to fight, not to hunt or guard or build dens. But when I saw the warmth and passion Cinderpelt put into her work... risking everything to help Whitethroat and I... it felt like everything fell into place. I was supposed to heal, not fight."

The three of them crest the hill — RiverClan's medics are waiting in the clearing, silhouetted by the rising sun. Cinderpelt waves her tail in greeting and teeters down the hill. Littlecloud stops short, giving Leafpaw a warm smile over his shoulder. "It took almost dying," he laughs, "but I found my purpose. You'll find yours too, Leafpaw, in time." With that, he nimbly descends into the hollow. Leafpaw follows without protest.

Do I have to have a near-death experience to figure this out?

"At last!" Mudfur gasps as they arrive, stretching zealously. "You tree-cats love to take your time."

Mothpaw, sitting neatly beside him, guffaws. She seems in high spirits. *She must've got her sign that she can be a medic!*

At Mudfur's teasing, Cinderpelt gives a mock grumble. Littlecloud chuckles. "Oh shush, fishface. I bet you arrived only minutes before we did."

"We have a longer distance to travel, thank you!"

Leafpaw catches Mothpaw's eye, and the two share a stifled giggle.

If nothing else, perhaps the camaraderie among the medics would keep her going.

The group sets into motion. Worries momentarily shelved, Leafpaw falls into step with Mothpaw, who has grown considerably in the half-moon since the Gathering.

"I didn't think you would be here," Leafpaw whispers. Mothpaw doesn't look at her head-on — instead, she glances at her sidelong, and something unspoken flickers in her amber eyes. Leafpaw flinches. "I'm sorry, I—"

Mothpaw sighs. "No, I'm sorry." She gives Leafpaw a small apologetic smile, but it quickly fades. "It's not your fault. You heard what Mudfur said at the last Gathering, about waiting for a sign from StarClan..."

Leafpaw nods.

"It didn't come. There was nothing! I thought that meant StarClan had rejected me— and every cat in RiverClan was *very* quick to start talking about it," she grumbles. "Just because my mother was a rogue, of course."

"Oh no— I'm so sorry!" Leafpaw exclaims, eyes wide with sympathy.

"Mudfur just told me to be patient." A wry twist crosses the molly's lips. "He may be good at that, but I'm not. I tried, but still the sign

didn't come." She laughs airily. "I was ready to leave the Clan, but Hawkpaw— you remember my brother, Hawkpaw?— he told me not to listen. He said I didn't have to prove my loyalty to the others. Only to StarClan. He was sure they would send the sign eventually."

Hawkpaw didn't strike me as the devout type when I met him, Leafpaw thinks. Nonetheless, she gives Mothpaw a hopeful twitch of her ears. "So... I take it he was right?"

"Yes!" Mothpaw purrs. "It was only two dawns ago. Mudfur came out of his den and found a moth's wing at the entrance. He showed it to Leopardstar and everyone else, too. He said you couldn't have a clearer sign than that."

"And did Leopardstar—" Interrupted by a distant yowling, Leafpaw looks up to find the three medics have paused at the top of the distant rise and are glaring back at the two of them.

"Are you coming with us or not?" comes Mudfur's voice faintly on the wind.

Exchanging a startled glance with Mothpaw, Leafpaw laughs. The golden molly throws back a devilish smirk. "Race you?"

The Moonstone awaits them both, ready to let them into the mysteries of their ancestors, and at that moment — as the two of them bound up the rise, weaving around trunks of trees with the wind rustling through their fur — Leafpaw can think of nothing better than being a medic.

By sunhigh, they are already well through WindClan's territory, having collected the moorland medic Barkface along the way. Medics can cross borders freely — by rank they are bound to peace, and to attack one is unthinkable. This immunity is part of what affords them such camaraderie with one another, and this is ever more obvious when Mudfur greets Barkface with nose outstretched as if he were his littermate.

Leafpaw's smile fades as she notes her mentor's hindered gait. Her old injury seems to be bothering her, but she'd never admit that

the pace is too much for her. She'd have to slow the party down herself.

"Can't we have a rest?" she begs, flopping down on a patch of soft heather. "I'm really tired!"

Cinderpelt shoots her a keen glance — obviously she's figured out Leafpaw's ploy — and voices her assent with a nod.

"Apprentices!" Barkface grumbles. "No stamina."

"*He* hasn't traveled as far as *we* have," Mothpaw mutters as she settles herself down beside Leafpaw. "And anyway, he doesn't even *have* an apprentice. What does he know?"

Leafpaw steals a laugh. "He's not actually rude. I think he just likes to sound grumpy."

Mothpaw looks thoughtful for a moment. "It's because he has a mustache," she says decisively. Leafpaw giggles, and leans to one side to give herself a thorough grooming.

Mothpaw starts to do the same, then pauses. "Leafpaw—" her tone is suddenly urgent, "will you test me?"

"Test you— on what?"

"Herbs." Mothpaw's eyes are rounded with worry. "We use marigold to stop infection, and yarrow leaves to expel poison, but what do you use for bellyache? I can never remember."

"Juniper berries, or chervil root," Leafpaw replies, mystified. "Why are you getting so worked up, though? You can always ask your mentor. He's not expecting you to know everything already, right?"

"No, no," Mothpaw dismisses, waving a paw. "But I can't ask *him* when I'm meeting with StarClan!"

Leafpaw blinks.

"I have to show them I'm fit to be a medic," Mothpaw explains.

"They might not accept me if I don't know my stuff!"

Leafpaw almost bursts out laughing. "It's not like that," she says softly. "StarClan won't... ask you questions, or anything like that. They..."

She furrows her brow. *They what?*

"It's difficult to explain. But I'm sure you don't have anything to worry about."

"It's easy for you."

To Leafpaw's shock, there is a hint of bitterness in Mothpaw's tone. The golden molly's amber eyes seem to smolder with a mixture of anger and determination. "You were born here. I have to fight twice as hard for anyone to take me seriously."

Leafpaw wonders briefly if her father ever had the same feeling. *He must have.*

She lays her tail over Mothpaw's back. Did the other molly tense? "RiverClan might be like that, but StarClan isn't," Leafpaw explains. "They don't care where you come from. Look at my father, for example. He used to be a kittypet, but now he's ThunderClan's leader."

"Leopardstar did mention that at the Gathering. And Hawk mentioned on the way home that that was your dad. He seemed excited about it."

Hawkpaw was talking about me? She wonders briefly what else he might have said, but Mothpaw prattles on. "I guess he's probably a little self-conscious about where we came from, too. Don't tell him I said that, of course."

The upset in her eyes has softened, but Mothpaw still looks uncertain.

"Trust me," Leafpaw purrs. "When you stand in front of the Moonstone, you'll understand everything."

By sundown, they reach Mothermouth. The rough moorland grass gives way to bare soil. A deep chasm of hard stone yawns the earth apart, blotched with yellow lichen. It spirals down to a flat hollow, and to one wall is a small, black fissure. The far end of the chasm reaches high into the sky, and all other angles are unreachable by the paws of cats.

Leafpaw has been here once before, when she was accepted as a medic apprentice, so she glances sidelong at Mothpaw to gauge her reaction. The molly's claws are clutching the earth as if she might float off. Her eyes speak vaguely of fear, but mostly of wonder — Leafpaw gives a satisfied purr. "It's wonderful, isn't it?"

Mothpaw nods fervently, but remains silent.

The group of cats carefully descend into the quarry, washed in the soft light of the rising half-moon. The path is wide, made by Twolegs long ago, but has since been abandoned to time. *They must have been trying to get to the Moonstone to interfere with it.*

As they reach the crack in the wall, cold, damp air pools at their paws. They descend into the darkness. The tunnel winds back and forth, and the air feels thick, as if they are underwater as well as underground. In front of her, Leafpaw snatches a glimpse of Mothpaw's tail swaying between her ankles, bushed to twice its usual size.

At last, Leafpaw feels a fresh ripple in the air around them, and the tunnel opens to an airy cavern. Starlight glimmers through a hole in the ceiling, surrounded by tall curving struts of stone scratching the sky, and underpaw the floor is smooth and well-worn. In the center, beneath the stars, stands a rock several tail-lengths high, and though it sleeps, its presence is a formidable one.

"Where are we?" comes Mothpaw's whisper, "what's happening?"

"Come before the Moonstone, Mothpaw," Barkface announces from across the cavern. "We must all wait until the time comes to share tongues with StarClan."

The medics form a ragged semicircle around the rock. Leafpaw hears Mothpaw's shuddering breath as the two sit down. *She's so nervous.*

Time seems to stretch out, and just as it seems as if they'd been sitting for all eternity, brilliant white light flashes into the cave as the moon peeks over the hole in the roof. The Moonstone wakes into dazzling life in front of them, glittering in moonlight as if the whole of Silverpelt has swirled down into its crystal surface. Leafpaw hears Mothpaw gasp.

Haloed by the light, Mudfur pads over and stands before Mothpaw. She rises suddenly, the effort to lay her fur flat very clear.

"Mothpaw," Mudfur rasps, "is it your wish to enter into StarClan's mysteries as a medic?"

Mothpaw hesitates — Leafpaw hears her audibly swallow. "It is."

"Then come forward."

Meekly, the molly steps towards the light. She looks unearthly, her golden fur pale as ash and a glint of silver in her eyes. *It's as if she's supposed to be here.*

Mudfur pivots on his heel before the Moonstone. "Warriors of StarClan, I present to you this apprentice. She has chosen the path of a medic. Grant her your wisdom and insight so that she may understand your ways and heal her Clan in accordance with your will." He waves his tail and speaks fondly to Mothpaw. "Lie down and press your nose to the stone."

She nods and creeps forward, settling to the ground with her paws tucked beneath her chest. The rest of the medics soon wordlessly follow, Leafpaw included.

She presses her nose to the stone.

At once the cold grips her body like the talon of a hawk, or as if she has fallen headlong into dark water. She cannot see or hear anything, or feel the stone floor of the cavern underneath her; she floats in a dark night without even the light of Silverpelt.

Then a series of rapid scenes begins to flash across her vision. The great trees of the Gathering place are bare, with only a few ragged leaves still clinging to the branches. Almost at once, the picture is replaced with a view of

Twoleg monsters speeding by on the Thunderpath, incomprehensibly large. Then cats, dozens of them trekking through snow, a dark line carving through an endless white landscape. There are no trees here — nothing to suggest that it's anywhere in the four territories. All the while, a horrific feeling of the unknown plagues her.

Then in a heartbeat, she's left alone in the darkness once more.

The ordinary freshness of night returns to her senses, and underpaw she feels the cold touch of stone. She winces in the light, and shakily she draws away from the stone.

Looking around, she sees the other medics doing the same. Among them is Mothpaw, her eyes blazing with a mixture of triumph and wonder at the things StarClan must have shown her. Mudfur touches the tip of his tail to her muzzle, a sign for silence. She nods fervently. The older tom leads the way back up the tunnel.

In the darkness, pulses of dread seem to permeate the group. While she knows she can't ask, Leafpaw itches to know what the other medics have seen. Have all of them seen the same thing?

As soon as they reach the entrance, Mothpaw leaps to the top of a jutting spur of rock. She flings her head back in a yowl of triumph. Mudfur watches her, shaking his head indulgently. "Not so bad after all, then, was it? Well," he goes on as Mothpaw springs down to his side again, "you're a true medic apprentice now. How does it feel?"

"Wonderful!" she replies. "I saw Hawkpaw getting his— wait, I'm not supposed to say, aren't I not..."

Leafpaw laughs lightly, but as her gaze drifts to Mudfur, the mirth fades. The old tom is smiling, but the haunted glint in his eye hides nothing.

They didn't see the same thing. He's only humoring her.

"Congratulations," she breathes, touching her nose to Mothpaw's.

"I told you it'd be alright."

"You did!" Mothpaw beams "Everything'll be alright now. Once the rest of RiverClan hears that StarClan approves of me, they'll *have* to accept me!"

With that, Mothpaw bounds off down the slope. Leafpaw watches her with a heavy heart. *Whatever is in store, StarClan has spared Mothpaw the details.*

But they didn't spare me.

