

"I wonder if this is part of Shadowclan's plan."

Firepaw twitched an ear towards Pepperpaw as he was walking. It was early in the morning, before the sun rose, and therefore far too early to be doing any critical thinking. He didn't know how the rest of the cats on patrol seemed so awake. "What do you mean?"

"They threatened to drive us out if we didn't let them hunt in our territory, but it's been over two moons since their last attack." The gray molly pointed out steadily. "I can't believe they honestly gave up when they didn't find the elders. Aside from the occasional hunting party, they've been quiet."

"And that's supposed to be a bad thing?" The ruddy apprentice shrugged. "Let them stay gone. We have enough to worry about without them showing up. Just look at what happened yesterday." He was trying not to let Frostfur's words bother him, but he couldn't help but shudder as he thought of how deep Tigerclaw had sunk his claws into the clan.

"But that's what I mean. What if they're trying to get us to tear ourselves apart?" Pepperpaw shivered despite the greenleaf warmth. "Getting us to attack each other, thinking there's a traitor, then come in and-"

"I doubt Brokenstar could plan that well." Dappleshine interrupted the apprentices' conversation before Pepperpaw could finish her statement. "Perhaps they realized that they couldn't drive us away as easily as Windclan and decided to back off."

"Maybe." Her apprentice seemed doubtful despite the tortoiseshell's confident words. "I just wish they'd attack instead. All this waiting is getting to everyone. You heard how Frostfur yelled at Ravenpaw yesterday."

Firepaw could see the older warrior wince at the gray molly's words. "She's always been high-strung. She was just misdirecting her anger at an innocent, is all." Even as she said it, he could see that Dappleshine didn't quite believe what she was saying.

"That's not what the clan is saying." Tinyfrost observed. "Most of them agree with her. They really believe Ravenpaw is a traitor." His voice was a low growl as he spoke, and Firepaw felt the fur bristle along his spine. Did his mentor agree with them? "None of them feel comfortable around him. They're acting worse than when I was an apprentice."

The patrol was silent for a few moments. "You think I haven't noticed?" Dappleshine finally responded, a hard edge to her voice. "It's not fair to him. Just like it wasn't fair to you."

The two apprentices kept silent, all too aware how touchy of a topic this was for the small black tom. "At least Bluestar gave me my name, despite what the Clan said." Tinyfrost spoke flatly, letting little emotion into his voice. "Ravenpaw has been an apprentice for seasons now. Yet he still hasn't received his warrior name. Does she intend on keeping him an apprentice forever? Or does she believe that if she waits long enough, the Clan will get over it?" The dark warrior snorted derisively.

"She's doing her best. These are unprecedented times." Despite her words, the tortoiseshell tensed up, as though she were holding more back. "Ravenpaw will prove himself to the rest of the Clan." She spoke with a conviction that didn't quite reach her green eyes. "Then she'll have no choice than to name him a warrior."

Firepaw hesitated, waiting for his mentor to respond. The patrol had a long moment of uneasy silence as they patrolled, until he felt he had no choice but to break it. "Do you really believe that'll happen?"

"I have to." Dappleshine replied simply. "Someone has to believe in him."

The ginger tom glanced at the other apprentice, the two speaking without words as they traveled. He was about to reply when Tinyfrost spoke up. "His father certainly won't."

He was surprised by the venom with which the warrior spoke. Did he too know the truth about Tigerclaw's intentions? "What do you mean?" He pried gently, curious to know what his mentor had against the senior warrior.

"Isn't it obvious?" It was Dappleshine who responded, the black warrior seemingly lost in thought and not glancing at the others as they spoke. "Tigerclaw's never cared for his son. Not since Nightwish died." Her ears flattened at the memory of the dead queen. "Maybe he blamed him for her death, I don't know. All I know is that after I took Ravenpaw in, Tigerclaw didn't visit him in the nursery once."

Firepaw couldn't say that that surprised him, given how gruff Tigerclaw was normally. It was hard to imagine him playing with a young kit, like those from Goldenflower's latest litter. It seemed all that grief he had pretended to have over his son was fake, too, not that that surprised him. After all, the giant tabby was a cold-blooded murderer.

"He likes to think he's toughening up his son, but the rest of the Clan doesn't see it that way. His words have more sway than he seems to realize." He didn't miss the despair in the queen's voice as she spoke. "He just needs to prove himself to the Clan. Once he does that, they'll forgive him."

The ruddy apprentice forced himself not to outwardly react to her words, but he knew all too well that that wasn't likely. Not as long as Tigerclaw was seeding doubt within the Clan. Still, he could tell she was desperate to believe that what she said was true; who was he to take that away from her?

"Do you smell that?" Pepperpaw interrupted his thoughts. The patrol collectively sniffed at the air, the scents of the forest mixing in with the acrid tang of the Thunderpath. But in between that...

"Shadowclan. And fresh." Tinyfrost was the first to speak. With his tail, he signaled for them to drop into a low crouch, taking the lead as they crept forward.

It was then that he caught sight of them, but these weren't the well-muscled warriors that had invaded Thunderclan camp before. These cats were small, scrawny; if he didn't know better, he would guess they were apprentices, but no apprentice would be alone on enemy territory. They were scenting at the air and looking around; another hunting party, if he had to guess.

The patrol moved forward as one, the stink of Shadowclan getting stronger as they moved closer. Suddenly, one of the intruders raised their head, looking away from where the patrol was coming and shouting something to their comrades. It was snatched by the wind before it could reach the Thunderclan patrol's ears, but it seemed to be a warning, as they all immediately slid into the shallow dip that ran alongside the Thunderpath. Their small forms were quickly swallowed up by the undergrowth.

It was mere heartbeats before a Monster came roaring past, the wind in its wake buffeting the patrol. They all hunkered down as it passed, waiting a few moments before continuing to where they had seen the Shadowclanners lurking.

Yet when they got there, there were no Shadowclan cats to be found. Their scent permeated the area, yet it was quickly fading in the breeze. It didn't seem to lead deeper into Thunderclan territory, either; it was as though they had just vanished where they stood.

Firepaw looked to the others, hoping that perhaps it was just his inexperience in tracking other cats that was confusing him, but they all seemed as perplexed as he was. "They couldn't have crossed the Thunderpath. Not with the Monster." Dappleshine said to Tinyfrost, who just nodded in response, his ears perked as he scanned the undergrowth for any sign of life. Firepaw did the same, but he knew he wouldn't find anything; somehow, the Shadowclanners had disappeared.

"We need to get back to camp. Bluestar must know about this." Tinyfrost finally spoke, his tail tip flicking in irritation. "If Shadowclan is loose in the forest, it's only a matter of time before they reach camp."

The others nodded and followed after him, racing through the forest as swiftly as the wind. Glancing behind him to where the sun's rays were beginning to light the Thunderpath, Firepaw wondered if the Shadowclan cats were watching them even now. He could only hope that they weren't lurking in the shadows, waiting for a chance to strike.