

# WARRIORS

## A Vision of Shadows

### Darkest Night

#### Exclusive Bonus Scene

## Chapter 1

*The afternoon sun lit the rocks* at the top of the gorge with a warm, welcoming glow. A breeze rustled the new green leaves of the bushes near the canyon's edge, and Nettlesplash caught the sweet scent of hawthorn. It smelled like home.

*I should leave.*

Nettlesplash hesitated, glancing back toward the scrubby grove of trees in the distance. His mate, Mintfur, and their four young kits were waiting there for him. He and Mintfur had made a nest, and he knew he ought to hurry back to it with the vole he carried. There was nothing for him in the gorge now. SkyClan was gone.

But still he couldn't stay away. In the half-moon since the rest of SkyClan's surviving warriors had left to find a new home, Nettlesplash had found himself drawn here over and over again. It was as if part of him hoped he would find his Clanmates back in their own camp, if he only looked hard enough.

Making up his mind, the thin brown tom dropped the vole behind a bush, scraped earth over the prey to conceal it, then silently padded to the edge of the gorge. Crouching low, he peered down at what had been SkyClan's camp.

The sand-colored walls of the canyon narrowed as they went down, and its sides were honeycombed with small caves connected by winding paths. Nettleplash had been born in one of those caves. As a kit he had slept nestled cozily between his littermates, Plumkit, Creekit, and Rabbitkit. Later he and Mintfur had shared a cave of their own. He could almost feel the rough surface of the paths beneath his paws. Far below, water spilled from a gaping black hole surrounded by stones and flowed into a stream that wound its way along the bottom of the canyon.

It should be his Clanmates down there now, basking in the afternoon sunshine beside the stream, sharing prey, going peacefully about the everyday tasks of the Clan.

Instead Nettlesplash glared down at a small groups of cats sitting with prey laid out before them, a huge white tom with a long black tail at the center of the group. *Darktail*. The rogue leader whose band of lying, murdering cats had *stolen* SkyClan's territory.

A breeze blew past Nettlesplash's ears, carrying not the familiar scent of SkyClan but the musty, foul scent of unwashed fur, half-spoiled prey, and bedding that had gone too long unchanged. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. The rogues had stolen SkyClan's camp, and they weren't even taking care of it.

Far below, a small, mottled gray cat stretched out his paw toward a

piece of the prey. Darktail snarled and leaped toward him, swinging one powerful paw and knocking the smaller cat to the ground.

*Bully, Nettlesplash thought, the end of his tail twitching. Even his own cats aren't safe from him.*

Nettlesplash wanted nothing more than to sink his teeth and claws into Darktail's pelt. But there were too many rogues protecting him. He and Mintfur couldn't fight them on their own. . . . Maybe with Ebonyclaw and Harveymoon behind them, they might stand a chance. But it had been days since he had seen either of the two daylight warriors.

*After all, there's nothing here for them now, he thought, his shoulders sagging. Maybe one day the rest of SkyClan will return, and then . . .*

"Get out of here!"

The angry hiss came from behind him, and Nettlesplash startled, his feet scrabbling briefly at the edge of the path as he whipped around.

A yellow tabby, her long fur tangled and matted, was glaring at him from only a tail-length away, her green eyes bright with fury. "This is our territory," she yowled. "You don't belong here!"

Nettlesplash flattened his ears and bared his teeth at her, fur rising along his spine. He didn't recognize the she-cat; she must be one of the rogues who had joined Darktail after he'd driven SkyClan from the gorge. "You've got no right to make me leave," he growled.

She was smaller than he was, and so thin that he could see her ribs clearly. Nettlesplash flexed his claws, digging them into the ground. He could win in a fight against a rogue, he thought, and he would have to—otherwise, she'd take him to Darktail.

The tabby cocked her head, her eyes narrowing. "You're one of those SkyClan cats, aren't you?"

Nettlesplash stiffened, cold fear running through him. *If Darktail knows there are still SkyClan cats here, he might come looking for us. I can't risk him finding the kits.*

"I don't know what you're talking about," Nettlesplash growled.

The rogue's eyes flashed with something that looked almost like disappointment. "Go on, then," she spat. "Get lost." *I can't afford to draw any more attention,* Nettlesplash thought. But just as he began to turn away, the she-cat wheezed, then began to cough—a dry, hacking cough that went on and on.

She sounded *awful*. Was it some sort of trick? "Are you okay?" Nettlesplash asked. The yellow tabby glared at him, her eyes watering as she coughed.

Unsure what to do, Nettlesplash shifted uneasily from one paw to another. Finally the tabby stopped coughing and gasped, trying to catch her breath. Her tail dangled limply, as if she was too tired or weak to hold it up properly.

"You should try some tansy for that cough," Nettlesplash meowed awkwardly. "You don't want it to turn into greencough."

He didn't know much about healing, but Frecklewish and Echosong, SkyClan's medicine cats, had always given sick cats tansy to soothe coughs and sore throats.

*Is Frecklewish even alive?* he wondered with a sharp pang of longing. Echosong had left with the rest of SkyClan, but Frecklewish had disappeared after the battle that drove SkyClan out of their gorge. He and Mintfur had searched, but they'd found no sign of the gentle brown tabby.

"I'm fine," the rogue mewed sharply. Then, clearly intrigued, she asked, "Tansy helps coughs?"

"It helped me before," Nettlesplash told her.

The yellow cat stared at him, her tail slashing the air indecisively, and then jerked her head toward the woods behind them. "We'll, I'll let you go this time, but you'd better get out of here before Darktail or one of the others sees you."

Nettlesplash slipped past her, heading not toward the grove where Mintfur and their kits were waiting but toward another group of trees, farther off. Better not to let any of Darktail's cats know where they were hidden. He slowed as he passed the bush where he'd left the vole, but he didn't stop. He would come back to retrieve it when this rogue was gone.

As he hurried away, he heard the tabby begin to cough again, a raw, hoarse sound that made him wince. Despite himself—despite everything the rogues had done to him and his Clan—he felt a jolt of sympathy shoot through him.

Darktail didn't believe in caring for sick cats. If cats weren't strong enough to hunt, or to fight other cats for prey, they wouldn't eat. For a moment he thought of offering her the vole, but then he flicked his ears, driving away his own foolishness.

*I have kits to look after,* he reminded himself. *And this rogue wouldn't do the same for me.*

"I'll get that mouse," Palekit announced, her mew full of confidence. The black-and-white she-kit stalked with stiff legs toward a dry leaf. A breeze caught the leaf and blew it a few tail-lengths away, and Palekit tense with excitement. "It's trying to run!" she announced.

"Remember what Mintfur told us? Get lower down," Gravelkit told her. He crouched beside Palekit, waving his tail with excitement.

Nettlesplash noticed Nectarkit slipping through the grass silently behind them, her eyes fixed not on the leaf but on her brother and sister. He nudged Mintfur, who was sharing tongues with Fringe-kit, the quietest and most thoughtful of their litter, and flicked his tail toward the small brown kit. Mintfur purred with amusement.

"Badger attack!" Nectarkit yowled suddenly, leaping onto Gravelkit's back. All three kits rolled over and over, play fighting in the grass, the leaf forgotten.

"I bet they weren't expecting that." Nettlesplash laughed.

Fringe-kit left her mother's side and edged tentatively closer to her littermates, until Palekit broke away from the other and tackled her, tumbling her into their game.

Nettlesplash and Mintfur sat close together, their sides brushing, as they watched the four kits exhaust themselves and then collapse happily side by side in the grass.

Mintfur blinked affectionately at Nettlesplash. "I can't believe how big they're gotten. It was only a moon ago that they were just starting to walk."

Warmth filled Nettlesplash as he remembered the kits' first wobbling steps. "They're so strong now," he murmured.

Mintfur looked wistfully back at the kits. "I wish the rest of SkyClan could see them. Sagenose's kits are already apprentice's. Imagine how much they're grown. . . ."

Nettlesplash brushed his cheek against hers. He knew that Mintfur missed her brother, Sagenose, just as he missed his kin. "We made the right choice, not going with them. Our kits weren't big enough to travel." He sighed. *And now that they're older, we have no idea where to go to find our Clan.*

Abruptly, Nectarkit raised her head, pushing FringeKit away from where she sprawled half on top of her. "What's that?" she mewed.

"What?" Mintfur tensed, her gaze scanning the grass and trees around them.

"That noise," Nectarkit answered. "It's like how FringeKit sounded when she had a stomachache. But bigger, and louder."

The other kits were listening, too. "I hear it," Palekit said, hunching her shoulders.

"I'm scared, Mintfur," FringeKit mew plaintively.

"Hush, kits," Nettlesplash told them sharply. He and Mintfur pricked up their ears to listen. At first he heard nothing but the chirping of birds and the rustling of leaves overhead.

Then a low moan broke through the ordinary noises. A guttural, strained noise, the sound of some creature in terrible pain. Nettlesplash and Mintfur exchanged worried glances.

"It could be a hurt fox," Nettlesplash meowed anxiously. "Or a weasel." He thought he and Mintfur could handle a lone fox or weasel, but an injured one could be even more dangerous—too unpredictable. They couldn't let it near the kits.

Another moan broke the silence.

"Kits," Mintfur called. "Into the den, now."

Gravelkit started to grumble, but at a sharp glance from his mother, he quieted. All four kits disappeared into the thorny bracken around their nest.

The creature groaned again. "I think it's coming from the bushes over there." Mintfur waved her tail toward a patch of bushes in a hollow not far away.

"Stay here with the kits and I'll check it out," Nettlesplash meowed. *I hope we don't have to move camp again.* They'd been moving frequently, trying to keep out of sight of Darktail's rogues, but this was such a good place for a den: It was dry and sheltered by a dip in the land, and the bracken made excellent protection for their nest.

Mintfur touched her nose to his. "Don't take any risk," she mewed. "Call if you need me."

"I'll be careful," Nettlesplash reassured her.

Crouching low, he crept toward the moans, cautious not to make a

sound. The cries were definitely coming from the hollow. His heart pounded hard. What if it was a fox?

A thick bush blocked his view of the little hollow. Nettlesplash reached out a paw and cautiously pulled down a prickly branch to make an opening to peer through.

A cat was lying huddled beneath the bush. Her yellow tabby sides were moving jerkily in shallow, pained breaths. After a moment, he recognized her. It was the yellow tabby rogue he'd met by the edge of the gorge a quarter moon before.

Her green eyes, glassy with fever, met his through the bush. She growled and tried to stand up, her ears flattening. But soon she slid back to the ground, panting. "Go ahead," she growled hoarsely. "Whatever you're going to do, I can't stop you."

"I'm not going to do anything," Nettlesplash told her, stung. "I'm not like Darktail's rogues. I wouldn't attack a helpless cat."

Her eyes shifted away from his. "I haven't . . ." She sounded guilty. "I joined Darktail after the cats who used to live in the gorge were gone. I was never going to attack you. I don't want to hurt other cats either."

"If you stay with Darktail, you'll have to," Nettlesplash pushed his way through the bush toward her. "I'm Nettlesplash," he told her as he looked her over. She was even thinner and more ragged than she had been a quarter moon before, and her fur was patchy in places, showing her pale skin underneath. "What's your name?"

"Dragonfly." She took a shallow, rattling gasp. "I met Rain in the forest, and he convinced me to join Darktail's group. He said it would be safer than living as a loner."

"And is it?" Nettlesplash asked dryly. He pressed a paw against her side. It felt warmer than it should. What was it that Echosong and Frecklewish had done for fever? There was so much he didn't know. *I miss living in a Clan, where we had medicine cats to heal the sick. . . .*

Dragonfly sighed. "At first, it seemed better. I had other cats to help protect me. But once I got sick . . ." She dipped her head. "Darktail doesn't like sick cats. When I wasn't strong enough to hold my own against the other cats, I wasn't allowed to eat. I got pushed out of the best sleeping places. And I've gotten sicker."

"Did you try tansy for your cough?" Nettlesplash was listening to Dragonfly's breathing. There was a strange whine at the end of each breathe, as if her chest couldn't quite hold the air she was taking in.

Dragonfly wrapped her tail closer against her body. "I haven't seen any. One of the other cats told me they'd heard that catmint could help a cough, and we went to find some, but Darktail took it away from us. He said he'd give helpful herbs to cats who deserved them." She sighed again, and her head sagged toward the ground. "He doesn't think I deserve them." Dragonfly's eyes slowly drifted close. "Following him was the wrong choice," she mewed. "I've made a lot of bad decisions." Her voice was getting softer and slower. "Maybe this'll be my last one."

"Don't fall asleep," Nettlesplash hissed. He had a dark, dread-filled feeling that if Dragonfly slept now, on the cold ground, she might not wake up again. If he kept her talking, she'd stay awake. "Tell me why

you're here now.”

Dragonfly opened her eyes again and peered at him dazedly. “I . . . wanted to find more herbs. But I didn't see anything that looked right. And . . . I tried to hunt but I was too weak. The longer I went without catching anything . . . the weaker I got.”

Nettlesplash hesitated, flicking his tail indecisively. *I don't owe her anything. I have my own kin to look after.* Dragonfly was the one who'd chosen to follow a cruel leader, to join a group of cats who had driven away everyone he loved and stolen his home.

Her eyes were closing again, and alarm flooded him.

“Stay awake!” he yowled, making up his mind. “Can you get up if I help you?” Nettlesplash moved closer to Dragonfly, pressing his side against hers.

Dragonfly's eyes blinked slowly open once more, and she struggled to pull herself onto her feet. “What?” she asked, confused. “Where are we going?”

“I'm taking you back to my den,” Nettlesplash told her. “We're going to help you.”

Mintfur took a delicate bite of pigeon, her whiskers quivering with anticipation. “This is delicious, Dragonfly. Thank you for sharing it with us.”

Palekit clambered over Dragonfly's back, short tail pointing straight up in the air. “You must have run really fast to catch it!” she mewed admiringly.

Dragonfly's green eyes were glowing with pride. “I wouldn't have been able to run so fast if it weren't for you all,” she answered. She looked at Mintfur. “So of course I want to share my catch.”

Fringekit nuzzled into Dragonfly's side, and Dragonfly bent to lick the top of her head. Warmth ran through Nettlesplash at the sight. So much had changed in the short quarter moon since he had decided to help Dragonfly.

He and Mintfur had made a nest for the sick tabby in a bush near theirs, and they'd found tansy for her, as well as a few other herbs they thought they recalled SkyClan's medicine cats using for coughs and fever. Nettlesplash hadn't been sure of any of the herbs, but regular food and rest had helped Dragonfly get better quickly.

And, he thought, so did their companionship. Despite all the cats in Darktail's camp, he thought that Dragonfly had been lonely there. She'd been so awkward at first, so grateful and surprised by any attention Nettlesplash and Mintfur paid her.

Now she and Mintfur were talking amiably about the best hunting spots nearby, while the kits wove their way between and over them both. Dragonfly fit in with their family so well, Nettlesplash thought. Having another adult cat with them—it was almost like having a little bit of SkyClan back.

The kits were growing sleepy, nuzzling against their parents' bellies, and Mintfur and Nettlesplash exchanged glances. Now was the

right time to bring up what they had discussed; Nettlesplash was sure of it.

"Dragonfly," he began, "you're so much stronger than you were. I'm happy you've recovered so quickly."

"Oh." Nettlesplash was surprised to see a sad look on the yellow tabby's face. "Yes, and I'm grateful that you helped me . . . but I'm ready to move on, if that's what you want. You have to look after yourselves."

"No!" Mintfur leaned toward her. "That's not it at all. We want you to stay with us."

Dragonfly blinked in surprise, and Nettlesplash hurriedly spoke up. "We know we can't offer much—three cats and a few kits can't offer the safety of a big group—but we hope that, someday, SkyClan will come back for us. You could be part of our Clan. . . ."

His voice trailed off as we saw the nervous, worried expression in Dragonfly's eyes, and his heart sank.

"I'm so grateful to you both." Dragonfly's mew was strained with emotion. "And I love the kits." She turned to where Palekit lay sleeping beside her, and touched her nose to the top of the kit's head. "But I don't know. I'd like to stay, but we'd be so vulnerable, especially with small kits to take care of." She looked back and forth between Mintfur and Nettlesplash, as if begging them to understand. "I've *never* been safe. Darktail isn't perfect. Not at all. But he's strong, and he can take care of his cats."

Mintfur's ears twitched. "But does he?" she asked sharply. "No one from the gorge has come looking for you. Has Darktail even noticed you're gone? Does he care?"

Dragonfly ducked her head, staring down at her paws. "I'm healthy again now," she mewed. "There's a place in Darktail's group for strong cats. And there are enough of us there that no cat would dare attack us."

Mintfur brushed her tail gently against Dragonfly's. "Darktail's group is stronger than we are," she agreed. "But we care about *you*, even when you can't hunt or fight."

Dragonfly blinked in acknowledgment, her broad face thoughtful, but didn't reply.

"Why don't you sleep on it?" Nettlesplash suggested. "We're all tired. We can talk more in the morning."

"All right." Dragonfly eased herself away from Palekit and Fringekit without waking them and got slowly to her feet. She looked at each of the kits for a long moment and then dipped her head respectfully to Mintfur and Nettlesplash. "I am grateful for how kind you've been," she added. "You'll know my decision in the morning."

Nettlesplash watched the yellow tabby walk slowly away toward her own nest. She was happy with them, he was sure of that. And with Dragonfly's company, he and Mintfur didn't feel so alone. *I hope she decides to stay.*

Early the next morning, a bright ray of sunshine shone through the branches of the den bush, straight into Nettlesplash's eyes. Squirming away from it, he listened to the steady breathing of Mintfur and the kits

and tried to go back to sleep.

But now he was fully awake, and prickles of excitement were running through his pelt. What would Dragonfly decide? If they could be part of a real group once more, something bigger, it would change everything. Maybe Harveymoon and Ebonyclaw would join them again. Maybe they could all find Frecklewish together. They wouldn't just be hiding from Darktail and hoping that SkyClan would one day return.

He couldn't stay in the den any longer. If Dragonfly was still sleeping, he would go for a hunt to calm the restlessness running through him. But first he would check to see if she was awake.

Carefully, he shifted Gravelkit away from his side. Then tan kit mumbled irritably but cuddled closer to Mintfur without waking. Nettlesplash slid beneath the thorny branches of their bush and stretched in the early-morning sunshine outside, shaking dust from his pelt.

Dragonfly's nest was silent. He couldn't see any movement at all from outside, nor catch even a glimpse of yellow fur. As he came up to the bush, he sniffed the air and found that her scent was already stale.

By the time he looked inside the nest, Nettlesplash had already had a heavy feeling of dread in his stomach.

Dragonfly had made her choice. Her nest was empty.

## Chapter 2

*"I can't anymore, kits," Nettlesplash groaned, flopping down at the foot of a tree. "You've worn me out."*

"More! Nettlesplash, swing me!" Nectarkit demanded piercingly. Nettlesplash shut his eyes, pretending not to hear.

He'd been the one to invent the game, swinging each kit high in the air by the scruff of the neck as they squealed in terrified delight. Now his jaw ached and he felt exhausted, while all four kits were still full of energy. "Give me a few moments, kits. Maybe Mintfur will be back soon with a fat vole for you to eat."

"I love vole," Palekit yowled.

"I'd rather have mouse," Gravelkit objected.

"I liked the pigeons Dragonfly used to bring us," Fringe-kit mewed softly.

Nettlesplash sighed. It had been half a moon since Dragonfly left, and the kits still talked about her. Was it good for them to grow up with just their parents around? In SkyClan, they'd shared the nursery with Sagenose and Birdwing's older kits, and by now his own sister Plumwillow's kits would have been born, giving them younger kits to boss and teach. His own kithood had been spent in a healthy, growing Clan, and he had always felt safe with so many Clanmates around.

"Catch Nettlesplash's tail!" Nectarkit yowled, and Nettlesplash felt sharp tiny claws swiping at his tail. *And in SkyClan, there were always Clanmates to help with the kits,* he thought, suppressing a groan.

It would have been a big help if Dragonfly had decided to stay. But more than that, he thought she would have been happier with them. He

hadn't gone back to the gorge since she'd left—he'd heard from a passing loner that more and more cats were joining Darktail's group. It wasn't safe to go near them.

Nettlesplash pricked up his ears, raising his head. He could hear bounding paws. Suddenly a rabbit shot into the clearing, its eyes wide with panic. The kits squealed with fear and excitement, and Palekit let out a yowl. Startled at the sound, the rabbit changed direction, dashing away.

*Something was chasing that rabbit,* Nettlesplash realized.

He got to his paws. "Quick, kits. Hide!" He could hear the sound of running paws. The kits dashed beneath a bush without hesitation.

Moments later, Dragonfly burst through the brush, Darktail on her heels, and stopped in surprise. Nettlesplash opened his mouth to mew her name and then caught sight of the panicked look in the tabby's eyes and closed his mouth again. Darktail couldn't know that they knew each other—that Dragonfly had known Nettlesplash was here and hadn't told Darktail.

Dragonfly looked healthy, though. Her long fur was glossy, and her ribs no longer showed through her pelt. And she must have won Darktail's favor if they were hunting together.

The big white tom sauntered up to Nettlesplash, looking down at him disdainfully. "Nettlesplash," he hissed. "I thought I'd driven all you flea-bitten SkyClan cats away. Didn't go far, did you?" He glanced around the clearing as if looking for evidence of the rest of the Clan.

"It's just me," Nettlesplash mewed, hearing his own voice waver. Were the kits properly hidden? His mouth was dry with panic. "I . . . lost Mintfur and our kits after the battle," he went on, thinking fast. "When all the others left, I couldn't bear to leave the last place . . ." He let his mew crack and trail off.

His heart was pounding against the walls of his chest. What if Darktail didn't believe him? What if he searched the clearing? *What if he finds the kits?*

He chanced a look up. Dragonfly's green eyes were wide with fear. But Darktail's were half-lidded, thoughtful. Did the rogue leader believe him?

"Well," Darktail said, stepping closer. Nettlesplash could smell the sour scent of the rogue camp on his fur. "You lost us that nice fat rabbit by yowling like the coward you are. I think you owe us something."

"I do?" Nettlesplash tried to hold Darktail's gaze, willing him not to look around again. He didn't remember the kits ever being so quiet before, not while they were awake. What if they didn't recognize how much danger they were in?

"Yes, you do," Darktail purred with amusement. "I think you owe us your next three catches. You can deliver them to the gorge today. If we don't have three delicious pieces of prey from you by nightfall, we will have to hunt you down." He pulled back his teeth, showing his sharp fangs, and Nettlesplash flinched.

Three catches before nightfall? He and Mintfur couldn't hunt together—they couldn't leave the kits alone. If they had to hunt for Darktail, the kits would go hungry today.

Still, it was better to agree than to have Darktail hunting *them*. Nettlesplash opened his mouth to speak.

But before he could make a sound, Dragonfly broke in, "Really, Darktail?" she asked smoothly. "Just look at him." Her eyes met Nettlesplash's with a cool, unfriendly gaze.

Nettlesplash's ears twitched nervously, as he wondered what the tabby was planning. Was she going to help him? Or was she going to prove her loyalty to Darktail? He thought he knew Dragonfly, but Darktail had also seemed like a good cat when he first joined SkyClan, and look what had happened. Any cat, Nettlesplash, now realized, could turn out to be very different than they first seemed. *What if she tells him I'm lying about being alone here?* he wondered, feeling sick.

"He's so scrawny," Dragonfly went on, padding forward to look Nettlesplash over disdainfully. "Any catch he can make won't be worth the effort of chewing. He was startled by a rabbit!"

Nettlesplash's heart began to lighten. *She hasn't said anything about Mintfur, or the kits.* Darktail's whiskers twitched with amusement as Dragonfly went on. "He's pathetic," she spat. "Leave him to his lonely life. Mate gone, kits gone, Clan gone. He won't last much longer."

"Not worth the trouble, you think?" Darktail seemed pleased with the cruelty of Dragonfly's words, and Nettlesplash hung his head, trying to look devastated. The big white tom came closer still, staring at him. "Maybe you're right," he growled at last. His paw nudged Nettlesplash's leg, his claws extended just enough to prick the skin. "I don't want to see you again," he added softly, and turned away. "Forget what I said before," he called over his shoulder. "For a cat as pitiful as you, being the last survivor of SkyClan is punishment enough."

"Yes, Darktail," Nettlesplash mewed meekly, trying to sound grateful and pitiful as the other cats left the clearing. Inside, he was yowling with joy. Darktail was leaving without spotting the kits! His family was safe!

Dragonfly glanced back over her shoulder as she left, side by side with Darktail. Nettlesplash caught her eye and nodded, hoping she'd know how grateful he was. Her green gaze held his as she nodded back, one tiny, almost imperceptible nod.

Nettlesplash thought he caught a glimmer of regret in that gaze. Dragonfly had made her choice, and he hoped she would be happy. She had to know how dangerous life in the gorge would be if she fell out of favor with Darktail.

*Be safe,* he thought.

By the time Mintfur returned, Nettlesplash had made up his mind. He'd buried the bones of their last meal and rubbed out the paw prints the kits had left in the mud at the edges of the clearing. There'd be as little trace of them here as he could manage.

He'd had all four kits roll in a patch of wild onions to disguise their scent, and he'd done the same for himself, wrinkling his nose at the smell.

When she saw him, Mintfur dropped the mice she carried at the

edge of the clearing. "What's wrong?" she asked, her blue eyes wide with fear.

"Darktail found the camp," he told her, and hurried to add, "But he only saw me. He doesn't know about the kits. And he doesn't know about you, either. He believes I'm the only SkyClan cat left. Dragonfly was with him; she convinced him to leave me alone."

"Oh, I'm glad Dragonfly's okay! But you're right, we'd better leave," she mewed. "We'll make a new camp, farther along the side of the gorge."

Nettlesplash sighed with relief. He had been half afraid Mintfur would want to leave the gorge behind and find new territory. But they couldn't. This was the only place SkyClan would know to look for them. He brushed his tail affectionately along her gray tabby fur. He had been foolish to worry at all. She was waiting for their Clan's return, just like he was.

"Come on, kits," he called. "We'll eat the mice Mintfur caught for us, and then we'll look for a new nest."

As he nudged the kits toward the prey, Nettlesplash thought again of SkyClan. *I hope they come soon*, he thought. *I don't know how long we can make it on our own, with Darktail so close.*

"I could eat a whole mouse by myself!" Palekit yowled.

"Well, you're not allowed to," Gravelkit snapped back at her. "Mintfur, tell her she has to share!"

Mintfur plopped a fat mouse in front of them and another in front of Nectarkit and FringeKit. "Of course you have to share," she mewed. "We're Clan cats, and that's what we do."

The tightness Nettlesplash had carried in his chest since Darktail stepped into the clearing began to loosen.

*We're Clan cats*, he thought. *We're together, and we're safe for now — thanks to Dragonfly. And someday SkyClan will come back for us.*

*We will survive.*