

WARRIORS

A Vision of Shadows
River of Fire
Exclusive Bonus Scene

Chapter 1

Willowshine let out a sigh and arched her back in a good long stretch, trying to work the weariness out of her muscles. It felt like moons that she had been crouched in the medicine-cat den, sorting her dwindling store of herbs. And however often she counted the stems of watermint, she couldn't make herself believe there were enough.

Softpaw and Havenpelt ought to have another dose now, but I think I'll have to delay it until sunhigh.

With another tired sigh, Willowshine turned away from her herb store and padded to the mouth of the den she shared with Mothwing beneath the overhanging bank of the stream. Bright sunlight shone through the branches of the thorn tree that shaded the den, and glittered on the surface of the water. The sound of the stream was a soothing murmur, and the air was warm with the scents of prey and new growth. But Willowshine couldn't share in the joy of newleaf. Her heart was dark.

Underneath the branches of the thorn tree, Softpaw and Havenpelt were curled up in mossy nests. Havenpelt was sleeping quietly, her tail wrapped over her nose, but Softpaw kept shifting, striking out with her pale gray paws as if she was having a nightmare. Every few heartbeats she let out a moan of pain.

Willowshine dug her claws into the ground, frustrated that there was nothing more she could do to help her Clanmates. The sickness had struck the Clan out of nowhere: It had begun with bellyache, followed by such severe vomiting that the sick cats couldn't keep food or water down. Watermint soon set cats on their paws again, but with WindClan and ThunderClan suffering too, the supplies of the precious herb were fast running out.

And that's not the only thing I have to worry about, Willowshine thought. Mistystar still insists on keeping our borders closed. How do you tell your Clan leader you think she has bees in her brain?

Willowshine had understood why Mistystar had withdrawn RiverClan at first, after the damage done by Darktail and his Kin. But she didn't understand why their leader still kept their Clan isolated, now that Darktail was dead and his Kin scattered. Willowshine could feel tensions rising in the camp.

Some of us support Mistystar, but I know I'm not alone in missing the other Clans. It can't be good for RiverClan to be so inward-looking.

A pang of loss pierced Willowshine's heart as she thought of her friends, the other medicine cats. She had worked so closely with them

for so many seasons, and now she was cut off from them. A few moons ago she had crept out of RiverClan territory to meet Alderheart and tell him about her vision of the cat with six toes, but that mission had only made her realize more deeply how much she had lost.

“Oh, Mistystar,” Willowshine murmured aloud, “please let us take our place among the Clans again.”

She had hardly finished speaking when her vision blurred, as if a sudden mist had fallen over the sunlit scene in front of her. The sky had grown dark, but it was a darkness without stars, and the swirling current had become a thick, ominous red, as if the stream was running with blood.

Willowshine tensed, her eyes wide and her whiskers twitching. “StarClan, what are you trying to show me?” she whispered.

A rolling boom of thunder drowned out her words, echoing through the RiverClan camp. The dark sky was suddenly transformed as flame burst out and covered it as far as Willowshine could see.

Fear shook Willowshine so that she quivered like an aspen tree in a gale, but she stood fast, forcing herself to stay alert and take in every scrap of the vision StarClan was sending her.

As she gazed up at the blazing sky, she saw shapes beginning to form within the fire. Flames roared through shrubs and thickets; trees burned, giving off a whirling shower of sparks. A tall birch creaked and tilted, then fell with a crash. Shapes scattered away from it, black against scarlet, and Willowshine recognized the figures of fleeing cats.

Oh, StarClan, no! This is our camp. . . . Fire is destroying our camp!

Horror kept Willowshine's paws fixed on the ground and she felt as if every drop of her blood had turned to ice. She had herself keep watching until the flames died away, leaving nothing but piles of smoldering debris.

“Hey, Willowshine!”

A cat's voice, meowing loudly from the top of the bank, banished the vision; sunlight came filtering back, and the roaring and crackling of the fire subsided, replaced by the twittering of birds in the branches and the whimpering of Softpaw in her nest under the thorn tree.

Startled, Willowshine blinked and turned to see who was calling her. Jayclaw leaped down at her side, and Willowshine noticed with alarm that several scratches were scored along his flank, blood trickling into his gray pelt.

“What happened?” Willowshine asked, desperately trying to seem calm and efficient while the horror of her vision still echoed in her mind. “Did you meet a fox? A badger?”

Jayclaw ducked his head, scuffling his front paws in the pebbles at the edge of the stream. His voice was embarrassed as he replied. “Uh . . . no. It was Owlnoze.”

“Owlnoze? You had a fight with Owlnoze?”

Jayclaw still didn't look at her. “Well, we had a sort of . . . discussion,” he admitted. “Owlnoze walked right over my nest in the warrior's den, and scattered the moss and bracken everywhere. Just after

I'd gotten it how I like it!"

"You fought with Ownose over a *nest*?" Willowshine rolled her eyes. "What are you, kits?"

"I'm sorry, Willowshine." Jayclaw met her gaze at last. "I know it was stupid. Can I have some herbs for my scratches, please?"

Willowshine let out a snort. "You think Mothwing and I go out collecting herbs so you can waste them fighting your Clanmates?" she asked. "All right. Sit down there and lick those scratches clean while I fetch some marigold."

On her way to fetch the herbs, Willowshine wondered what could have possessed Jayclaw and Ownose to get into a fight over something so trivial. They were both reasonable cats, so what was suddenly making them so aggressive?

It's not just those two, she thought sadly. We're all starting to feel as if we have ants in our pelt. And I bet I know why.

Even though a Clan always stayed on its own territory, living behind closed borders was different. There was no friendly gossip with cats from other Clans on border patrol. No Gatherings. No half-moon meetings for the medicine cats. For RiverClan now, it was as though the other Clans didn't exist.

The cats of RiverClan had always thought of themselves as peace-loving, the last cats to get into unnecessary skirmishes. But now that they had no contact with the other Clans, all that was starting to fall apart.

We're turning on one another.

By the time Willowshine returned from her den with leaves in her jaws, Heronwing had cleaned up his scratches. The bleeding had almost stopped, and Willowshine judged that she didn't need to path the wounds with cobweb. Swiftly she chewed up the marigold leaves and trickled the juice into the gashes.

"Ow! That stings!" Heronwing exclaimed.

"Serves you right for being so mouse-brained," Willowshine retorted. "Maybe you'll think next time before you start trouble with a Clanmate."

"It was Ownose who—" Heronwing began to protest, then clamped his jaws tight shut as he caught Willowshine's irritated gaze. "It won't happen again," he promised.

"It had better not."

As Willowshine spoke, movement at the top of the bank made her glance up to see Mothwing leap gracefully down, a bundle of leaves in her jaws. The medicine cat acknowledged Willowshine with a nod, then disappeared into their den without speaking.

At least Mothwing has found some herbs, Willowshine thought, though the bunch had looked worryingly small. I hope there's watermint.

"Okay, you're done," she meowed briskly to Heronwing. "Come tomorrow to let me check those scratches. And *don't* get into any more fights."

"I won't. I'm really sorry. Thanks, Willowshine." Heronwing

sprang back up the bank and disappeared, leaving Willowshine to clean up the scraps of marigold. As she was finishing the task, Mothwing emerged from the den.

Willowshine turned to her swiftly. "Did you find watermint?"

Mothwing shook her head. "Tansy and marigold. But not a sprig of watermint. This is getting serious."

Willowshine murmured agreement. There wasn't much more to say. Usually, in an emergency like this, a medicine cat could go to the other Clans and see if they were willing to share supplies, but with the RiverClan borders closed, that wasn't possible.

There was her vision, too. Though Willowshine had been forced to push the fearful sight to the back of her mind while she took care of Heronwing, anxiety clawed at her heart when she remembered the burning camp. She wished she could discuss what she had seen with Mothwing, but Havenpelt was stirring in her nest, and Curlfeather was padding along the stream toward them from the direction of the lake.

I'll have to wait until I can talk to Mothwing alone.

Instead Willowshine told her fellow medicine cat about the fight between Heronwing and Ownose, and how she had treated Heronwing's scratches with marigold.

"As if we haven't got enough trouble!" Mothwing commented with a whisk of her golden tabby tail.

"I suppose I ought to go and look for Ownose," Willowshine mewed. "He—"

She broke off as Curlfeather, who had almost reached the stretch of pebbly ground in front of the medicine-cat den, suddenly halted, turned, and vomited neatly beside the stream.

"Oh, StarClan, not another one!" Willowshine exclaimed.

Curlfeather lapped from the stream, then padded up to the two medicine cats, her head and tail drooping. The sour reek of vomit came from her pale brown pelt.

"I'm sorry," she mewed miserably. "I tried to ignore the bellyache, but now I just can't stop vomiting. Reedwhisker told me to leave the hunting patrol and come to see you."

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Mothwing told her reassuringly, resting her tail-tip for a moment on Curlfeather's shoulder. "You can't help being sick. Let's make you a nest over there beside Havenpelt. Willowshine, fetch her some watermint."

Willowshine slipped into the den and returned with a stem of watermint, worried all over again when she looked at their dwindling supply. Curlfeather let out a moan of pain as she settled into the nest Mothwing had made for her.

"I was going to check on Ownose," Willowshine meowed while Curlfeather was chewing up the leaves. "But I think I'd better go and look for more watermint. There's so little left."

Mothwing nodded. "You do that. I'll see to Ownose."

Willowshine left the camp and headed across the territory to the

border with WindClan. Dark clouds were massing above the moor, blotting out the early morning sunlight. A chilly breeze sprang up; Willowshine shivered as its icy claws penetrated her fur, knowing she would have to hurry if she was to get back to camp before the storm broke.

Inwardly she felt colder still. *Storms in this season just aren't natural.*

She knew that her fellow medicine cats believed that RiverClan was partly responsible for the worsening weather, because of the prophecy: *The dark sky must not herald a storm.*

The thought of the prophecy brought Willowshine's earlier vision back to her mind, and she shivered as she remembered the roaring flames that devoured the RiverClan camp.

What does it mean? Is an actual fire coming—or is StarClan trying to tell us something else?

As Willowshine approached the border, her hopes of finding more watermint died. Not many days before, there had been plentiful clumps of the vital herb, but now when she looked for the spiky stems with their large leaves, she couldn't spot a single plant, not even on the WindClan side of the stream.

We must have used it all, and there hasn't been time for it to grow back. Sighing, she struggled to accept that with sickness raging through WindClan and ThunderClan as well, watermint was going to be scarce for a while.

Back in the RiverClan camp, Willowshine found Mothwing crouched outside their den, her gaze fixed on the sleeping cats under the thorn tree. She looked up hopefully as Willowshine leaped down to join her, then let her whiskers droop in disappointment as she saw that Willowshine wasn't carrying anything.

"No luck, then?" she mewed.

Willowshine shook her head. Settling down beside Mothwing, she remembered yet again her vision of scarlet flames. "Mothwing, I have to tell you what I saw this morning. . . ."

Mothwing listened attentively, her amber gaze fixed on Willowshine's face, she shook her head, blinking in confusion.

"Couldn't it have been just a bad dream?" she asked. "You know how tired you were."

Willowshine forced herself to keep her claws sheathed. *How I miss talking to the other medicine cats, who believe in StarClan.* "I do know the difference," she snapped. "This felt far too important to be a dream. Mothwing," she added, "after the Great Battle, how can you go on saying that StarClan doesn't exist?"

Mothwing shifted uncomfortably, letting out a long sigh. "I admit *something* happened there," she replied. "But if StarClan does exist, I still don't believe in their power, or that they know what's best for us. Why do these terrible things happen, if StarClan is on our side?"

Willowshine could understand that Mothwing had a point. StarClan hadn't intervened when all the Clans were being devastated by Darktail and his Kin. *There was such dreadful suffering. . . .*

"I'm not sure they work like that," she began slowly, feeling her way with every word as if she were padding down a dark tunnel. "They warn us about what will happen, but it's our responsibility to act."

And that means I have to do something to avoid what I saw in my vision. But how?

"I'm really worried about the watermint supply," she meowed, returning to the problem of the sick cats. "There's no more on our territory, as far as I can tell, and we can't very well ask other Clans to help us when our borders are closed."

"And we chased off WindClan and ThunderClan the other day," Mothwing agreed, her amber eyes clouded with anxiety.

"Surely Mistystar will open the borders soon," Willowshine responded.

The yowl of a cat in pain almost drowned out Willowshine's last few words. A cat half leaped, half fell from the overhanging bank above the medicine cats' heads and landed on the ground a tail-length away from the stream.

"Mossbelt!" Willowshine exclaimed, springing to her paws.

Her mother lay on her side, her legs splayed out and her chest heaving. Her tortoiseshell pelt was sticky with vomit, her fur standing up in clumps, and an acrid reek rose from her like morning mist.

"Oh, StarClan!" Willowshine whispered. "This just gets worse and worse!"

Chapter 2

Willowshine stood at the back of the medicine-cat den, staring at the last stem of watermint. Its leaves were already starting to wither.

Havenpelt had recovered enough to the warriors' den. But Softpaw and Curlfeather were still resting in their nests under the thorn tree, along with Mossbelt, who was even weaker than she had been when she'd arrived the day before. She desperately needed more watermint, but this last limp stem was all they had. And the sickness was still raging through the camp.

What if another cat has it even worse than Mossbelt? Willowshine asked herself. *Then we would have nothing.*

Picking the last stem up in her jaws, Willowshine padded out of the den and joined Mothwing, who was standing beside the stream, gazing down into the water.

"Should I give this to Mossbelt?" Willowshine asked. "It's the last, but she really needs it."

Mothwing glanced up at Willowshine and opened her jaws to speak, then clearly changed her mind and turned away to stare down at the swirling current.

"What?" Willowshine asked.

Mothwing shook her head helplessly. "I feel terrible even having this thought," she meowed. "But maybe we shouldn't give the watermint to a cat as frail as Mossbelt. What if we do, and she still doesn't get

better?"

Willowshine stared at her, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. "How can you say that to me?" she burst out. "Mossbelt is my *mother!*"

"I know. I'm sorry." Mothwing's amber eyes were full of sorrow. "I only want to do what is best for our Clan."

Seeing her distress, Willowshine felt her anger die. "I hate talking like this," she meowed "We're medicine cats. It's our job to help out sick Clanmates, not to argue about which of them deserves the treatment more."

Mothwing nodded slowly. "You're right. There's only one thing we can do now: talk to Mistystar. Give Mossbelt the watermint, and then we'll go. Perhaps the two of us can make her see sense."

Mistystar sat outside her den, her blue-gray fur fluffed up against the unseasonable chill, as storm clouds still lowered over the RiverClan camp. She listened without commenting as Mothwing and Willowshine told her about the shortage of herbs, especially their desperate need of watermint.

"What are you asking me?" she demanded when they had finished. "You want me to allow you to look for herbs on other territories? As medicine cats, you could go and ask permission from the other Clan leaders."

"Yes, but . . ." Willowshine shifted her paws uncomfortably. "We didn't exactly welcome WindClan and ThunderClan when they came looking for herbs on our border. How do you think the other Clans will react if we show up now, asking to share their supplies?"

"Mistystar," Mothwing began gently, "don't you think it might be time to reopen our borders? It would be a gesture of goodwill that might encourage the other Clans to help us. Besides," she added when the Clan leader didn't respond, "things are getting a little . . . *tense* in camp. Cats are beginning to lose patience with one another. And Willowshine thinks she's had a vision."

Mistystar's ears pricked at the medicine cat's last words, and she turned to gaze at Willowshine. "A vision? Tell me about it."

Startled at the sudden change of subject, Willowshine described how she had seen the RiverClan camp in flames, her Clanmates fleeing as their home was reduced to ash and smoking debris. Before she had finished speaking, she could tell that Mistystar wasn't convinced.

"I understand your concern," the Clan leader began, "but you might just have been dreaming. The prophecy doesn't mention fire, only a storm. And I'm not ready to reopen the borders," she added, turning back to Mothwing. "It's too risky—remember what happened with Darktail."

"But Darktail is dead!" Willowshine protested.

Mistystar ignored her protest. "I understand your need," she told Mothwing, "but I think the sickness will pass. RiverClan cats have had it before; it isn't dangerous."

"It isn't dangerous to a *healthy* cat," Willowshine meowed. "But Mossbelt is an elder."

At her words Mistystar turned toward her, blinking sympathetically. "She's your mother, and I understand that you're worried about her. But Mossbelt has more power in her than you realize."

Once that were true, Willowshine thought, remembering how Mossbelt had nursed her when she was a kit, letting her snuggle into her warm tortoiseshell pelt. *But now . . . I don't know.*

But it was clear there was no point in arguing anymore with their Clan leader. With a respectful dip of her head she took a pace back, and followed Mothwing as her fellow medicine cat led the way back to their den. As they passed the other dens, Willowshine imagined flames licking at them, leaping into the sky in a flurry of sparks.

I hope Mothwing and Mistystar are right, she thought. *I hope it was just a dream.*

Rain lashed down on the RiverClan camp, driven across it by the wind in a never-ending stream. Thunder rolled across the sky, and every few heartbeats the dark night was broken by lightning that crackled down like massive, dazzling claws. All the cats had retreated to their nests. Mothwing and Willowshine had brought the three sick cats inside the medicine-cat den; there was hardly space for the five of them, but at least they were dry and warm.

Two days had passed since the medicine cats had tried to persuade Mistystar to open the borders. In that time, Mossbelt had grown weaker still, and now there was no watermint left to give her, and no hope of finding more.

"I'm so sorry," Willowshine murmured into her mother's ears. "If Mistystar would only open the borders, we might be able to get herbs from other Clans, but—"

"Mistystar is our leader," Mossbelt interrupted, her voice hoarse but emphatic. "She knows best."

Willowshine clamped her jaws shut, knowing that she couldn't call her own mother and a Clan elder a stupid furball. "This time, Mistystar is wrong," she snapped after a moment. As soon as she had spoken, she was sorry for her sharp tone.

The tension in camp is really bad, she reflected. *It's even starting to affect medicine cats.*

"We'll find a way," she promised, giving her mother's ears a comforting lick. "We have to."

Wriggling between Softpaw and Curlfeather, Willowshine crept up to Mothwing, who was crouching at the mouth of the den, gazing out at the rain and the swollen stream.

"Mothwing, I've had enough of this," Willowshine meowed. "I'm going to talk to Mistystar again."

Mothwing looked up, startled. "She won't—"

Willowshine missed the rest of whatever Mothwing wanted to

say as she slipped out of the den, leaped up to the top of the bank, and raced across the camp. Rain crashed down upon her with an icy shock, soaking her pelt and plastering it to her sides in a couple of heartbeats.

Outside the bramble thicket where Mistystar had her den, Willowshine halted. "Mistystar!" she called out. "May I come in?"

Mistystar's voice came back. "Come."

Willowshine brushed through the entrance tunnel until she stood in front of her Clan leader, who was sitting in her nest of moss and bracken. Willowshine longed to shake the water out of her wet pelt, but she couldn't risk showering Mistystar with the chilly droplets.

"Well, what is it?" Mistystar asked.

"Mistystar, we have to do something about the herb supply," Willowshine meowed. "We've run out of watermint now, and Mossbelt is getting weaker every day. You have to open the borders."

Her Clan leader's eyes were like chips of blue ice. "No cat tells a Clan leader what to do," she responded. "And I've already told you that I'm not ready to join with the other Clans again."

"But things are getting really bad," Willowshine insisted. "We must—"

"Enough!" Mistystar rose and lashed her tail. "Go back to your duties, Willowshine. This isn't your decision to make."

Biting back another furious protest, Willowshine turned and left the den. Mistystar's brusque refusal had shocked her. *I never thought out Clan leader was like that*, she considered as she dashed back through the rain. *How loyal can I be to her if she doesn't care?*

Another claw of lightning flashed over the camp, and in the same heartbeat an idea came into Willowshine's mind.

She told me to go back to my duties, and my duty is to care for sick cats—whatever it takes.

When she reached the medicine cats' den, she crawled back beneath the overhang to Mothwing's side. "Mistystar wouldn't listen," she whispered. "But we have to do something."

"What do you suggest?" Mothwing asked.

"We know there's watermint by the stream that divides WindClan from ThunderClan," Willowshine began. "I want to go there and get some."

Mothwing's amber eyes stretched wide with amazement. "They used up that supply," she responded. "That's why they came here."

"But there's been time for it to grow back," Willowshine pointed out. "At any rate, it's worth a try."

"Without permission?" Mothwing asked. "We could be in trouble from ThunderClan and WindClan—not to mention our own leader."

Willowshine shrugged. "So? I don't care, if we can save our Clanmates."

Mothwing was silent for a moment, blinking thoughtfully. "Okay," she meowed at last. "But I think we should both go. That way it's clearer how bad the emergency is."

"No, that won't work," Willowshine responded with a decisive shake of her head. "If anything happened—if the other Clans stopped us

from coming back—RiverClan could be left without a medicine cat. I must go alone.”

Mothwing's forepaws scuffed in the debris at the edge of the den. “I don't like it, Willowshine,” she mewed. “The WindClan or ThunderClan warriors might attack you.”

Willowshine's pads itched with impatience. She felt as if time was running out for Mossbelt with every heartbeat. “Warriors don't attack medicine cats. And even if they did, it's worth the risk,” she insisted. “Saving cats is why I became a medicine cat, and now I have to do this to save Mossbelt. Besides,” she added, “with any luck the storm will keep cats in their dens.”

Mothwing let out a long sigh. “Okay, Willowshine,” she murmured. “But be careful.”

Willowshine nodded and left the den, intending to follow the stream as far as the lake, then head along the shore through WindClan territory. But before she had taken more than a couple of paw steps, the sky seemed to crack open with the brightest bolt of lightning yet, dazzling her and leaving her almost blind. She stood at the water's edge while thunder crashed over her head.

As the noise of the thunder faded, another ominous sound split the night: the yowling of terrified cats. Her sigh clearing, Willowshine looked up to see an orange glow in the sky above the camp. She tasted the air and picked up the smell of burning.

My vision!

Willowshine leaped to the top of the bank and looked out across the camp. The lightning had struck a tall birch tree, wrapping its branches in flame. Willowshine was in time to see it tilt, then fall, crashing down on the bramble thicket that housed the warrior's den. Instantly the brambles began crackling with flames, the sparks whirling up just as Willowshine had seen. A wave of heat rolled over her. Now, when they needed rain, it had faded to a thin drizzle, and fire was already leaping to the other dens until the whole camp was ablaze.

Cats were fleeing into the open, letting out screeches of terror as they tried to avoid the flames. Fire lit up their panic-stricken faces, their eyes staring and their fur bristling. Willowshine spotted Mallownose rolling on his back, trying to put out the sparks in his fur. Shimmerpelt was limping on three legs, with one paw held clear of the ground.

Outside of her den, Mistystar stood firm, her head thrown back as she yowled, “Out! Every cat out! Cross the streams!”

Willowshine stayed motionless for a few heartbeats, watching her Clan scatter. Then she gave her pelt a shake. *This is no time to stand here like a frozen rabbit!*

Glancing down toward the medicine-cat den, she spotted Mothwing pushing the three sick cats into the open. Willowshine bunched her muscles to jump down and help them, but before she could, she spotted movement along the lakeshore. From her vantage point at the top of the bank she could make out several cats racing alongside the lake through WindClan territory, heading for the border with RiverClan. Even at that distance she could recognize the powerful figure of

Bramblestar in the lead.

Oh, thank StarClan! Relief shook Willowshine from ears to tail-tip. The other Clans are coming to help us!

At the same moment she felt some cat give her shoulder a shove, and turned to see Mistystar.

“Move!” her Clan leader snapped. “The fire's spreading.”

“Look!” Willowshine exclaimed, pointing with her tail toward the cats who were still pelting along the shore.

Mistystar suddenly tense. She made no reply to Willowshine; her gaze was fixed on the approaching rescuers. Looking into her eyes, Willowshine could see regret and relief mingled there, and a growing warmth as Mistystar realized that the other Clans were still willing to help.

A heartbeat later, Mistystar turned, yowling orders to her Clanmates. Willowshine jumped down to join Mothwing and the sick cats. Reedwhisker and a couple of other warriors were already racing up to help them.

This is the turning point, Willowshine reflected. Her vision had become reality, but it hadn't been a warning of disaster. Instead, through the danger and destruction, Willowshine understood that it was all for the best. The fire, and the courage and generosity of the approaching cats, would force RiverClan back into the community of the other Clans.

Where we belong.