

WARRIORS

A Vision of Shadows
The Apprentice's Quest
Exclusive Bonus Scene

Chapter 1

Squirrelflight blinked awake and raised her head to look out from the den she shared with Bramblestar. Icy claws of cold pierced through the moss and bracken of her nest, digging deep into her fur. The frosty light filtering through the interwoven branches above her head showed her that all the nests in the warriors' den were empty.

I'm the Clan deputy! she thought with a jolt of alarm. I should have been the first one awake. I should be organizing the patrols!

She struggled for a moment to rise to her paws, then realized that the patrols were probably long gone. With a sigh that was half a groan she flopped back into her nest. Leafpool and Jayfeather had been urging her to move to the nursery, but she had refused—she was determined to fulfill her duties as deputy until she absolutely couldn't.

Squirrelflight had slept since before moonhigh the night before, and yet she still felt exhausted. Her legs and her tail seemed as heavy as thick oak branches.

My back hurts and my belly hurts—in fact it feels like every hair on my pelt is hurting! I could sleep forever if only I weren't so hungry!

When Squirrelflight had first found out that she was expecting kits, joy and excitement had flooded through her like a sparkling stream, swamping her slight feelings of nervousness. That had been at the beginning of leaf-bare, with the first sprinkling of snowflakes on the ground.

But now snow lay thick on the forest ground, trampled to a dirty slush inside the stone hollow by the paws of many cats. The leaves had fallen from the trees, laying ThunderClan's territory open to the slanting rays of a pale sun. And Squirrelflight's nervousness had grown and grown until it felt like a huge paw pinning her to the ground. Under its weight, it took a massive effort to move, or even breathe.

Summoning her strength, Squirrelflight staggered upright. She arched her back in a long stretch, catching her breath with a hiss as renewed pain stabbed through her. With a quick shake of her pelt she thrust her way through the branches of the den. Hard crystals of ice stung her pads as she emerged into the open.

Outside in the camp her Clanmates were milling around, their breaths puffs of white in the frosty air. Heading toward the fresh-kill pile, Squirrelflight spotted Cherryfall waving her tail, beckoning her over to where she was sharing a small vole with Berrynose and Snowbush.

"We're just back from hunting, and we saved you a mouse," Cherryfall meowed as Squirrelflight padded up to her.

Berrynose pushed the mouse over to her. "Eat up," he invited.

Even though the mouse was a scrawny-looking one, Squirrelflight realized with a pang of guilt that it was probably the best piece of prey the hunting patrol had caught that morning. She knew how scarce prey was in the middle of leaf-bare, especially when the ground was covered in snow.

I don't think it's right for me to take it all for myself, Squirrelflight thought. Especially when I haven't been hunting. The whole Clan must be hungry, and I don't want to take more than my share.

But at the sight of the mouse Squirrelflight felt her belly start grumbling and water flood her jaws in anticipation of sinking her teeth into fresh-kill. Oh, great StarClan, I'm starving!

As if the constant pain weren't bad enough, Squirrelflight couldn't believe how hungry expecting kits made her. No matter how much she ate, her belly was always bawling for more. And however long she slept, she was always tired.

But worse than all that—disturbing her sleep sometimes, in spite of her exhaustion—was her anxiety when she wondered what kind of a mother she would be. At first she had felt confident: After all, she had raised her sister Leafpool's kits from before their eyes had opened. But lately her confidence had shrunk to almost nothing, like a puddle under the hot sun of greenleaf.

Lionblaze, Hollyleaf, and Jayfeather had believed they were Squirrelflight's own kits, and when they'd discovered the truth, it had taken them a long time to forgive her.

Am I a good mother? Can I be? Squirrelflight asked herself. *I was able to lie to Lionblaze, Hollyleaf, and Jayfeather for so long, and they resented me for it so much. Was I ever a good mother to them?*

"Hey!" Snowbush's voice broke into Squirrelflight's thoughts. "That mouse isn't going to leap into your mouth you know."

Squirrelflight realized that she was still staring at the mouse Berrynose had put in front of her. "Uh . . . sorry," she muttered. "But I shouldn't eat more than my fair share of the prey. I don't need all of this."

"Yes, you do!" Cherryfall flicked Squirrelflight's shoulder with the tip of her tail. "Every cat has been telling you that for nearly a moon! Don't forget you're eating for your kits, too."

"No, I'm fine," Squirrelflight insisted. "I can manage."

"That's just mouse-brained," Berrynose told her. "If you—"

"Who are you calling mouse-brained?" Squirrelflight snapped, sudden annoyance overwhelming her.

Cherryfall brushed her muzzle against Squirrelflight's flank, a comforting gesture that somehow annoyed Squirrelflight even more.

"Take it easy," Cherryfall mewed. "Berrynose doesn't mean anything by it."

"Then he should know when to keep his jaws shut!" Squirrelflight retorted.

Berrynose rolled his eyes, "She-cats!"

Squirrelflight slid out her claws, but before she could move, Snowbush slipped between her and Berrynose.

"Squirrelflight, it's okay," he meowed. "We know it's tough for

you right now.”

“Yes, we only want what's best for you and your kits,” Cherryfall agreed. “Eat the mouse, please.”

Squirrelflight suddenly felt ashamed of herself. *I don't know what's gotten into me lately.* This wasn't the first time she had lost her temper with one of her Clanmates. They could be having a perfectly ordinary discussion, and then, for no reason at all, she'd find her feelings spiraling out of control.

I don't really want to claw Berrynose's ears off. Even if he is an annoying furball.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “Thanks for the mouse.”

But as she crouched in front of the prey, bent her head, and took a reluctant nibble, she found her irritation rising again. She knew she should be more grateful that her Clanmates were looking out for her. But seeing them hunt for her when she should be hunting for herself and her Clan made her feel guilty and embarrassed.

Daisy keeps telling me how being with kits is a special time, she thought grumpily. I'm not sure I agree—unless “special” means “irritating”!

“Hi, Squirrelflight.”

Jayfeather's voice broke in on Squirrelflight's thoughts; she looked up to see that the medicine cat had emerged from his den and was padding toward her.

“How are you feeling today?” he asked, coming to a halt in front of her.

Squirrelflight swallowed her mouthful of prey. “Hi, Jayfeather. I'm fine, thanks.”

Gazing into the sightless blue eyes of her foster son, she felt a sudden surge of warmth. *Perhaps everything will be okay after all.*

“Do you want some of this mouse?” she asked, nudging the remains of the fresh-kill toward Jayfeather.

The medicine cat shook his head. “I've already eaten, thanks. And now that I've checked on you, I have to gather some medicine for Sorrelpaw.”

“You need to be careful, gathering herbs in this weather,” Squirrelflight told him, trying to be helpful. “The trees are bare, and the whole forest is covered with snow and ice. Make sure you watch where you're putting your paws, since you can't see where you might slip.”

Jayfeather let out an exasperated sigh and flicked his ears with irritation. “Like I haven't lived through leaf-bare before,” he snapped. “I can manage just fine. You should focus your energies on the kits who are coming. *They'll* need you.”

And you don't? Squirrelflight thought. Jayfeather swung around without waiting for her to reply, and he stalked off toward the cliff, where an alder bush had rooted itself in one of the cracks. Sliding out his claws, he began peeling off strips of the hard, blackish bark.

“What are you doing?” Berrynose asked, padding after Jayfeather and giving the alder bark a curious sniff.

“I'm swimming in the lake,” Jayfeather snarled. “What does it

look like?"

"I was only asking." Berrynose's cream-colored shoulder fur fluffed up as he backed away, offended. "No need to be mean."

Jayfeather waved his tail in a kind of apology. "Sorrelpaw has a toothache," he explained. "And alder bark is very good for it. If the pain in her mouth is too great for her to want to eat much, she could get skinny and sick, so the alder bark is very important."

While he was speaking, he went on stripping the bark. The branches of the bush were shifting with his movements and Squirrelflight saw that one of them had dislodged a large chunk of snow and ice that had been clinging precariously to the cliff face.

"Watch out!" she yowled. Instinctively she sprang to her paws and hurled herself at Jayfeather.

She had meant to thrust him out of the way, but she was so big and clumsy that she missed her footing and cannoned into him, driving both of them to the ground in a tangle of splayed legs and tails. The chunk of ice hit the ground beside them and exploded, splattering both of them with freezing cold splinters.

"Great StarClan!" Jayfeather exclaimed, scrambling to his paws and spitting out fragments of ice. "What did you do that for? I think my back leg is sprained now," he added, flexing it before he set his paw to the ground.

"I'm sorry," Squirrelflight meowed as she hauled herself upright. "I saw some ice that was about to come loose and fall on you."

Jayfeather heaved a long sigh. "Yes, I heart it," he responded. "I was just about to move out of the way. Do you think I'm mouse-brained? I don't need you to protect me."

Squirrelflight stared at him, a pang thrusting into her heart as sharply as a fox's claws. The tension of her past lives—the way she had raised Jayfeather and his littermates, pretending to be their real mother—hung between them like a thorny tendril of bramble.

Saying no more, Jayfeather began to gather the strips of alder bark together. Before he picked them up, he glanced over his shoulder at Squirrelflight. "I can take care of myself, thank you," he hissed. Then he gripped the bundle of bark in his jaws and stalked back to the medicine cats' den.

His cold anger stung Squirrelflight afresh. *What kind of mother will I be?* she asked herself. *I keep quarreling with my Clanmates, and I can't seem to say anything right, not even to one of the kits I raised as my own.*

Crouching down in a dark fog of misery, she finished off the mouse, even though she felt that every mouthful would choke her. She was just swallowing the last scraps when she spotted Bramblestar leaping down from his den on the Highledge and bounding toward her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Squirrelflight wanted to tell her mate that she was fine, but the lie wouldn't come out of her mouth. She remained silent, staring down at her paws.

A heartbeat later she felt Bramblestar's tail-tip resting on her

shoulder. "What's wrong?" he asked gently.

"Oh, Bramblestar, I'm not sure I can do this!" The words came spilling out of Squirrelflight. "What if I'm a terrible mother?"

"That's impossible," Bramblestar's voice was warm. "I know you'll be just fine." When Squirrelflight didn't respond, he continued. "Maybe we should go on a walk together, just the two of us. Then you can relax."

Though she recognized that Bramblestar was trying to be kind, Squirrelflight felt her neck fur bristling as if she were facing an enemy. "For StarClan's sake," she snarled, "I'm expecting kits! I'm not an elder. I don't need to relax!"

Hearing her own voice, she felt guilt return, sweeping over her from ears to tail-tip. *Oh, no—I'm doing it again!*

"Sorry," she added, "but I feel that all I've done for moons is relax and pick quarrels with my Clanmates."

"It's okay," Bramblestar reassured her, his ember eyes glowing with affection. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to."

But Bramblestar's words had given Squirrelflight an idea. "You know what I *would* like to do?" she meowed. "Go on a hunting patrol, just you and me." *I can't fight my if I'm not around them*, she realized. *And I won't feel so bad about all the extra prey I've eaten if I catch something for myself. It's perfect!*

To her dismay, Bramblestar was looking uncertain. "I don't know . . . Shouldn't you be resting?" he asked her. "Prey has been a bit scarce, but no cats are in danger of starving."

"But I really want to do this," Squirrelflight insisted, desperation welling up inside her. "No—I really *need* to do it. Please."

Bramblestar hesitated for a moment, then stretched out his neck to give Squirrelflight a lick around the ears. "If it's what you want," he purred, "let's go!"

Squirrelflight followed Bramblestar through the thorn tunnel and out into the snow-covered forest. The pale sunlight of leaf-bare shone down through the trees so that on every branch frozen water droplets glittered and the crisp surface of the snow shimmered like a starlit sky.

I've been stuck in camp for so long that I've forgotten how beautiful our home can be!

Though her paws were soon so cold that she could hardly feel them, and the nagging ache never left her back, Squirrelflight quickly felt her tense muscles loosen and energy flow back into them. She took in deep lungfuls of the frosty air, and her crankiness began to dissolve like the white clouds she breathed out.

"I was right," she murmured. "This is perfect!"

Bramblestar gestured with his tail for Squirrelflight to lead the way. To begin with she followed the old Twoleg path, where the snow lay even and unmarked except for the spiky claw prints of birds. Then, before the abandoned Twoleg nest came into sight, she turned aside and plunged into the undergrowth in the direction of the lake. Bramblestar padded along at her shoulder.

"There's something I want to say to you," Bramblestar mewed

hesitantly after a while. "Promise not to bite my tail off?"

Half amused, Squirrelflight halted beneath the snow-laden branches of a hazel bush and gazed at her mate with narrowed eyes. "That depends . . ."

"It's only because I care about you," Bramblestar went on. "But I've noticed lately . . . well, you don't seem quite like yourself."

That's because I'm expecting kits, mouse-brain!

But Squirrelflight would never say that aloud. Bramblestar deserved a better, more honest answer.

"I know," she sighed. "And I'm sorry. I guess I've been a real pain in the tail."

"Not to me," Bramblestar purred, touching his nose to hers. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Well, I . . ." Squirrelflight paused, and then the words came out in a rush. "Oh, Bramblestar, I'm so scared that I won't be a good mother! I did my best for Lionblaze and Hollyleaf and Jayfeather, but I felt terrible about lying to them. And they hated me when they found out the truth. Was I ever a good mother to them? Can I be one for our kits?"

For many heartbeats Bramblestar was silent, his expression thoughtful. Squirrelflight's heart began to pound uncomfortably. She remembered how furious Bramblestar had been when he'd discovered she had lied to him, too, letting him think that he was the kits' real father. For moons he had barely spoken to her, and she had believed that he would never want to be with her again.

Oh, StarClan, I couldn't bear the pain if he still doesn't trust me!

Squirrelflight tried to tell herself that Bramblestar had forgiven her, but she was still afraid that her deception had changed the way he thought of her forever.

Suppose he agrees that I won't be a good mother?

"Stupid furball," Bramblestar murmured, brushing his muzzle against Squirrelflight's shoulder. The warmth in his amber eyes reassured her even before he continued. "I know you loved the three kits you raised with your whole heart. And they turned into three amazing cats. No she-cat in the forest could be a better mother than you will be for our kits. And I'll be right here with you."

Overwhelming love for Bramblestar swept through Squirrelflight. She felt as if she could stand beside him forever, drinking in his familiar scent.

"Thank you, Bramblestar," she mewed. "I feel much better now." Straightening up, she gave her pelt a shake, ridding herself of her worries like so many scraps of debris. "Let's hunt!"

Chapter 2

The sun floated above the horizon, casting a bloodred pathway across the waters of the lake. Here and there the warriors of StarClan were beginning to emerge in the frosty leaf-bare sky. Beneath the trees dusk was already gathering.

Squirrelflight and Bramblestar padded along the edge of the forest, above the lakeshore. With every paw step Squirrelflight felt more and more discouragement. They had been hunting since before sunhigh, and yet for all their efforts they hadn't caught a single piece of prey.

And it's all my fault, Squirrelflight told herself.

She thought of all the times they had spotted prey that Bramblestar could have gone after, but he had refused, saying that it was too skinny or too far away. Squirrelflight had found it hard to believe him. He was a skillful hunter, and with fresh-kill so scarce in leaf-bare, *any* piece of prey was worth pursuing. She suspected he just didn't want to leave her. But when she had tried to go after the prey, she'd been too slow, and each time the squirrel or the rabbit had outpaced her.

And Bramblestar ran beside me, though I know he could have gone faster. Of all cats, even he is treating me differently!

"Maybe it's time for us to go back to camp," Bramblestar broke the silence. "It's getting dark."

"But we haven't caught anything!" Squirrelflight protested. Failure stuck in her throat like a gristly piece of crow-food.

Bramblestar shrugged. "It doesn't matter. There's enough prey on the fresh-kill pile. Besides," he added as Squirrelflight opened her jaws to protest again, "I thought I scented a fox. It could be dangerous out here."

We're dangerous too! Squirrelflight wanted to say. Then she wondered whether that was true right now, when she was so big and clumsy and tried. Fox or no fox, she wanted to continue until it was dark, but she realized that Bramblestar had made up his mind. Suppressing a hiss of annoyance, she followed him without objecting as he headed toward the stone hollow.

But even in her disappointment Squirrelflight stayed alert, instinctively scanning her surroundings for signs of prey. Her keen glance darted here and there, her ears pricked for the slightest sound, and her jaws parted to taste the air.

If only I could catch something before we get back to camp!

As she and Bramblestar approached a spot where the undergrowth stretched down almost to the water's edge, Squirrelflight saw a vole slipping through the long grass. Signaling with her tail for Bramblestar to keep back, she dropped into the hunter's crouch and crept up on her prey, paw step by cautious paw step.

But Squirrelflight had misjudged how big she was. Her swollen sides set the grass stems waving as she brushed through them, which alerted the vole. It raised its head, whiskers twitching. Squirrelflight threw herself toward it in a desperate leap, but she was too far away for a successful pounce. As her forepaws slammed onto the ground a mouse-length away from the vole, it scabbled away from her and bolted for the forest. Squirrelflight sprang after it with a screech of frustration, determined that this time she was going to catch it.

Using all her strength, Squirrelflight dashed after her prey into the shadow of the trees. She ignored her freezing paws and her grumbling belly, concentrating instead on the bunching and extending of her muscles on the sight of the vole scurrying ahead of her.

“Squirrelflight!” Bramblestar yowled behind her. “Slow down!”

Squirrelflight ignored that, too. She pursued the vole as it darted into the gap between two trees growing so close together that Squirrelflight had to squeeze herself through. She let out a snarl of annoyance at being delayed.

She emerged on the other side just in time to spot the vole again as it whisked around the trunk of a much bigger tree, its tiny paws scattering flakes of snow as it fled.

Hurling herself after her prey, Squirrelflight forced her legs into massive bounds that ate up the distance between herself and the vole.

Yes! No way am I letting this one escape!

Then, as she was gathering herself for the final pounce. Squirrelflight felt one of her paws catch on something buried beneath the snow. *Oh no!* For a heartbeat she was flying through the air; the snow-covered ground rose up to meet her, and she landed with a thump that jarred all the bones in her body. She staggered, fighting for balance, and managed to stay on all four paws.

The vole was still in sight. A bramble thicket loomed up just ahead of it, and Squirrelflight knew that if it managed to dive in among the twisting tendrils, she would lose it for sure. Summoning the last of her energy, she pelted after it, her lungs burning and her paws throbbing with pain. She was so close to the vole that she could see the separate hairs on its pelt.

Pushing off with a huge thrust of her hind legs, Squirrelflight leaped onto the vole. Her claws sank into its back, and she killed it with a swift bite to its neck.

I did it!

Squirrelflight was panting, her heart racing from the chase, but triumph warmed her all through like a ray of sunlight. She picked up the vole in her jaws and turned around to show Bramblestar. But his dark tabby pelt was nowhere in sight.

“Bramblestar?” she called, but there was no reply.

Puzzled, Squirrelflight headed back along her own paw marks in the snow, wondering why Bramblestar hadn't followed. Heading for the huge tree, she spotted the twisted root that had tripped her, mostly hidden by the snow. At the same moment a vicious snarl broke the silence of the twilight forest.

Her heart pounding even harder, Squirrelflight raced around the huge tree, then skidded to a halt in a flurry of snow. Facing her was a massive fox, its jaws gaping to show a mouthful of sharp teeth.

It was standing barely a tail-length away from Bramblestar, who was backed up hard against the trunk of the tree. His back was arched, his shoulder fur was bristling defiantly, and his tail was bushed up. Blood trickled from a scratch on his forehead.

“Squirrelflight, run!” he gasped.

As he was speaking, the fox lunged at him, striking out with its claws and snapping at his neck. For a moment Squirrelflight stood frozen, watching her mate as he twisted away from his attacker and raked his claws down the fox's flank.

“Run!” he repeated, his voice an urgent yowl. “I’ll be fine. Protect yourself—protect our kits!”

No! Squirrelflight thought. You’re my mate . . . the father of my kits. No way am I leaving you!

Dropping her vole, she sprang forward and hurled herself at the fox’s hindquarters, digging her claws in hard. The fox let out a yelp of pain, but it never wavered in its attack on Bramblestar, pinning him down among the roots of the tree. Bramblestar battered at its belly with his powerful hind legs, but he couldn’t shake it off.

Squirrelflight could feel the fox’s bones beneath her claws. It was so skinny. *It must be starving*, she thought. *No wonder it’s fighting so ferociously. But today’s not the day it gets to eat out!*

Squirrelflight swiped again and again at the fox’s hindquarters, driving her claws in deep until at last it turned on her, giving Bramblestar the chance to stagger to his paws.

The fox lashed out at Squirrelflight, and she felt its claws sink deep into her shoulder. She let out a hiss of pain and leaped back out of range.

“All right, flea-pelt!” Squirrelflight growled. A plan had slipped her mind, and she backed off toward another tree. “Come and get me!”

The fox followed her, its malevolent eyes unblinking as it snarled, its head thrust forward and its lips drawn back to show its teeth.

“You’re such a slow mole!” Squirrelflight taunted it. “Can’t you do better than that?”

Now all the fox’s rage and hunger were fixed on her; it seemed to have forgotten Bramblestar, who was limping up rapidly to rejoin the fight.

“Bramblestar, distract it!” Squirrelflight yowled.

She’d scarcely said the words before he darted in from the side, striking out again at the fox. The fox spun around to meet the new attack.

Instantly Squirrelflight sprang into the tree, swarmed up the trunk, and scrambled out along a branch, pushing her way through a tangle of bare twigs that snagged in her fur and scraped her sides. Reaching a clearer space at the end of the branch, she paused for a moment to let her gaze measure the distance between this tree and the next. Then she leaped into a fork of the second tree, directly above the fox and Bramblestar.

The two of them had broken apart and were circling each other, each looking for an opening to strike. Squirrelflight waited until the fox was right below the spot where she was perching. Then, with a blood-curdling screech, she launched herself into the air and landed with a thump on the fox’s back.

The fox let out a shriek of pain and reared up, trying to shake her off, but Squirrelflight had dug her claws in deeply, and she kept her balance while she sank her teeth into its neck. The fox twisted this way and that, yelping in pain, while Bramblestar crouched in front of it, poised to plunge back into the fight.

Squirrelflight jumped to the ground to stand beside Bramblestar, breathing hard and snarling defiance at the fox, waiting to see if it would attack again.

But the fox had had enough. With a last vicious growl it turned away and limped off into the trees, its blood spattering the snow. Squirrelflight and Bramblestar watched until it was out of sight.

“Good, it's gone,” Squirrelflight meowed with satisfaction. “We showed it that it was no match for two ferocious cats!”

“Squirrelflight, you were magnificent!” Bramblestar's voice was shaking. “You saved both of us. Thank you.”

Triumph flooded through Squirrelflight. *Yes, I did! I'm still a warrior—I can still fight!* Then she noticed that the tree she had climbed and the one she had leaped into were both alders. *Jayfeather was right: Alder trees are important, and not just for their bark!*

“I was so scared,” Bramblestar went on. “I thought the fox would get you, and I'd lose both you and our kits.”

Squirrelflight leaned against him and gave his muzzle a lick. “I had to jump in,” she mewed. “I couldn't let the fox hurt you, not when I could fight beside you.”

Bramblestar nuzzled her and twined his tail around hers; for a long moment the two cats stood together, drinking in each other's scent. *Yes, we are together,* Squirrelflight thought. *Bramblestar and I are so much stronger together. And we'll work together to make sure our kits are loved and safe.*

“We'd better get back,” Bramblestar murmured at last. “We'll need to see Leafpool and Jayfeather to get our scratches treated.”

“At least they are only scratches,” Squirrelflight pointed out. “It might have been much worse.”

“Thanks to you, it wasn't,” Bramblestar responded.

Squirrelflight retrieved the vole she had caught, and the two cats headed back to the stone hollow side by side. By this time night had fallen, and the snow glimmered eerily in the light of the waning moon. The forest was silent except for the distant cry of a night bird.

Though she still felt heavy and awkward, Squirrelflight's heart was lighter than it had been for many days. *Being a mother isn't about saying the right thing or doing the right thing all the time, she mused. No cat does that. No cat can. No, being a mother is about protecting the cats you care about.*

And Squirrelflight knew that was something she could do, and would do for the rest of her life.