

WARRIORS

A Vision of Shadows
Thunder and Shadow
Exclusive Bonus Scene

Chapter 1

Heart pounding, Needlepaw followed her mentor between the looming pines. A cool breeze ruffled her fur. Branches creaked overhead. She kept her wide-eyed gaze fixed on Tawnypelt's back. This was the first time she'd been out in the woods after dark, and Tawnypelt was hardly more than a shadow in the night-shrouded forest.

A fox yowled in the distance, and Needlepaw pressed closer behind Tawnypelt. She glanced nervously between the trees, straining to make out the shadowy forms. Brambles crowded the trunks. Ditches showed like dark wounds on the forest floor. A winged shape flitted between the trees.

"I didn't know birds flew in the dark," Needlepaw whispered.

"That was a bat." Tawnypelt pulled away from her, ears pricked, her slitted gaze on the forest ahead. "They swoop low in leaf-bare, hunting for insects. Stay alert. A good hunter can hear them coming and pluck them from the air as they pass."

Needlepaw's fur tingled excitedly. Would she ever be good enough to do that? As she tried to imagine herself reaching out to swipe a bat to the ground, she brushed against Tawnypelt.

"Stop crowding me." Tawnypelt nudged Needlepaw away irritably.

"Sorry." Needlepaw flashed hot with shame. She was acting like a scared kit. "I'm not used to the forest at night."

Tawnypelt softened. "You're bound to be edgy. But you're perfectly safe. I'll let you know if I scent anything dangerous. We're here to look for prey, so keep your eyes on the undergrowth and tree roots. There are fewer places to hide in leaf-bare, but the lack of cover makes prey wary. So tread softly. And keep your eyes narrow. Wide eyes shine like stars in this darkness. They will be the first thing to betray you."

Needlepaw squeezed her eyes into slits and swept her gaze across the tangled roots snaking into the ground. *I hope I catch something!* A shiver ran down her spine, half anxious, half excited. She wanted to impress Tawnypelt. In the few days since her training had begun, she'd only managed to catch a butterfly and frighten a mouse into a hole.

She followed her mentor across a ditch, jumping lightly and landing softly on the far side. As they ventured farther from the warmth of camp, the air seemed colder with every step. The fox yowled again, and she wondered if it sounded closer this time. *Don't be scared. You should be excited to be out here as an apprentice, learning how to hunt, instead of a kit curled up next to Berryheart in the nursery.* She gazed through the branches at the star-specked sky.

"You're meant to be scanning the *undergrowth*," Tawnypelt hissed under her breath. "We're not hunting *stars*."

As she spoke, the tortoiseshell stopped and stiffened. Her gaze flashed toward the shadowy cleft of a tree root. Needlepaw followed it, her heart quickening with excitement.

Something small was moving there. She could hear prey snuffling through the damp leaf litter.

Mouse. She recognized the scent with a flash of pride.

She glanced at Tawnypelt. Her mentor's gaze was fixed on the shadowy movement. Needlepaw saw the tip of the tortoiseshell's tail twitch excitedly. Was Tawnypelt preparing to leap? *I don't want to steal her catch.*

But Tawnypelt didn't move.

Unless she's waiting for me. Needlepaw's heart lurched. *Should I try to catch it or stay out of her way?*

As indecision froze her paws, the mouse scuttled into the watery moonlight and darted over the root. *It's escaping!* Before it could disappear, Needlepaw leaped.

Fur flashed in the corner of her eye. Tawnypelt was moving too! Their flanks collided. Unbalanced, Needlepaw flailed in midair. With a grunt, she crashed into the tree root. Pain flared through her paw as it scraped against the wood.

Tawnypelt landed clumsily and turned on her. "Why did you hesitate?" she snapped.

"I didn't want to get in your way!"

"So you stood in the moonlight like a tree stump while a mouse got away!"

Shame scorched Needlepaw's pelt. She dropped her gaze. "How was I supposed to know it was my catch?"

Tawnypelt stared at her. "We're here to train *you*, not me! If I'd wanted to catch everything myself, I'd have left you back at camp."

"Sorry," Needlepaw murmured. Next time she wouldn't wait.

Tawnypelt sighed. "Perhaps you'll do better if you hunt over there." She nodded toward a small clearing between the trees where moonlight pooled on a patch of withered bracken. "Then we won't get into each other's way."

Needlepaw's shoulders drooped. *You mean I won't get in your way.* She headed for the clearing, not glancing back, and slunk between the bracken stems. Lifting her muzzle, she tasted the air. A strange scent tainted the breeze. *Prey?* It didn't smell like mouse or vole. Perhaps it was a shrew? Or a weasel? She'd never seen a weasel before. Beepaw had told her that they were huge and vicious and that if you didn't get your jaws around their spine quickly, they could give you a nasty bite. *Please don't be a weasel.* Mice were hard enough.

A breeze lifted her fur, as though a huge tail was swishing through the air above her. A shadow flashed across the clearing. Another bat? Perhaps she could catch it. As she looked up hopefully, a dark shape blocked the sky.

Sudden pain pierced her flanks.

She gasped as huge claws fastened around her spine. She felt them dig in and lift her until her paws were dangling. Panic shrilled through her.

"Tawnypelt! Help!" She glimpsed her mentor beyond the clearing. The tortoiseshell's eyes were wide with horror. "Save me!" Needlepaw scrabbled at the ground, desperately trying to hook a root or stem. Bracken fronds slipped through her claws as the powerful creature lifted her up into the sky. She saw branches swirl dizzily in front of her, and then she was above the treetops.

"Needlepaw!" Tawnypelt's yowl sounded through the branches.

Needlepaw hardly heard her over the blood roaring in her ears. Her mind reeled. Pain cut through her terror. The creature's claws dug into her flesh, and she hung from them like prey. Squirming, she tried to wriggle free, but each twist sent fresh agony burning through her flanks. Turning her head, she looked up into the wide underbelly of an owl. Its flecked feathers rippled in the wind as it flew, and its great face look ahead as it flapped relentlessly on. *StarClan, help me!* The forest slid by beneath her. Cold night air rushed through her fur. She seemed to be traveling faster than the wind, the steady beat of the owl's wing thumping above her.

Through her pain and horror, she was aware of her home disappearing behind her. The forest thinned below, turning to marsh and then moon. *I have to get free!* She stared at the ground, distant and rippled by moonlight. *I'll die if I fall!*

She was almost blind with pain now, hardly able to breathe through the wind battering her face. Then moorland turned to forest once more. Treetops darkened the moonlit landscape beneath her. *Where is it taking me?* Fresh terror opened in her belly. *If it gets me to its nest, it will peck out my eyes and rip out my heart.* She hadn't forgotten the nursery tales Beepaw and the others used to tell after dark. *I have to escape!*

Falling was her best hope. The creature's grip was close to her hindquarters. Her forelegs hung limply, but with a struggle she could lift herself and twist. Gritting her teeth, she twisted and swung her forepaws to one side, as high as she could reach. Pain arced like fire from the wounds and where the talons dug in, but she ignored it. With a snarl, she lashed at the owl.

Triumph rose above the pain for a moment as she felt her claws rip through feathers and reach flesh. As she swung back down, trembling, she felt the owl jerk as though rebalancing itself. The talons seemed to loosen around her spine. Hope sparked in Needlepaw's chest. Gasping, she swung again, this time twisting to the other side and reaching farther. Her claws hooked into flesh, feathers fluttering around her paws. She clung on, tearing at the owl, desperation giving her strength.

The owl screeched in pain. With eyes as wide as moons, it glanced down at her in surprise. Then Needlepaw felt its talons unfasten from her flanks.

Suddenly she was falling. Fresh terror flared through her as wind rushed around her. Flailing against emptiness, the roar of air in her ears, she shrieked. *StarClan, make my death quick!* As she imagined the agony of landing, branches suddenly engulfed her. Twigs snapped as she fell through, whipping her body. But then the forest seemed to slow around her as the trees softened her fall. A stout branch slammed into her belly. She collapsed over it, paws dangling, struggling for breath. Hanging limply,

she waited to see if she was going to die.

The soft sigh of the wind sounded in her ears. Below, she could hear the undergrowth rustling. Pain washed through her, touching every hair. And yet she kept breathing. Cautiously, she moved. Her paws stung, her belly ached, but she managed to heave herself onto the branch.

She crouched, staring wide-eyed through the leaves. Trembling, she twitched her tail. It moved easily. Pressing down on her paws, one by one, she found they still held her weight. The wounds where the owl had gripped her burned. She could smell blood. She turned to lap at the torn flesh, but the branch wobbled beneath her. *I have to get down.*

Gingerly, she crept along the branch toward the trunk. She saw, with relief, another branch a tail-length below. She leaped down, wincing as the jolt sent fresh agony flaming through her pelt. Tail-length by tail-length, she worked her way down the tree; then, as she neared the ground, she scrambled down the trunk, tail first. She slid onto the damp forest floor with a *mrrow* of relief, relishing the hard earth beneath her paws.

Thank you, StarClan! She couldn't wait to get home and tell her Clanmates what had happened. They'd be amazed when she told them how she escaped. Even Tawnypelt would be proud!

Her happiness evaporated as she peered into the shadowy forest. *Where is home?*

Suddenly she felt very small. Shivering, she backed into a hollow between the roots of the tree. She was as helpless as a kit. And alone. She hunched tight and curled her tail around her. *You're going to be okay*, she soothed herself. Tawnypelt come and find her, surely? All she had to do was wait.

Needlepaw sat through the night, ears pricked, eyes wide, staring into the strange forest. When a fox shrieked nearby, she wriggled deeper into the hollow. A little later, cold and trembling, she forced herself to wash her wounds, feeling sick as she licked the owl stench from them.

At last, dawn began to turn the sky orange beyond the branches. Was Tawnypelt near? The owl had flown in a straight path, so she thought Tawnypelt would be able to track her. Perhaps she'd brought a patrol to find her. Needlepaw's heart ached at the thought of the friendly faces of her Clanmates. She leaned forward hopefully, tasting the air. But there were no familiar scent here.

Tiny paws scuttled nearby. Stiffening in surprise, she saw a vole scurry past the hollow. Carrying a seed in its jaws, it seemed unaware of her presence. Without thinking, Needlepaw lunged for it. She slapped her paws onto its spine and crouched for the killing bite.

Its warm blood bathed her tongue. Needlepaw felt a rush of joy: *My first catch!* Her belly rumbled. *I'm starving.* Yet she knew she must've eat it. *All prey goes on the fresh-kill pile.* She must wait until her Clanmates found her and take it back to camp with them.

Slowly the rosy sky filled the forest with pale light. As the terror of the long, dark night eased, Needlepaw felt sleep pull at her. She dragged the vole back into the sheltering hollow and curled around it protectively. Wouldn't Tawnypelt be surprised when she found her with fresh-kill for her Clan? She closed her eyes, relieved to feel the icy chill of night release its grip. Tucking her tail over her nose, she let herself drift into a hopeful

sleep.

She didn't know how long she'd slept when a warning scent touched her nose. Waking, she stiffed. She smelled cat and felt the warmth of another pelt close by. Alarmed, she opened her eyes.

A yellow tom stood at the entrance of the hollow. He was staring at her quizzically.

Needlepaw struggled to her paws, her body stiff and aching. She faced the stranger, anger surging through her as she saw what he was holding. "Thief!" she snarled.

Her vole was dangling from his jaws!

Chapter 2

"Give it back!" she hissed angrily.

The tom didn't flinch. Instead he laid the vole on the ground. "What do you want it for?"

"It's mine!"

"Does it help you sleep?"

Needlepaw saw a teasing glint in his eye, and her anger burned harder. "I am saving it for my Clanmates."

The tom looked around the forest, still pale with early morning light. "I don't see them."

"Well, they're coming!" Needlepaw glared at him. He was young—older than her, but no older than the youngest warriors in ShadowClan.

"It might taken them a while to get," the tom mewed coolly. "You're a long way from the lake. That's where you're from, right?"

Needlepaw ignored his question. Anxiety fluttered in her belly. *A long way from the lake.* "How far?"

"A day's walk, maybe two," the tom told her.

Had the owl carried her that far?" Needlepaw tried to hide her surprise. How did this tom know about the lake? She narrowed her eyes. "Why should I believe you?"

The tom shrugged. "You don't have to." He sat down, licked a paw, and ran it over an ear.

Needlepaw's gaze flicked to the vole. She was so hungry her belly ached. If the tom was right, and they were really a day or two's walk from the lake, then it would take her Clanmates longer than she'd thought to find her. The tom paused from washing and blinked at her. "This vole will be spoiled by the time you get it back to you Clan." To her surprise, he pushed it toward her. "You may as well eat it now."

Needlepaw eyed him warily. Was he trying to trick her into betraying her Clanmates? She'd heard stories about loners and rogues and how they liked to cause trouble. Perhaps he was a kittypet. They cared about nothing at all except filling their bellies. "Who *are* you?" she demanded.

"I'm Tree."

"Tree?" She stared at him. "What kind of name is that?"

Tree shrugged. "What are *you* called?"

"Needlepaw." She saw amusement flash in his eyes once more, and her fur ruffled defensively. "*What?*" she demanded. Was he making fun of her?

Tree licked his paw again, digging his tongue between his toes as he began to wash it thoroughly. "I just don't see," he mewed between laps, "how someone called Needlepaw could find the name Tree amusing."

"Needlepaw is a great name." Needlepaw shifted her paws. She was trying to ignore the mouthwatering scent of the vole and the ache in her belly. She didn't want to seem desperate. She wanted to show this strange tom that she wasn't someone he could pick on. "My Clan named me, and I like it." She puffed out her chest. "Who gave you *your* name?"

Tree tugged a piece of grit from beneath a claw before answering. "I gave it to myself as I was old enough to want a name." He spat the grit onto the ground. "I like trees, so I named myself Tree."

Needlepaw blinked at him, unsure of what to say. It was hard to criticize his reasoning, but she wanted to criticize something. He seemed so sure of himself.

He nodded toward the vole. "Are you going to eat that? Because if you're not, I will. It'll save me a morning's hunt."

Needlepaw glanced from Tree to the vole. If the camp was really as far as Tree said, then it was pointless saving the prey for her Clan. But she didn't feel comfortable eating in front of this stranger. She didn't want him to see how hungry she was.

Tree watched her. "Why don't we share it, then hunt for some more?"

He sounded genuinely friendly. For the first time, Needlepaw felt her prickling fur relax against her spine. Perhaps she should eat. All cats got hungry. It wasn't anything to be ashamed of. "Okay." She leaned down and took a bite, then pushed the vole toward Tree.

He took a bite and pushed it back. "How did you get so far from home?" he asked, chewing.

She took another bite and swallowed. "An owl grabbed me."

Tree's ears pricked with surprise. "An owl?"

"It picked me up and brought me here."

Tree was staring at her, eyes wide. "It carried you here and let you go?"

"I fought it and it dropped me." Needlepaw couldn't help the pride edging her mew.

Tree glanced up between the branches. "You *fell*?" He sounded as though he hardly believed his ears.

"Yes." Needlepaw was enjoying the startled look on the tom's face. "I had to slash the owl's belly twice before it let go."

"You must have been terrified." he glanced at the wounds in her flank. "Are you okay?"

"I will be if I can get back to my Clan," Needlepaw mewed coolly. She hoped he couldn't see the fear sparking beneath her fur as she remembered her struggle with the owl. "Dying from the fall seemed better than being shredded by an owl in its nest."

"Wow." Tree sat back on his haunches, pushing the vole closer to Needlepaw. "You'd better eat all of this," he mewed. "You sound like you

need it. I knew Clan cats were brave, but that is *really* brave.”

Needlepaw dropped her gaze, suddenly self-conscious. “I didn’t really have a choice.” She gnawed hungrily at the vole. Then she frowned, a question flashing in her thoughts. Tree had heard about the courage of the Clan cats *and* he knew how far away they lived. “How do *you* know about the Clans?”

“I’ve just traveled from the lake,” he told her. “It was too hard to hunt. Clan cats don’t like strangers on their territory. So I came here where I can hunt wherever I like.” He purred suddenly. “It’s funny I should find a Clan cat hogging the prey here too.”

Needlepaw stiffened defensively. “You said I could have it.”

“And I meant it.” He purred louder. “I’m just teasing. You sure are easy to tease.” He lifted his other paw and started washing again. “Finish the vole, and when you’re done, we’ll find more prey. If I’d just escaped an owl and spent the night a strange forest, I’d be starving.”

He washed while she gulped down the rest of the vole, spitting out its bitter bile sac when she was done. Then she sat up and licked her lips, feeling warmer and relieved that her aching hunger was gone.

Tree stopped cleaning himself. He looked her, tipping his head curiously. “Are you one of those swimming cats?”

Needlepaw bristled. “No!” she mewed indignantly. “That’s RiverClan. They’re so fat and sleek they’re practically otters, I’m from ShadowClan. ShadowClan cats never swim.”

“But they fly.” Tree got to his paws and flicked his tail.

Needlepaw purred, suddenly warming to this loner. He was funny. “Only with the help of owls.” She stretched, sliding her forepaws out and bending her belly toward the earth. A ripple of satisfaction shivered along her spine, despite the pain from her wounds. “I guess I should be going now.” She glanced toward the red sky where the sun had risen. Wouldn’t Tawnypelt and the others be impressed to find her already heading home? “Is the lake that way?”

“I thought we were going to find more prey.” Tree looked disappointed.

Needlepaw straightened, surprised. Why did a loner want to hang around with another cat? “I’m not hungry anymore.”

Tree shifted his paws self-consciously. “Then maybe I could show you the way back to the lake.”

Needlepaw tipped her head, thinking. She’d never traveled far by herself before. It would be useful to have a guide. And she’d be safer if she had another cat with her. “Okay,” she agreed.

Tree’s eyes shone. “Great.” He turned and headed between the trees. “First we have to get to the edge of this forest.”

Needlepaw followed, watching him through narrowed eyes. Clearly Tree wasn’t as independent as he pretended to be. She wondered if it got lonely, being a cat on your own. She’d never had to think about that before.

The forest reminded her of the ThunderClan territory she’d seen across the ShadowClan border. Fat oaks mingled with pale, slender birch. It was so different from the straight, dark pines that lined ShadowClan’s

land. As she followed Tree through the withered patches of fern and frost-blackened foliage of bilberry bushes, she wondered how any cat ever found prey among such lush undergrowth.

Then she wondered if Tree found the landscape as strange as she did. After all, he'd said it would take a morning's hunting to catch a vole here. Tawnypet could catch four voles in a morning in the pine forest. She called after him. "Where do you usually hunt?"

He stopped and turned, waiting for her to catch up. "Anywhere. So long as there's prey."

"So you've hunted in woods like this one before?"

"Sure." Tree started walking, letting Needle paw fall in beside him. "And on moors, and in marshes, and besides rivers."

Needle paw looked around the thick forest, feeling out of place without the familiarity of pines. "Clan cats are used to hunting on one type of territory."

"Isn't that boring?"

"No. It feels good to know where the best prey hides and where it will run."

"Is that why Clans are so protective of their territory?" Tree ducked under a drooping elderberry.

"I guess." Needle paw had never really thought about it before. It was just what Clan cats did.

"It's just weird to have territory," Tree went on. "Doesn't the land belong to everyone?"

Needle paw didn't understand. "But all cats need homes. A place where they feel safe. You must have had one once. When you were a kit?"

Tree kept walking, his gaze fixed ahead. "My mother made a den deep beneath a bramble bush, in an abandoned fox hole. She nursed my sister and me there while we young. I guess that felt like home."

"Didn't your mother name you?"

Tree glanced at her, puzzled.

"You said you named yourself," Needle paw reminded him. "But your mother must have given you a name when you were born."

"If she did, I forgot it."

"What happened to her?" Needle paw sensed Tree stiffen as he walked beside her, and she wondered how far she dared question him. Was he hiding painful memories? But curiosity tugged at her belly. "And your sister? What happened to her?"

Tree kept his gaze on the forest ahead. "One day my mother brought a mouse back to the den. It was injured, but not dead. She told me how to kill it. So I killed it, and when I did, she said, 'You're grown now.' The next morning, when I woke, she was gone. My sister too."

"She left you?" Pity flooded Needle paw's heart. "Why?"

"I guess she thought I'd be okay." Tree's mew betrayed no emotion.

"But she took your sister." Needle paw didn't understand how a mother could abandon her kit.

"My sister could never kill a mouse. She hardly knew how to suckle. She was always sick. I figure my mother wanted to take her someplace she'd be safe. Perhaps she hoped she could find a home as a

kittypet. Twolegs sometimes take pity on kits. And they know how to make the sick ones better.”

“But why not take you too?”

Tree shrugged. “Maybe she didn’t want me to be a kittypet. Maybe it was like she always said: Twolegs are unpredictable. Sometimes they feed kits; sometimes they drown them. I guess she thought my sister was sickly enough to worth risking it. She looked like she’d die anyway.”

Needlepaw suddenly missed her Clan with a pang of longing so intense her throat tightened. If Berryheart had abandoned her, her Clanmates would have looked after her and taught her how to hunt. She blinked at Tree. The only hunting lesson he’d had was in a den with an injured mouse. “That’s so sad,” she murmured.

“I guess.” Tree shrugged. “But it was kind of fun too. I got to do what I liked. I taught myself to hunt and how to climb trees. After a while, it felt good not to need anyone.”

Why are you helping me find my Clan, then? Needlepaw kept the thought to herself. “I’ll always prefer being in a Clan. I like to know where my home is. And to know there’s always someone looking out for me.” She paused. “What happened to the den your mother made? Why didn’t you stay there?”

“A bigger tom drove me away.”

“And you’ve never had a home since then?”

“I guess after that, I never thought any place was worth fighting for.”

He sounded unconcerned, but Needlepaw wasn’t convinced he didn’t care. Last night was the first time in her life she’d slept alone. Since she’d been a kit she’d been surrounded by the paw steps and warmth of her Clanmates. Did Tree really enjoy his freedom as much as he claimed?

Her paws ached by nightfall. They had found the edge of the forest and crossed the moorland. Only the wide stretch of marshland lay between her and ShadowClan’s forest.

“We should rest before we cross the marsh,” Tree advised.

“But we’re so close!” Needlepaw could see the pines crowding the darkening horizon.

“Crossing a marsh at night is dangerous,” Tree warned. “There’s no cover from owls.” He blinked at her, “You don’t want to be carried off again, do you?”

Needlepaw could smell the pine scent wafting on the breeze. She wished she were home.

“Besides,” Tree went on, “cats have been lost in the marsh. The mud will swallow you quicker than a snake if you wander off the trail.”

Needlepaw sat down, her pelt pricking irritably. She wondered if Tree was just making excuses because he didn’t want to be alone again. The thought eased her irritation. She felt sorry for him. “Let’s hunt,” she suggested. “There’s no point of going to sleep on an empty belly.”

They hunted until they’d caught a frog and a water vole, which they shared in a small gap between two clumps of reeds, where the ground was

dry and grassy. They curled up together, sheltered by the swishing sedge, close enough to share each other's warmth.

As she tucked her nose under her tail, Needlepaw's fizzed with excitement at the thought of finding her Clanmates and telling them about her adventure. She wanted Tree to meet them too, so he could see how great it was to belong somewhere. *Everyone needs a home*. She thought of Tawnypelt and Sparrowtail, Berryheart and Beepaw. Were they searching for her right now? Would she wake to find them weaving through the reed beds, calling her name. She strained to hear them until, slowly, her thoughts drifted into confusion and sleep enfolded her.

"Wake up!" She poked Tree with a paw. He was still snoring even though the sun had lifted above the horizon and was spilling pink light across the marsh.

He lifted his head sleepily and yawned.

"I've caught prey." Needlepaw had been awake long enough to track down a mouse and begin to explore the trails that wound through the clusters of sedge. Now that she wasn't thinking so hard all the time, trying to impress Tawnypelt, hunting felt much easier. "I think I've found a way across the marsh." She pawed the mouse toward Tree. She'd eaten half of it already but had saved the juicy hindquarters for him.

"Thanks." He stood and stretched before gulping down his share; then, licking his lips, he looked across the reed beds. "Show me the trail."

Needlepaw led him happily along a ridge that zigzagged between the muddiest part of the marshland. Around them, the reeds rattled in the brisk morning breeze.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they reached the far side, and Needlepaw's heart quickened with excitement as the shadow of the pine forest fell over them. Tree shivered beside her.

"It'll be warmer once we're among the trees," Needlepaw promised.

They slid between brambles and padded into the forest. Needlepaw quickened her step as she felt soft pine needles, silky beneath her paws. The pines muffled the wind, enclosing her in a world that seemed silent after the blustery marshland. And yet, familiar sounds echoed through the woods. Blackbirds sang. Crows squabbled high in the branches above their heads. Magpies chirruped, arguing over territory.

A warm scent touched Needlepaw's nose. "Tawnypelt!"

Her mentor had passed this way not long ago. Her scent was still fresh on the brambles. She was pleased to know they hadn't missed her mentor on the long walk back to ShadowClan territory.

"That's your mentor, right?" Tree was glancing nervously around.

"Yes!" Needlepaw hurried after the scent trail, realizing after a few paw steps that Tree wasn't following.

He stood staring after her uncertainly. "Perhaps I should leave you here," he mewed. "The last group of Clan cats I met weren't happy to find a loner on their territory."

"But you're with me!" Needlepaw blinked at him. "You helped me find my way home. My Clanmates will *want* to meet you."

Tree looked unconvinced, but he padded after her, his pelt rippling anxiously along his spine.

Needlepaw followed her nose, quickly recognizing the trail Tawnypelt was following. They had gone this way the first time Tawnypelt had shown her ShadowClan's territory. It smelled as though Cloverfoot and Scorchfur were with her. Were they setting out on another search for her? She broke into a run, her heart quickening as she spotted familiar pelts between the trees.

"Tawnypelt!" She called her mentor's name as she saw the tortoiseshell fur, bright against the shadowy forest floor. Cloverfoot and Scorchfur flanked the she-cat, and they turned as they heard Needlepaw's call.

Tawnypelt stared at her, wide eyed, as she raced to meet them. "Needlepaw! You're alive!"

Needlepaw skidded to a halt in front of them.

Tawnypelt's ears were flat with surprise. Her gaze flitted along Needlepaw's flank, wincing as she saw the wounds, dry now but still sore. Cloverfoot and Scorchfur were staring at her as though she had appeared from StarClan.

"How in all the stars did you escape an *owl*?" Tawnypelt gasped.

"I attacked it while it was flying," Needlepaw told them breathlessly. "I managed to swing around and claw it until it dropped me."

"It *dropped* you?" Tawnypelt's fur spiked. "How far did you fall?"

"I don't know. The forest caught me," Needlepaw explained. "The branches broke my fall and I landed in a tree."

"We thought you were dead," Cloverfoot meowed in amazement.

"Tawnypelt said she'd seen the owl carry you off," Scorchfur explained. "No cat's ever escaped from an owl before."

"We sat vigil for you last night," Cloverfoot told her.

Needlepaw blinked. "*You sat vigil*?" She could hardly believe her ears. "Weren't you searching for me?" Her gaze flashed accusingly to Tawnypelt. "I waited for you to come find me."

"I saw the owl take you!" Tawnypelt's eyes were still wide. "You were so limp, I thought it had broken your spine."

Needlepaw swallowed back hurt. How had her Clanmates given up on her so easily? "Didn't you even send out a patrol to search?" Her mew cracked.

Cloverfoot padded closer, brushing her spine reassuringly with her tail. "We didn't think there was a chance of finding you."

"But you could have looked." Needlepaw's eyes felt hot with disappointment.

Tawnypelt met her gaze apologetically. "I really thought you'd been killed."

Paw steps sounded behind Needlepaw. She turned to see Tree padding toward them. "When I found her, she'd sat up all night waiting for you to come," he told them. Reproach edged his mew. "She'd even caught a vole and was saving it for when you got to her."

Tawnypelt's eyes rounded with guilt. "Oh, Needlepaw!" She padded quickly forward and rubbed her nose fiercely along Needlepaw's

jaw, nuzzling her affectionately. "I'm so glad you're alive. It's like a gift from StarClan. Sparrowtail and Berryheart will be overjoyed. I'm sorry I didn't look for you." She stepped back and gazed at Needlepaw. "I underestimated you."

Needlepaw purred, forgetting her hurt as she saw pride and affection in her mentor's gaze. Then she saw Cloverfoot's gaze flit toward Tree.

"This is Tree." She hurried to stand besides her new friend. "He showed me the way home." A thought struck her. She was surprised she hadn't thought of it before. "Perhaps he can come live with ShadowClan. He's clever and brave, and he taught himself to hunt. He'd make a great warrior. He can climb trees and hunt on marshes and in woods and on moors." As she chattered on, she saw the gazes of her Clanmates harden. She trailed off. "I thought ShadowClan would be happy to. . ."

"He's a loner," Tawnypelt meowed. "Loners aren't happy in Clans."

"They find it hard to settle in one place," Cloverfoot agreed.

Needlepaw looked at Tree, searching his gaze. Was he hurt?

He lifted his chin. "You Clanmates are right, Needleapaw," he mewed. "I like to be free to roam wherever I wish. Besides, I was heading away from the lake when I found you. I only came back to make sure you returned to your Clan safely." He dipped his head politely to Tawnypelt. "It's good to meet you," he mewed. "Needlepaw's told me so much about you."

He sounded cheerful, but Needleapaw could hear him hurrying his words, as though he wanted to get away from the awkward conversation as quickly as he could. Pity jabbed her heart. She knew he wasn't a loner out of choice, but because he'd been abandoned. He *must* be hurt that the Clan didn't want him.

"We could ask Rowanstar," she suggested brightly. She looked pleadingly at Tawnypelt.

Tawnypelt shifted her paws. "We are very grateful to Tree for bringing you home, but you heard him; he doesn't want to join our Clan."

You're not exactly making him feel welcome! Needleapaw wanted to wail, but she didn't speak. She felt too helpless. Why were her Clanmates being so mean? And why didn't Tree say how he really felt?

Tree dipped his head. "I must be going." He nodded to the warriors and turned away. "Take care, Needleapaw."

She watched him go, her heart aching. "Perhaps we'll meet another time," she called after him.

He stopped and looked back, his eyes flashing. "I'll check the sky every night for falling cats."

"Come on." Tawnypelt nudged Needleapaw's cheek. "Let's get back to camp. The others will want to know you're alive."

Needlepaw let her mentor guide her a few paces along the track that led toward camp; then she halted. "Wait," she mewed, her heart bursting. "I have to say good-bye properly and thank him."

Tawnypelt narrowed her eyes. "Okay, but be quick. Sparrowtail and Berryheart have been mourning you too long already."

Needlepaw hurried after Tree. He looked so forlorn, padding

between the trees, his tail drooping. "Tree! Wait!"

He stopped as he heard her and turned.

She scrambled to a halt in front of him and reached her nose to touch his. "Thanks, Tree," she panted. "You've been a really good friend. I'm sorry they wouldn't let you join the Clan. I know you'd have been a great Clanmate."

"Your friends are probably right." Tree stared past the bramble where Tawnypelt, Cloverfoot, and Scorchfur had disappeared. "I'd find it hard to settle down."

Needlepaw saw sadness mist his gaze. *I wasn't imagining it!* He *did* want to join the Clan. "Come with me!" she urged. "I'll take you to Rowanstar and explain everything. You can tell him about your mother and your sister and the big tom who stole your home. Once he knows everything, he's bound to let you join."

Tree shook his head. "Your Clanmates will be angry if you go behind their backs. And I don't want to be where I'm not wanted. Besides"—he whisked his tail—"I'm used to being a loner. I can travel where I want and hunt where I like." He met her gaze, staring at her silently for a moment. "I'm glad I met you, though. You're the first real friend I've had."

"I will *always* be your friend," Needlepaw mewed earnestly. She rubbed her cheek against his.

Tree purred and pressed against her before turning away. "Look after yourself," he called as he headed between the trees.

Needlepaw watched him go, her heart aching. Her Clanmates were wrong. Tree would have been a *great* ShadowClan cat.

Tawnypelt's mew rang through the trees. "Hurry up, Needlepaw!"

Scuffing her paws through the pine needles, Needlepaw followed her Clanmates. Irritation jabbed her belly as she trailed after them. If Tawnypelt had been more open-minded, if she'd taken the time to get to know Tree, she would have changed her mind. She grunted angrily to herself. *Just because you're Clan cats doesn't always mean you know what's best for everyone.*