

A STARLESS CLAN

WARRIORS

THUNDER



ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THUNDER

**ERIN
HUNTER**

HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

Special thanks to Kate Cary

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

BRAMBLESTAR—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

DEPUTY

SQUIRRELFIGHT—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes and one white paw

MEDICINE CATS

JAYFEATHER—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

ALDERHEART—dark ginger tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes

BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom

MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

BAYSHINE—golden tabby tom

POPPYFROST—pale tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

LILYHEART—small, dark tabby she-cat with white patches and blue eyes

NIGHTHEART—black tom

BUMBLESTRIPE—very pale gray tom with black stripes

CHERRYFALL—ginger she-cat

MOLEWHISKER—brown-and-cream tom

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

FINCHLIGHT—tortoiseshell she-cat

BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with petal-shaped white patches

IVYPOOL—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

EAGLEWING—ginger she-cat

MYRTLEBLOOM—pale brown she-cat

DEWNOSE—gray-and-white tom

THRIFTEAR—dark gray she-cat

STORMCLOUD—gray tabby tom

HOLLYTUFT—black she-cat

FERNSONG—yellow tabby tom

HONEYFUR—white she-cat with yellow splotches

SPARKPELT—orange tabby she-cat

SORRELSTRIPE—dark brown she-cat

TWIGBRANCH—gray she-cat with green eyes

FINLEAP—brown tom

SHELLFUR—tortoiseshell tom

FERNSTRIPE—gray tabby she-cat

PLUMSTONE—black-and-ginger she-cat

FLIPCLAW—brown tabby tom

LEAFSHADE—tortoiseshell she-cat

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

SPOTFUR—spotted tabby she-cat (mother to Bristlekit, an orange-and-white tabby she-kit; Stemkit, an orange tabby tom; and Graykit, a white tom with gray spots)

ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now retired)

THORNCLAW—golden-brown tabby tom

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes

BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches

BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER

TIGERSTAR—dark brown tabby tom

DEPUTY

CLOVERFOOT—gray tabby she-cat

MEDICINE CATS

PUDDLESHINE—brown tom with white splotches

SHADOWSIGHT—gray tabby tom

WARRIORS

TAWNYPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

STONEWING—white tom

SCORCHFUR—dark gray tom with slashed ears

FLAXFOOT—brown tabby tom

SPARROWTAIL—large brown tabby tom

SNOWBIRD—pure white she-cat with green eyes

YARROWLEAF—ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

BERRYHEART—black-and-white she-cat

GRASSHEART—pale brown tabby she-cat

WHORLPELT—gray-and-white tom

HOPWHISKER—calico she-cat

BLAZEFIRE—white-and-ginger tom

FLOWERSTEM—silver she-cat

SNAKETOOTH—honey-colored tabby she-cat

SLATEFUR—sleek gray tom

POUNCESTEP—gray tabby she-cat

LIGHTLEAP—brown tabby she-cat

GULLSWOOP—white she-cat

SPIRECLAW—black-and-white tom

FRINGEWHISKER—white she-cat with brown splotches

HOLLOWSPRING—black tom

SUNBEAM—brown-and-white tabby she-cat

QUEENS

DOVEWING—pale gray she-cat with green eyes

(mother to Birchkit, a light brown tom)

CINNAMONTAIL—brown tabby she-cat with white paws (mother to Firkit, a brown tabby tom, Streamkit, a gray tabby she-kit, Bloomkit, a black she-kit, and Whisperkit, a gray tom)

ELDERS

OAKFUR—small brown tom

SKYCLAN

LEADER

LEAFSTAR—brown-and-cream tabby she-cat with amber eyes

DEPUTY

HAWKWING—dark gray tom with yellow eyes

MEDICINE CATS

FRECKLEWISH—mottled light brown tabby she-cat with spotted legs

FIDGETFLAKE—black-and-white tom

MEDIATOR

TREE—yellow tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS

SPARROWPELT—dark brown tabby tom

MACGYVER—black-and-white tom

DEWSPRING—sturdy gray tom

ROOTSPRING—yellow tom

NEEDLECLAW—black-and-white she-cat

PLUMWILLOW—dark gray she-cat

SAGENOSE—pale gray tom

KITESCATCH—reddish-brown tom

HARRYBROOK—gray tom

CHERRYTAIL—fluffy tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

CLOUDMIST—white she-cat with yellow eyes

TURTLECRAWL—tortoiseshell she-cat

RABBITLEAP—brown tom

WRENFLIGHT—golden tabby she-cat

REEDCLAW—small pale tabby she-cat

APPRENTICE, BEETLEPAW (white-and-black tabby tom)
MINTFUR—gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes
NETTLESPASH—pale brown tom
TINYCLOUD—small white she-cat
PALESKY—black-and-white she-cat
VIOLETSKINE—black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes
BELLALF—pale orange she-cat with green eyes
QUAILFEATHER—white tom with crow-black ears
PIGEONFOOT—gray-and-white she-cat
GRAVELNOSE—tan tom
SUNNYPELT—ginger she-cat
APPRENTICE, BEEPAW (white-and-tabby she-cat)
NECTARSONG—brown she-cat

QUEENS

BLOSSOMHEART—ginger-and-white she-cat (mother to Ridgekit, a reddish she-kit with a white nose, and Duskit, a white tom with brown paws and ears)

ELDERS

FALLOWFERN—pale brown she-cat who has lost her hearing

WINDCLAN

LEADER

HARESTAR—brown-and-white tom

DEPUTY

CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom

MEDICINE CATS

KESTRELFLIGHT—mottled gray tom with white splotches like kestrel feathers

APPRENTICE, WHISTLEPAW (gray tabby she-cat)

WARRIORS

NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat

BRINDLEWING—mottled brown she-cat

APPLESHINE—yellow tabby she-cat

LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with amber eyes
WOODSONG—brown she-cat
EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark paws
BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes
HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes
CROUCHFOOT—ginger tom
SONGLEAP—tortoiseshell she-cat
SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat
FLUTTERFOOT—brown-and-white tom
SLIGHTFOOT—black tom with white flash on his chest
OATCLAW—pale brown tabby tom
HOOTWHISKER—dark gray tom

QUEENS

LARKWING—pale brown tabby she-cat (mother to Stripekit, a gray tabby tom, and Brookkit, a black-and-white tom)
FEATHERPELT—gray tabby she-cat

ELDERS

WHISKERNOSE—light brown tom
GORSETAIL—very pale gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

RIVERCLAN

MEDICINE CAT

MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat

WARRIORS

DUSKFUR—brown tabby she-cat
MINNOWTAIL—dark gray-and-white she-cat
MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom
PODLIGHT—gray-and-white tom
SHIMMERPELT—silver she-cat
LIZARDTAIL—light brown tom
SNEEZE CLOUD—gray-and-white tom

BRACKENPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat
SPLASHTAIL—brown tabby tom
FOGNOSE—gray-and-white she-cat
HARELIGHT—white tom
APPRENTICE, FROSTPAW (light gray she-cat with blue eyes)
ICEWING—white she-cat with blue eyes
APPRENTICE, MISTPAW (tortoiseshell-and-white tabby she-cat)
OWLNOSE—brown tabby tom
GORSECLAW—white tom with gray ears
NIGHTSKY—dark gray she-cat with blue eyes
BREEZEHEART—brown-and-white she-cat
APPRENTICE, GRAYPAW (silver tabby tom)

QUEENS

HAVENPELT—black-and-white she-cat

ELDERS

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

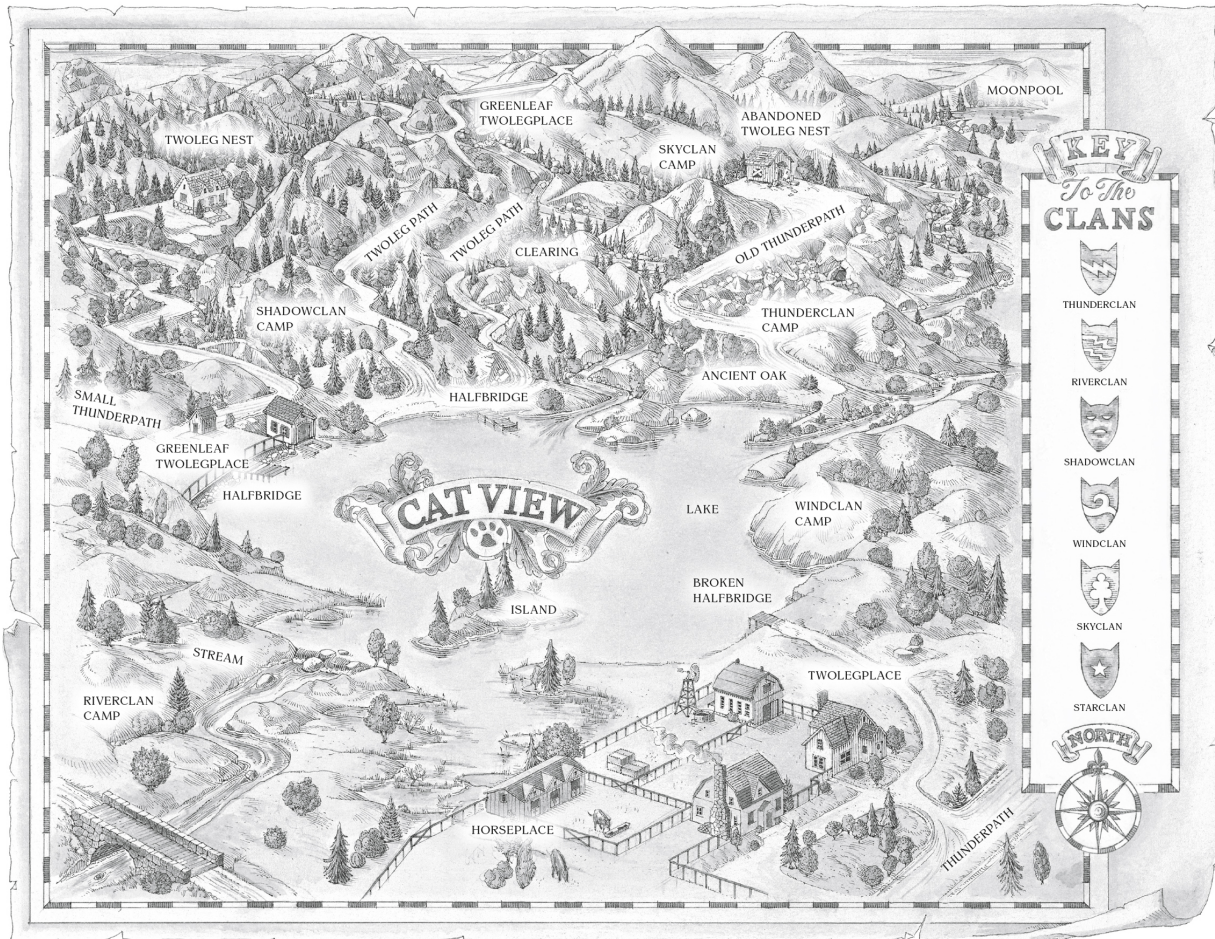
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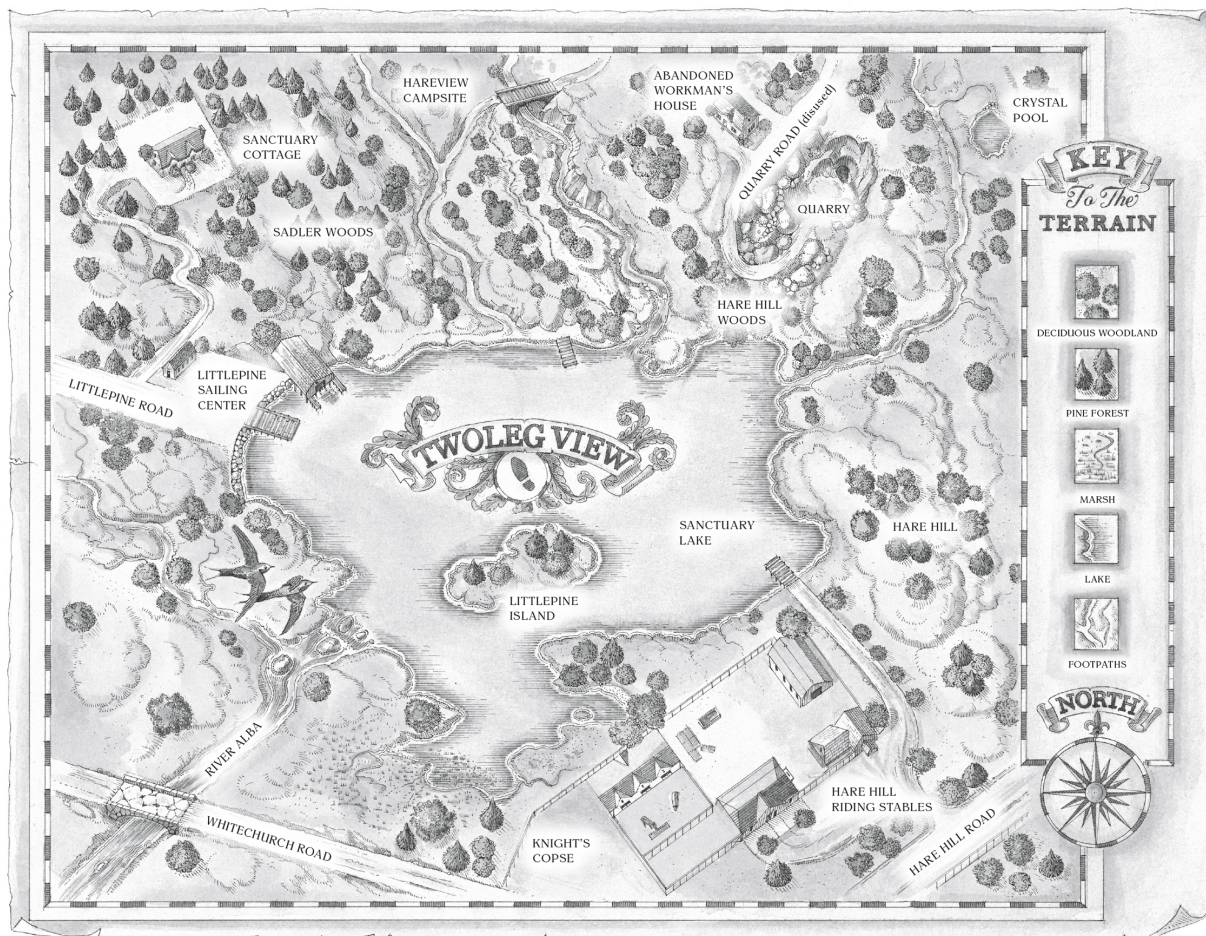
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Prologue



"Did you know she'd suffer?" Windstar looked in dismay at Riverstar.

Riverstar didn't look at her; he kept staring into the pool. Her words pierced his heart, but he couldn't let them sway him. This was the only way. "It can't be changed," he growled.

Shadowstar, Skystar, and Thunderstar sat beside him, hunched over, their eyes dark as they gazed into the crystal water. The smooth surface didn't reflect the StarClan sky. Instead it showed the RiverClan camp. It was night there. Only a few cats lingered in the watery moonlight, finishing the last of the prey, talking in hushed whispers, while a ShadowClan warrior padded softly around, peering into the dens and sniffing around the camp wall. Another stood at the edge of the clearing, waiting for the last of the RiverClan cats to go to their nests for the night.

The image in the pool shifted. It swung toward the moor, skimmed the heather, faster than a hawk, and slowed as it homed in on a young, light gray she-cat lying alone beneath the stars. She was barely moving. Blood ran from the wound on her neck, gleaming as it soaked her chest fur.

Windstar's pelt pricked with alarm. "She's dying."

"This wasn't her destiny!" Thunderstar mewed imploringly. "She was never meant to be a medicine cat."

"No." Riverstar's tail twitched. "But things have changed. If RiverClan is to survive, it needs a messenger. A *powerful* messenger."

"Even if it kills her?" Shadowstar gasped.

"She's strong," Riverstar growled.

"There must be another way!" The ShadowClan founder protested.

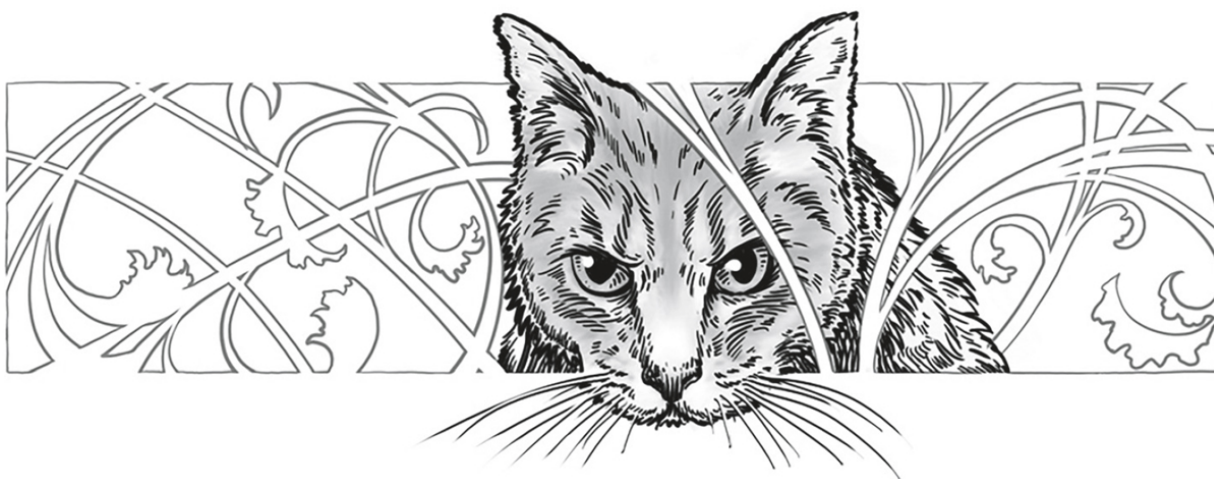
"You can't let her die!" Even Skystar sounded shocked.

"I believe in her." Riverstar was still watching the young she-cat. "She's stronger than any cat I've seen in generations."

"Strong enough for *this*?" Windstar sounded angry.

"RiverClan is mine," Riverstar growled. "This is my choice to make." He leaned closer to the pool. "Frostpaw will find the strength

to survive. I'm sure of it. She will be the one to save her Clan."



Chapter 1



Trust no cat. The words pierced the fog of pain that had wrapped itself around Frostpaw. Blackness swirled at the edge of her consciousness, but she fought it, fear surging toward her like a flood. *I mustn't die.* Hot blood poured from the wound in her neck and grew cold where it soaked her chest fur, and she could smell it, mingled with the dank odor of peat and heather. The scent filled her nose and bathed her tongue. She felt sick and began to shiver as the icy grip of the moor seemed to harden around her where she'd fallen, hidden by night, far from home, far from safety.

But was home *safe* anymore? The thought pressed a fresh thorn of fear into her heart. Who had attacked her? She stared into the darkness, her ears pricked, fighting back the exhaustion that wanted to drag her into the earth. Were they still nearby? Panic shrilled through every hair on her pelt. Would they burst at any moment from the heather to finish her off?

Why had she come here? She felt like a kit, floundering in the river as it swirled her toward a waterfall. She grasped at memories as though clutching for stones in the riverbed—*anything* to slow her thoughts, to stop her being swept over the edge into darkness.

The vision! She'd watched the RiverClan deputy die! But why had StarClan sent her a vision *now*, after she'd admitted to the whole Clan that she had no connection with them and that her previous visions had been no more than her imagination trying to give her Clanmates the answer they craved? RiverClan had wanted StarClan to decide who their next leader should be, and they'd been waiting for her to tell them. She'd done her best—at the Moonpool and in her dreams. She'd strained to understand StarClan's wishes. But the vague images she'd conjured in her mind had never led to the right answer; instead, they had just produced a series of wrong ones.

This vision of Reedwhisker's death had been different. It had been *real*. Even though she was a warrior apprentice now, she'd known in her bones it was true. Just hours before, Harelight had been teaching her how to fish when the river had faded in front of her

and she'd found herself looking through the eyes of the cat who'd attacked Reedwhisker and pushed him over the cliff.

The vision had terrified her. She'd told Splashtail about it. She'd planned to tell Whistlepaw; she wanted to ask the WindClan medicine-cat apprentice's advice. That was why she'd come to the moor.

She'd been so close to the WindClan camp. She'd almost reached it when she'd heard paw steps behind her and turned, hoping to find Whistlepaw. Instead she'd seen the shape of a cat hidden in shadow, and a paw had come out of the night and slashed her throat. Perhaps if she could reach the camp now, she could get help.

She tried to struggle to her paws. Pain clawed into her. Weakness made her legs fold beneath her, and she fell back against the earth. Why struggle to reach the WindClan camp? She didn't even know it was safe. She didn't know if *anywhere* was safe.

The heather rustled beside her. Her heart began beating so hard she felt sure it would give her away. *They've come back!* Terror gripped her like badger jaws. *I'm going to die.*

Overwhelmed by panic, Frostpaw thought she glimpsed pale brown fur and caught a familiar scent. *Curlfeather!* Hope surged in her chest. Her mother had come to save her! She yearned for Curlfeather's touch and, reaching desperately for the warmth of her fur, fell into darkness.

She opened her eyes to find that dawn had washed the night from the moor and the heather was soaked with rosy sunlight. The wound on her neck had dried. She could feel the scab crack when she moved her head. *I'm alive.* The thought surprised her. A shaft of sunshine sliced through the branches, and she screwed up her eyes. There was no warmth in the dazzling brightness. There was no warmth anywhere. She was freezing.

Paw steps scuffed the earth beyond the wall of heather. Frostpaw's breath caught in her throat as they padded closer. Her attacker?

The bushes rustled beside her. Frostpaw pressed herself against the earth as though she could disappear into it as a cat pushed their way through. She strained to recognize the strange cat, but mist

swam across her vision. Fear was shaking her like a fox shaking its prey, and she heard a low growl. It was rolling in her own throat. *Is that me?*

The cat dropped into a crouch beside her. "You're hurt."

"Leave me alone!" Frostpaw tried to wriggle away. Terror pulsed like fire through her body. She felt her wound split, and blood soaked her fur once more.

Fierce paws pushed her back. "Stay still!" The mew sounded scared. "You're making it worse."

Frostpaw froze. She heard moss being ripped from the earth beside her, smelled its peaty scent as it rolled over her, and felt it being pushed against her throat. Paws pressed into her neck. *This cat's trying to kill me!* She struggled but had no strength to escape. *Help!* She felt too terrified to push out any sound. Then she realized there was no sharpness in the paws at her neck, no claws, no tearing of flesh, only a strong, steady pressure that held her still.

"It's okay." The cat spoke softly, like a mother to her kit. "I'm going to help you."

Confused, Frostpaw stopped trying to fight and lay still.

Her fear began to ease. She became aware of the cat's scent. It was WindClan. The gray tabby fur seemed familiar. She smelled herbs and found herself looking into a face she'd seen many times before. "Whistlepaw." Her mew was no more than a whisper.

"Didn't you recognize me?" Whistlepaw sounded surprised.

"I thought they'd come back."

"Who?" Whistlepaw was still pressing her paws against Frostpaw's wound. "Who did this to you?"

"I don't know."

"Well, there's no cat around now." Whistlepaw sat back on her haunches.

Frostpaw began to push herself to her paws.

"No!" Whistlepaw reached for her throat again. "Don't get up. I've stopped the bleeding for now, but it'll start again if you move." She leaned back again as Frostpaw stopped struggling. "I need to get help." Whistlepaw glanced around.

Panic sparked in Frostpaw's chest. "No!" she gasped. "You can't tell any cat."

"But you're hurt," Whistlepaw mewed. "You need help. Stay still while I fetch Kestrelflight."

"No!" Frostpaw's panic spiraled.

"But he'll know what to do." Whistlepaw's eyes were glittering with alarm. "This is beyond me."

"*No cat* can know I'm here," Frostpaw rasped.

"What about the cat who hurt you?" Whistlepaw mewed. "We need to get you somewhere safe."

Frostpaw stared at her imploringly. "Nowhere's safe," she mewed.

Whistlepaw frowned. "But I can't leave you here," she mewed. "You might die."

"You could fix me up, though," Frostpaw begged. "Just enough that I can get away."

"Get away *where*?" Whistlepaw looked unconvinced.

"Somewhere no cat can find me."

"You'd be safest in our camp," Whistlepaw insisted. "Kestrelflight can treat your wound properly, and I'll make sure no cat hurts you again."

Frostpaw's heart began to pound. "How?" she mewed. "We don't know who did this. It could be any cat. It could be one of your Clanmates."

"You think a *WindClan* cat tried to kill you?" Whistlepaw looked shocked.

"I don't know!" Frostpaw felt more helpless than ever. She had to convince Whistlepaw to keep this a secret. But the WindClan she-cat was frightened, and fear might make her tell. "Please," she begged. "Please don't say anything."

Whistlepaw shifted uncertainly. "Okay," she agreed. "For now I'm going to get some herbs to fix you up the best I can. Don't move until I get back." The gray tabby medicine-cat apprentice slid back into the heather.

Frostpaw watched her go. *Can I trust her?* She had no choice. She wanted to creep away, but Whistlepaw was right: her wound would reopen if she moved. Now that she was alone once more, exhaustion seeped back into Frostpaw's limbs. The rush of desperation that had given her the energy to argue with Whistlepaw seemed to drain away. But she was still scared. *What about the cat*

who hurt you? Whistlepaw's words haunted her. They could still be close. She'd have to play dead.

Frostpaw lay stiff, like prey, but unsheathed her claws. She wouldn't die without a fight. She stared at the bushes ahead, ears pricked, alert for the sound of paw steps. *I have to figure out who did this.* She struggled to piece together what had happened. Who could want to silence her? She'd been with Harelight when she'd had the vision. She'd been close to the RiverClan camp when she'd told Splashtail. She'd been attacked on WindClan land. What was the link? Above her, the dawn lost its glow, brightened into day, became brittle as the sun lifted over the moor. Her thoughts grew foggy. She glimpsed an idea, lost sight of it, then glimpsed another for a moment before it disappeared. Her eyes felt heavy. *I mustn't sleep.* Mothwing had taught her that sleep could cure, but that if a cat was weak enough, it could kill. She fought it, straining to stay awake, but still the moor seemed to fold over her and darkness consumed her.

"Frostpaw."

Whistlepaw's urgent whisper dragged Frostpaw back into consciousness. She smelled thyme and felt poppy seeds on her lips.

"Swallow," Whistlepaw ordered.

Frostpaw licked the leaf crumbs and seeds from around her mouth as she opened her eyes. Whistlepaw was peeling away the blood-soaked moss. She had a heap of cobweb and goosegrass beside her and was chewing herbs into a poultice. She lapped the ointment into Frostpaw's wound. Frostpaw winced at the pain but held still, recognizing the scent of oak leaf and marigold, remembering from her training that they would fight infection.

Finally Whistlepaw draped cobweb over the gash and gently wound the sticky goosegrass around her neck to hold it in place.

She sat back. "How are you feeling?"

The poppy seeds were already easing Frostpaw's pain and, with the thyme, had taken the edge off her fear. But she was still freezing.

"I need to get you somewhere warm where you can heal," Whistlepaw mewed. She was frowning again. "I'm not sure if the herbs I've given you are enough. Are you sure you won't let me take you back to the medicine den? I promise you'll be safe there." She blinked hopefully at Frostpaw.

"No." The thought of being trapped in a den, in another Clan's camp, made Frostpaw's heart begin thumping once more. "It's too dangerous."

Whistlepaw's eyes shone with worry. "Please let me help you."

"No." Frostpaw wished she could shrug off the exhaustion clawing at her limbs. "Some cat tried to kill me and I don't know who. I need to hide." She was the only one who knew that Reedwhisker had been murdered, besides the murderer. "I need to find a way to protect my Clan."

"But you can't protect them if you die here," Whistlepaw mewed. "Please let me fetch Kestrelflight."

"You mustn't tell!" Frostpaw glared at her desperately. "You *have* to keep this secret. Tell no cat what's happened, not even Kestrelflight. Whoever did this must think I'm dead. I need time to figure out what to do."



Chapter 2



Nightheart was purring. *Sunbeam* seemed to be settling into ThunderClan so easily. His heart still fluttered with joy that she'd come. That they could be together after all. They lay, pelts touching, in a patch of fading sunshine at the edge of the stone hollow next to Bayshine and Myrtlebloom. The last hunting patrol had just returned, and Fernstripe, Flipclaw, and Sorrelstripe would be leaving soon for the evening border patrol. For now, though, they seemed to be hanging back, as though they didn't want to go.

Bayshine was teasing Myrtlebloom. "Sunbeam snores way less than *some* of our denmates." He looked at her pointedly.

"Are you saying I snore?" Myrtlebloom shot back.

"Maybe." Bayshine winked at her.

"I didn't hear you snore," Sunbeam told Myrtlebloom.

"See?" Myrtlebloom sniffed at Bayshine, then nodded toward the warriors' den. "I fixed up your nest earlier," she told Sunbeam.

"Really?" Sunbeam had spent her first night in the ThunderClan camp in a hastily gathered pile of ferns beside Nightheart. "Thanks."

"I helped," Nightheart mewed quickly. "We wove the ferns together and lined it with moss."

Sunbeam nudged his cheek with her nose. "Thanks."

Bayshine looked at her warmly. "I hope the warriors' den isn't too crowded for you."

"It is kind of crowded," Sunbeam mewed. "Not that I mind," she added hastily. "ShadowClan's warriors' den is just bigger, that's all." She hesitated. "Not that ThunderClan's den is too small. It's just that . . ."

Sunbeam was floundering. Nightheart felt a flash of sympathy for her as her mew faded away. He knew that being a new warrior in another Clan was complicated; he remembered what it had been like when he'd moved to ShadowClan. He hadn't wanted to seem disloyal to ThunderClan, but he had wanted ShadowClan to see that he was serious about becoming a ShadowClan warrior. He ran his tail along Sunbeam's flank. "It's always strange sleeping somewhere new," he mewed reassuringly.

He still couldn't believe she'd followed him when he'd returned to his birth Clan. She'd appeared the day before and announced in front of every cat that she loved him so much she wanted to join ThunderClan. He purred louder as he remembered. "I'm just glad you're sleeping beside me."

Bayshine began to wash his face, then paused and blinked at Sunbeam. "Did Nightheart tell you about the time he put a live vole on the fresh-kill pile?" he mewed. "He thought he'd killed it, but when Squirrelflight picked it up, it bit her on the chin."

Myrtlebloom purred. "What about the time he got stuck in the Sky Oak?"

Heat spread through Nightheart's pelt. "Okay, okay." He waved his tail at his two friends. Would they mention how many times he'd failed his assessment next? "Sunbeam doesn't have to know every embarrassing mistake I made when I was an apprentice."

"Yes, I do." Sunbeam's whiskers twitched. "I want to know everything about you."

Lilyheart and Sparkpelt were padding toward them.

Bayshine's eyes sparkled mischievously. "What about the time he got stuck headfirst in a rabbit burrow and Lilyheart had to dig him out?" He blinked at the small, dark tabby she-cat as she reached them. "You remember that, right?"

"Of course." Lilyheart's whiskers twitched. "But he did manage to catch a rabbit while he was down there." She glanced affectionately at Nightheart.

Sparkpelt halted beside her. "Nightheart always found his own way of doing things."

Nightheart eyed his mother uncertainly. Was she criticizing him?

She hadn't finished. "I really think he has the makings of a great warrior."

Nightheart relaxed. Since he'd returned, his mother had been treating him as though he were a different cat from the one who'd left ThunderClan. It felt like she respected him now.

He watched Sparkpelt as she dipped her head to Sunbeam. "I'm pleased he's found a mate who loves him enough to switch Clans," she mewed. "He deserves it."

Nightheart blinked at her. Perhaps it was good that he'd left. *But I'm glad I came back.*

"If you need any help finding your way around ThunderClan territory, just let me know," Lilyheart told Sunbeam. "I'll be happy to show you around."

Nightheart felt a wave of gratitude to his former mentor. To *all* his Clanmates. Before he'd left, he'd felt criticized and unappreciated, as though no cat in his Clan—not even his kin—had really understood him. It was the reason he'd decided to join ShadowClan. Not the only reason, of course. He glanced at Sunbeam. The white patches in her soft brown fur looked snowy in the early evening light. He'd wanted to become her mate. But now that he'd returned, he felt accepted and valued in a way he never had before. Even Finchlight, his littermate, had welcomed him home warmly, as though she'd never been angry at him for leaving.

Joining ShadowClan had been tough. Sunbeam's mother, Berryheart, seemed to have a grudge against any cat who hadn't been born in ShadowClan. But that wasn't why he'd come home. He'd left too many things unresolved here, and it had been hard to witness Bramblestar struggling as ThunderClan's leader. He'd wanted to help. And now that conflict loomed between the Clans, he knew he had to stand with the warriors who'd raised him.

His pelt prickled uneasily at that thought. Sunbeam was still chatting with Sparkpelt and Bayshine. She seemed so at home. But what would she do if ThunderClan found itself at war with ShadowClan? She'd already admitted to him that she didn't know if she'd be able to fight her former Clanmates. Faced with a battle against ShadowClan, would she stay?

"Should we share out the prey?" Poppyfrost mewed from beside the fresh-kill pile, which still lay untouched.

"Is there enough?" Lionblaze padded toward the pile. It looked full, but Lionblaze seemed worried. The golden warrior had been on edge all day. "Perhaps we should send out another hunting patrol," he mewed.

"It's a little late, isn't it?" Poppyfrost frowned. "Besides, Squirrelflight and Bramblestar will be leaving for the Moonpool soon. We should all be here to see them off." She glanced at Squirrelflight

as though hoping for an answer, but the ThunderClan deputy didn't seem to have heard her. She was pacing at the bottom of the rock tumble, lost in thought.

Ivypool crossed the clearing. "It's never too late to catch prey," she mewed. "A hunting patrol could go out with the border patrol once Squirrelflight and Bramblestar have left."

"It sounds like a good idea to me." Bramblestar was stretching below the Highledge. The ThunderClan leader looked more relaxed than he had in moons. "Are you ready, Squirrelflight?"

At the sound of her name, Squirrelflight finally looked around. "Almost." She glanced at Alderheart. The dark ginger medicine cat was darting back and forth, gathering up the poppy seeds Jayfeather was scattering as he tried to ease them with his claws from a dried seed head. "You should have something to eat," Squirrelflight called to him. Her gaze flicked toward Nightheart. "And you," she mewed.

"Me?" He blinked at her in surprise.

"I want you to come with us."

Nightheart saw his mother's gaze light up with pride. He felt a rush of joy. Had Squirrelflight chosen him to show him that she trusted him? That she respected him as a warrior now? The thought pleased him, but anxiety tugged in his belly. Going with Squirrelflight and Bramblestar to the Moonpool would mean leaving Sunbeam with the Clan. They'd be kind to her, but she might feel uncomfortable alone with Clanmates she barely knew. He looked at her. "Will you be okay?" he whispered.

"Yes." She lifted her chin. She must have guessed what an honor this was. "I think I can survive *one* night without you." She was making light of it, but he knew by the prickling of her pelt along her spine that she was nervous.

The Clan began taking prey from the pile. Poppyfrost carried a shrew to Alderheart and dropped a mouse beside Nightheart.

Nightheart offered to share his mouse with Sunbeam, but she insisted he eat it all and shared a squirrel with Myrtlebloom instead. His paws were fizzing with excitement. He could barely swallow, but he forced himself to eat every morsel. He could still hardly believe he'd been asked to join Squirrelflight and Bramblestar on one of the most important journeys of their lives.

At last, the sun disappeared behind the treetops and Squirrelflight padded to the middle of the clearing. She looked around at the warriors scattered around the camp.

"We'll be back before sunhigh," she promised as Bramblestar got to his paws and crossed the camp to stand beside her. "And when we return, I hope StarClan will have accepted me as your leader."

Lionblaze's pelt ruffled. "Are you determined to do this?"

"It's okay if you want to change your mind," Poppyfrost added.

"We're not changing our minds," Squirrelflight told her.

"We've given it a lot of thought." Bramblestar's gaze was solemn. "Squirrelflight will make a better leader than I can be now."

"You might feel differently in a few moons," Lilyheart called. "Once you've rested, you might feel like your old self."

Bramblestar looked back at her darkly. "I don't think I'll ever be my old self again," he mewed. "But I can still be a good Clanmate, even in the elders' den. I think we all know that this is what's best for ThunderClan."

Nightheart could remember how courageous and energetic Bramblestar had been before Ashfur had stolen his body. Bramblestar's soul had roamed the forest for moons, unseen and unheard, neither dead nor alive, until the villainous warrior had finally been driven out. The experience, and his time as a captive in the Dark Forest, had changed the ThunderClan leader. He'd struggled for moons now, his energy sapped and his concentration in tatters, and Nightheart was relieved that the noble warrior he'd admired and respected since he was a kit was now taking time to care for himself.

His Clanmates murmured uneasily to each other. Even though Bramblestar would be happier as an elder than as leader, the change clearly worried them.

Sparkpelt stepped forward, shooting a challenging glance at her Clanmates. "Squirrelflight will make a great leader," she called out confidently.

"It's right she should take Bramblestar's place," Twigbranch agreed.

"But what if StarClan refuses to give her nine lives?" Lionblaze fretted. "We don't know that they'll agree to this plan."

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it." Squirrelflight swished her tail. "For now, I want you to know that ThunderClan will not change. You will have a new leader and a new deputy, but you will still have the loyal and courageous hearts of ThunderClan warriors."

A new deputy? Nightheart glanced at Lionblaze. The golden warrior had served as deputy when Squirrelflight had been temporary leader. He looked anxious, shifting on his paws, while his mate, Cinderheart, stood close, as though trying to reassure him.

"Ivypool." Squirrelflight was staring at the silver-and-white tabby she-cat. "When I return, if StarClan accepts me as leader, I will name you deputy."

Nightheart felt a glimmer of surprise. Ivypool was gazing steadily back at Squirrelflight. They must have discussed it already. Why *should* he be surprised? Everyone knew Ivypool was a brilliant warrior. She'd gone undercover in the Dark Forest as a young cat to help the Clans fight evil cats who'd conspired to destroy the living Clans. And her daughter, Bristlefrost, had given her life fighting the same dark forces moons later.

Squirrelflight went on. "You've always been a loyal and brave ThunderClan cat, even as an apprentice," she mewed. "I know you will serve your Clan with courage and honor."

Ivypool dipped her head. "I will protect them with my life," she mewed.

Nightheart glanced at Lionblaze. The golden warrior looked relieved. Was he glad Squirrelflight hadn't chosen him? He lifted his voice to yowl the new deputy's name.

"Ivypool!"

"Ivypool!" Fernsong called his mate's name, his eyes glowing with pride. Twigbranch joined in enthusiastically, while around the clearing the ThunderClan warriors nodded to each other. Clearly, they approved of their soon-to-be-leader's decision. They called the name of their new deputy, their breath billowing into the chilly leaf-fall air as the last rays of sunshine faded.

"Ivypool!"

"Ivypool!"

Squirrelflight spoke again as their chanting died away. "One of your first duties," she told Ivypool, "will be to come up with three trials

for Sunbeam to prove her loyalty to her new Clan.” Squirrelflight blinked warmly at the brown-and-white she-cat, and Nightheart felt his future mate shift beside him. He glanced at her and saw her eyes glistening eagerly. *She really wants to be a ThunderClan warrior.* His heart swelled. He didn’t want to leave her alone in camp. *She must be nervous as well as excited about the trials.* Even if Ivypool’s tests weren’t as dangerous and difficult as the trials Berryheart had set for him, they would need to be challenging enough for Sunbeam to earn her place as a ThunderClan warrior. Perhaps he should stay with her tonight and ask Squirrelflight to choose another cat to join the patrol.

But being asked was an honor. He didn’t want to refuse it, and not just because he was flattered; he couldn’t help feeling that Sunbeam wasn’t the only warrior who needed to prove they would be brave and loyal to ThunderClan from now on.

Alderheart had ducked into the medicine den. He returned now, three leaf wraps dangling from his jaws. He laid two beside Bramblestar and Squirrelflight, then carried the other to Nightheart and dropped it at his paws. “Traveling herbs,” he mewed. “We’ll be walking most of the night. They’ll give you energy.”

Nightheart’s belly was still full from the shrew, but he unrolled the leaf with his paws and lapped the herbs up anyway. Excitement flickered in his belly, and as Squirrelflight and Bramblestar headed for the entrance, he turned to Sunbeam.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” He blinked at her anxiously.

“Of course.” She nudged him away. “You’d better hurry. They’re leaving.” Alderheart was following Squirrelflight and Bramblestar out of camp.

“We’ll take care of her,” Bayshine called as Nightheart padded after them.

Finchlight was heading toward Sunbeam. “Don’t worry,” she told Nightheart as she passed him. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t feel lonely.”

Nightheart blinked gratefully at his littermate and glanced back once more at Sunbeam. She waved him on with her tail. *She’ll be fine,* he told himself as he ducked out of camp, ignoring the tug of guilt in his chest.

They headed to the WindClan border and followed the trail upward, tracking the edge of the moor as it rose into the night sky. Stars were twinkling above them. *Is StarClan watching us?* wondered Nightheart, looking up at them.

Bramblestar was pushing ahead; the broad-shouldered tabby led the patrol with a confidence Nightheart hadn't seen in moons. *He feels this is the right decision.* Squirrelflight followed more slowly, her tail twitching occasionally. Would StarClan grant her nine lives? What must it feel like to have so much time stretching ahead? Would Bramblestar mind living with only one life again like an ordinary ThunderClan cat?

He didn't seem to be worried. He led their patrol along the track that met the stream bubbling down from the high moor, and they followed the stony path that ran beside it.

"Sunbeam seems like a good warrior," Bramblestar called over his shoulder to Nightheart as he scrambled up a rise where the stream tumbled between steep rocks.

"She is." Nightheart caught up to him. "She's a great hunter, and Tigerstar thinks a lot of her. That's why he asked her to go on the mission to find catmint."

"If I hadn't asked you to join the same patrol, she might not be joining ThunderClan now." Bramblestar glanced at him teasingly. "You should thank me for getting you two together."

"I'm glad you did," Nightheart purred.

Bramblestar swished his tail. "I'm sure Sunbeam would have noticed you even without the patrol," he mewed.

"Do you think so?"

"Of course."

Was it true? Sunbeam hadn't seemed too pleased when Nightheart had first turned up in ShadowClan. He'd claimed he wanted only to be with her, but she'd known there had been other reasons he'd left ThunderClan. Still, it had all worked out. She loved him now and he loved her. He wondered how she was doing in the camp without him. Would Finchlight really make sure she wasn't lonely? He felt a glimmer of unease, remembering Berryheart's hostility. *My kin are nothing like Berryheart,* he told himself. *They don't think switching Clans is wrong.*

The path was growing steeper, and as the patrol reached the top of a rise, Nightheart glimpsed SkyClan's forest in the distance. He shivered. Leafstar had warned Tigerstar in no uncertain terms that unless he withdrew his warriors from RiverClan's land soon, she would drive him out, and Squirrelflight had agreed with her. If Squirrelflight became leader, war with ShadowClan would be a real possibility. Sunbeam would *have* to pick a side. *I hope she picks ThunderClan.* His heart seemed to tighten into a knot. Was that fair? *All her kin are in ShadowClan.*

It would be best if she never had to choose. "Squirrelflight." Nightheart glanced at the ThunderClan deputy. "Would you really join SkyClan in a battle against ShadowClan?"

She brushed past him. "We've more important things to worry about right now."

He dropped back as she fell in beside Bramblestar. "Why's she so worried?" he mewed softly to Alderheart. "Doesn't she want to be leader?"

"She's worried StarClan might not accept her," Alderheart told him.

"What happens if they don't?" Nightheart asked.

Squirrelflight heard him. "That's a good question." She turned her muzzle toward Bramblestar. "Will you remain leader?"

"Yes." Bramblestar sounded resigned. "I would never leave ThunderClan without a leader."

"Good." Squirrelflight's mew was brisk. "We've seen what kind of trouble that can cause." She was clearly thinking of RiverClan and the chaos they'd been in since Mistystar's sudden death.

Nightheart was relieved that Bramblestar would never allow that to happen to ThunderClan, but he noticed his leader's shoulders sagging. The thought of continuing to head the Clan clearly felt like a burden he didn't want to carry.

Alderheart must have seen it too. "There's no reason StarClan will refuse," he mewed. "This isn't the first time a leader has retired and passed the leadership to another cat. Rowanstar did it. StarClan gave his son Tigerheart nine lives without question, making him Tigerstar. They realize that a Clan can't survive without a strong leader."

A strong leader. Nightheart thought he saw Bramblestar flinch at the words. Did he feel he'd let his Clan down?

Squirrelflight didn't seem to notice. Her tail was twitching irritably. "Tigerstar may be a strong leader, but if they can see what he's doing now, StarClan might regret giving him nine lives," she growled.

Bramblestar looked at her. "He's done more good for the Clans than bad," he mewed. "He stood against Ashfur and took in the cats he drove from their Clans."

"He seems like a good leader to me," Nightheart ventured. While he'd been in ShadowClan, Tigerstar had seemed wise and reasonable.

"I'm not sure RiverClan would agree with you," Squirrelflight mewed.

"Not right now, perhaps," Bramblestar conceded. "But once they've survived this, they may come to appreciate Tigerstar's intervention."

Squirrelflight grunted but didn't argue. The Moonpool hollow was looming ahead of them. The steep boulders that led up to it were swathed in shadow. As the patrol reached them, Nightheart looked up at the rim. Anxiety sparked through his pelt. Would StarClan really allow this change of leadership?

Squirrelflight's eyes were dark, and Bramblestar's shoulders were stiff, as though he was bracing himself for whatever outcome awaited him. He leaped first up the steep slope and disappeared over the top as Squirrelflight followed. Nightheart waited for Alderheart to climb, then jumped up after him, concentrating on his footing as he scrambled from one boulder to another until at last he reached the top.

The hollow spread out below him, bathed in moonlight. The encircling cliffs sheltered the patrol from the cold wind. At the bottom, the Moonpool was as still as ice and as black as night. Even from here, Nightheart could see the moon reflecting on the surface, and a shiver ran along his spine. Did StarClan know they were coming? Could they see them here at the edge of the hollow? He looked up at the stars glittering in the night sky. So many dead warriors. Were they watching him now?

"Stay here." Squirrelflight nodded to Nightheart. "Keep watch. Stop any cat who comes." Nightheart lifted his chin, trying to hide his anxiety. Did she want him to fight? "We don't want to be interrupted." She looked darkly at Bramblestar. "Are you ready?" He nodded and her gaze flicked to Alderheart. "Ready?"

Alderheart dipped his head. "Yes."

As the dark ginger medicine cat led Squirrelflight down the smooth stone slope, Nightheart wondered how he felt guiding her and Bramblestar through such an important event. They were his parents, after all.

Bramblestar blinked at Nightheart. "If any cat does come," he mewed softly, "ask them to wait, but don't put yourself in danger."

"Okay." Nightheart dipped his head. His heart was pounding. If StarClan did transfer leadership to Squirrelflight, would war with ShadowClan be inevitable? Would it mean losing Sunbeam? He watched as Bramblestar padded toward the Moonpool, following the dimpled pathway of ancient paw steps that spiraled down into the hollow. So many cats had passed this way. He knew that his worries were like tiny grains of sand in the great swath of Clan history, and yet they felt greater than the wide sky above him. *Please let Sunbeam stay with me.*

He could see Squirrelflight at the water's edge. She looked strong and sleek. Bramblestar seemed worn and tired beside her. Alderheart pressed against him as they stood beside the pool. Then they crouched and, together, touched their noses to the water.

Nightheart shifted his paws uneasily. If StarClan accepted Squirrelflight as leader, the decision to go to war would rest in her paws alone. Would she really join Leafstar against ShadowClan? He forced himself to hope. Perhaps StarClan would warn her against it. Or, perhaps, once Squirrelflight felt the responsibility of leadership for real, she'd be reluctant to send warriors into battle.

And yet, whatever she decided, Nightheart would do his part as a loyal ThunderClan warrior. ThunderClan was his Clan again. It would be forever. And he was sure that Squirrelflight was the right cat to lead it.



Chapter 3



Sunbeam followed the rest of her patrol back into the moonlit camp. As Nightheart had left, Ivypool had asked her to join a hunting patrol with Myrtlebloom, Poppyfrost, and Finchlight. She dropped the plump young rabbit she'd been carrying onto the fresh-kill pile and wondered if Nightheart and the others had reached the Moonpool yet.

It felt strange to be here without him, as though she'd wandered into the wrong camp by mistake. But she'd chosen to come, and once Nightheart returned, she'd feel more at ease. She was sure that one day this echoing stone hollow, crowded at the edges by bushes and trees, would feel as much like home as the quiet, calm ShadowClan camp.

As the patrol broke up and Myrtlebloom padded toward the warriors' den with Bayshine, Sunbeam lingered next to the fresh-kill pile and looked around the clearing. Warriors were dotted around the edges. *Is there anyone I could sit with?* Poppyfrost had settled beside Lionblaze, but when the golden tom caught Sunbeam watching them, he narrowed his eyes warily. *Okay—guess I won't be sitting with them!* Sunbeam glanced in the other direction, where Lilyheart took a mouse and laid it in front of a cat Sunbeam was pretty sure was called Honeyfur. Meanwhile, Ivypool watched with round, dark eyes from the Highledge. Did ThunderClan warriors always stay up this late, or were they anxious about what was happening at the Moonpool?

Should I go to my nest? It might seem rude when everyone else was still awake. Besides, she wasn't tired. She was too uneasy. But where should she sit? Beside Myrtlebloom and Bayshine? They'd been kind to her all day, and Myrtlebloom had quietly shown her the ThunderClan way of tracking prey while they'd hunted.

ThunderClan's oak forest wasn't as dense as ShadowClan's pines. Moonlight seemed to betray her every move. Even worse, the trees were losing their leaves, which pines never did, so she felt exposed beneath the sky. And the ThunderClan cats worked more closely than ShadowClan hunters, always with one eye on their

Clanmates and one on the prey, judging which way their denmates would move before moving themselves. It was an efficient way to hunt, and they'd caught three mice, a rabbit, and a squirrel. But Sunbeam missed the sense of freedom she'd had as a ShadowClan hunter. She'd enjoyed prowling away from the group and bringing back prey she'd caught by herself. Scaring a mouse into another cat's paws seemed like cheating.

Myrtlebloom noticed Sunbeam hesitating. She beckoned her over with a nod, and Sunbeam, relieved, went to sit beside the pale brown she-cat. "Nice hunting," Myrtlebloom mewed. "I can see you're not used to working with a team, but you have quick reactions and a good nose for prey."

Sunbeam dipped her head, not sure whether to be grateful for Myrtlebloom's praise. Why did the ThunderClan she-cat seem so surprised? Then she noticed Finchlight and Sparkpelt talking, their heads close, their gazes on her, and fluffed out her pelt self-consciously, stiffening as they began to head toward her.

Finchlight stopped by the fresh-kill pile and grabbed a mouse from the top. She dropped it beside Sunbeam. "You've earned this."

Sunbeam couldn't help feeling wary of the tortoiseshell. She'd been kind, but Sunbeam couldn't forget Nightheart telling her how sharp-tongued his sister had been before he'd left ThunderClan. She pushed the mouse toward Finchlight. "We can share it."

"Really?" Finchlight looked pleased and crouched down to take a bite.

Sparkpelt had settled beside her. "Finchlight says you're a good hunter." Was she surprised too? *Do ThunderClan cats think they're the only ones who know how to hunt?*

Sunbeam narrowed her eyes. "Thanks."

Sparkpelt blinked back at her warmly. She was clearly trying to be kind.

Myrtlebloom had begun washing her tail. "Is it weird hunting in a different forest?" she asked Sunbeam.

"The scents must be strange," Bayshine chipped in. "It must be confusing."

Sunbeam shrugged. "Mouse-scent smells the same everywhere," she told them. She didn't want to seem defensive, so she added,

“But it’s tricky stalking over fallen leaves. They’re crunchy. It’s hard not to make noise.”

Finchlight looked up from the mouse. “I can take you out tomorrow and give you some tips,” she mewed.

“Nightheart can show her,” Sparkpelt mewed, “when he gets back.” Her eyes glowed with pride. “I’m pleased Squirrelflight chose him to go to the Moonpool with them. But I’m not surprised. He’s a lot more mature now. Perhaps he just needed a bit of time away from his Clan.” She looked at Sunbeam. “Perhaps meeting you has helped him grow up a bit.”

Sunbeam knew she meant it as a compliment, but it seemed unfair to Nightheart. She returned Sparkpelt’s gaze steadily. “He had to work hard to make ShadowClan accept him. The trials they set him were really hard.” She didn’t want to admit that it was her own mother who’d made them so difficult. “And he did well in all of them.” And why mention that Nightheart hadn’t passed the third one? *He failed it for me. On purpose.* He’d wanted ShadowClan to believe he’d left because he had no choice. Her heart ached as she wished he were here with her. “I’ve always known Nightheart was a true warrior.”

But Sparkpelt didn’t seem to be listening. She was gazing across the clearing thoughtfully. “It’s taken me a while to get used to calling him Nightheart,” she mewed. “But I’m coming to see how well it suits him. He seems far more himself than he ever did as Flamepaw. It’s like he—”

“Sunbeam!”

Sunbeam jerked her muzzle toward the entrance, her heart quickening anxiously as a familiar mew rang across the camp. Berryheart was barging her way through the thorn tunnel.

Flipclaw and Sorrelstripe hurried in after her, looking flustered, as the ShadowClan she-cat stopped and shook out her pelt before flashing her gaze around the clearing.

“Sorry!” Flipclaw apologized to Ivypool, who had leaped down from the Highledge.

“She insisted on coming to the camp,” Sorrelstripe explained, glancing angrily at Berryheart. “We couldn’t stop her and we didn’t want to fight her.”

Berryheart was glaring at Sunbeam. "There you are!" she snapped.

Sunbeam got quickly to her paws. Her pelt was burning. *Please don't do this.* Was her mother going to start a fight with her here, in front of her new Clanmates?

Berryheart's angry gaze flicked toward Finchlight and Sparkpelt as they got to their paws beside Sunbeam. "I see you've made yourself very cozy here already," she snarled.

Sunbeam hurried forward. "Let's talk somewhere else," she whispered.

"Yes." Ivypool's tail was twitching. "Take it outside."

Sunbeam began to head toward the entrance, beckoning her mother to follow with a desperate nod. But Berryheart held her ground. "I have nothing to say to you that I can't say in front of your new *Clanmates*." She nearly hissed the word, and Ivypool's tail stilled, her eyes narrowing.

Sunbeam stared imploringly at her mother. "I'm sure they don't want to hear this."

Myrtlebloom sat up. Bayshine's ears were pricked. Around the clearing, the ThunderClan cats were leaning forward, their eyes narrowing with interest. Sunbeam wished they'd all go politely to their dens. Her mother had come to make a scene. *Please don't say anything offensive about ThunderClan.* She was going to be living with these cats from now on.

"I never imagined my daughter would betray her Clan!" Berryheart snapped.

"I haven't betrayed them," Sunbeam mewed back. "I never would. I'm just switching Clans, that's all."

"That's *all*?" Berryheart's eyes glittered with anger. "What worse betrayal is there than to turn your back on the cats who raised you?"

"Don't you want me to be happy?" Sunshine ignored the shame worming beneath her pelt. She was too furious. "I came here to be with Nightheart."

"Oh, Sunbeam." Berryheart's mew was suddenly filled with sympathy. "I know you were upset when he abandoned you. But I didn't realize you were so desperate that you'd *follow* him."

Sunbeam's eyes widened. Berryheart *pitied* her! "I didn't follow him out of desperation," she snapped. "I did it out of love."

Berryheart looked confused. "How can you love a cat when he *left* you? I raised you to have more pride than that."

Sunbeam couldn't believe her ears. Her mother was making her sound pathetic. "We love *each other*!" she snapped. "Nightheart chose to join ShadowClan to be with me, and now I'm choosing to join ThunderClan to be with him!"

Berryheart looked exasperated. "*Leaving* Clans! *Joining* Clans! Neither of you knows what you really want. How can you trust a cat who's abandoned *two* Clans? You should have chosen a good ShadowClan warrior as a mate, some cat who knows where he's meant to be. Some cat who won't just walk away when life gets difficult. Some cat you can trust!" Her mew grew taut and her eyes began to glisten. "It's not too late." She was pleading now. "Come home with me. You can start again."

"I don't want to start again!" Sunbeam was aware of Ivypool's cold stare. She had to stop this now. She took a breath, forcing her fur to remain smooth, and looked her mother in the eye. "I want to be here. With Nightheart. I've made my choice. I'm going to be a ThunderClan warrior, and I'm going to be a loyal one."

"Well said." Lionblaze's deep mew sounded across the clearing.

"You're making the right choice," Shellfur agreed.

Sunbeam glanced gratefully at the tortoiseshell tom. His support meant a lot. She knew that his mate, Fernstripe, had once been a WindClan cat and had settled happily into ThunderClan.

Berryheart's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Where *is* Nightheart?" She looked around the camp. "I don't see him. Which is odd"—she flicked her gaze back to Sunbeam—"seeing how you're both so *in love*."

Sunbeam lifted her chin. "He's away. On a patrol," she mewed. "He'll be back by sunhigh."

"Really?" Berryheart's eyes glittered as though she'd just spotted prey. "Are you sure he's not still running away from you? Are you certain he wanted you to follow him here? Had you even talked to him about it?"

Sunbeam froze. No, they hadn't talked about it. She'd just shown up in ThunderClan. But she *knew* how much Nightheart wanted to be with her. She was certain. He'd told her before he'd left ShadowClan. He'd meant it, right? Doubt jabbed at her heart. What if he'd just been letting her down gently?

Fur brushed her flank as Sparkpelt stepped forward.

She was glaring at Berryheart. "Why did you come here?" she snapped.

"To fetch my kit home," Berryheart snapped back.

"And do you really think humiliating her in front of her new Clanmates will make her want to go back to ShadowClan with you?" Sparkpelt's pelt was bristling. "How could you say such cruel things? Of course Nightheart loves her! He left his Clan to be with her, and he's as happy as the rest of us that she chose to follow him back to ThunderClan."

Sunbeam felt a wave of gratitude. She wasn't entirely sure the *whole* Clan was happy she'd come, but she'd make them happy. She'd show them that a former ShadowClan cat could be just as loyal as any other ThunderClan warrior.

Finchlight joined Sparkpelt. "Perhaps you should worry less about why Sunbeam came to ThunderClan and more about why she left ShadowClan," she hissed at Berryheart.

Berryheart's eyes flashed with rage. "She had no reason to leave ShadowClan."

"And yet she did," Finchlight returned icily. "And after listening to you shred her tonight, I'm not surprised."

Sunbeam stiffened with alarm. *Don't provoke her.* She was thankful to Nightheart's kin for defending her, but she was frightened that they'd goad Berryheart into saying something even worse.

"How dare you?" Berryheart was bristling now. "Sunbeam had no reason for leaving ShadowClan to join a bunch of arrogant squirrel-chasers, and if you ever—"

Ivypool interrupted her. "You should remember that you are a guest here, Berryheart," she mewed softly. "You should watch what you say."

"Watch what *I* say?" Berryheart's tail lashed. She glared at Finchlight. "This stuck-up young she-cat just said Sunbeam left

ShadowClan because of *me*!”

“Berryheart.” Ivypool padded between them and dipped her head politely to the ShadowClan warrior. “You’ve said what you came here to say. It’s time you went back to your Clan.” She nodded to Flipclaw and Sorrelstripe. “Please escort Berryheart back to the border.”

As they stepped forward, Berryheart flattened her ears and glared.

Sunbeam stiffened. Was her mother actually going to *fight*? She felt a rush of relief as Berryheart turned away.

“Very well,” Berryheart grunted. “I’ll leave. But it won’t be long before ThunderClan learns what ShadowClan already knows— young cats change their minds as often as they change the bedding in their dens.” She shot a look at Sunbeam over her shoulder. “Enjoy your stay here,” she mewed. “When you realize you’ve made a mistake, I’ll be waiting to welcome you home. I just hope Tigerstar will be as willing to take you back as I am.”

Sunbeam could feel her heart thumping as Berryheart disappeared through the thorn tunnel. She was confused and overwhelmed. Her mother had been so mean, and her new Clanmates had seen all of it. She wished Nightheart were here. She needed to hear him say that he wanted her to stay and it would all be okay and ThunderClan would accept her even after they’d seen Berryheart rip her to shreds in front of them.

“You were brave to stand up to her.” Sparkpelt’s gentle mew sounded in her ear.

Finchlight pressed against her flank. “Your mother is one tough warrior.”

Sunbeam looked from one to the other, then glanced nervously around the clearing. She was relieved to see that the ThunderClan cats had returned to their washing and eating and were sharing tongues as though nothing had happened. But she hated to think what they’d be saying to each other once she was out of earshot. “I’m so sorry.” She blinked at Ivypool. “I didn’t know she’d come here and cause trouble.” She dipped her head to Sparkpelt and Finchlight. “Thanks for sticking up for me.”

Guilt tugged in her belly. She was apologizing to ThunderClan cats about her own mother. It felt disloyal. Berryheart had only come

here tonight because Sunbeam had hurt her deeply. *She's right. I have betrayed her.* Sunbeam felt suddenly very tired. Berryheart truly believed she would be better off in her birth Clan—that her decision had been a mistake. *If only I could get her to understand.* But Sunbeam knew it would be impossible. Berryheart was so certain of her beliefs that trying to change them would be like trying to persuade flowers not to blossom in newleaf.

Her pelt began to prick. *What if I do change my mind?* Nightheart had changed his mind, hadn't he? *Berryheart could be right, and I could have hurt her for nothing.* Her heart suddenly ached, not for Nightheart this time, but for her mother. Berryheart loved her and wanted what was best for her. She'd been prepared to stand in front of another Clan and ask Sunbeam to come home. Swallowing her pride like that must have taken courage. *And I turned her away.*

Sunbeam suddenly realized that Ivypool was staring at her.

"It's best not to dwell on it," Ivypool whisked her tail. "Go and gather herbs with Myrtlebloom."

Sunbeam blinked. "This late?"

"It seems clear no cat is going to sleep well tonight," Ivypool told her. "You should stay busy. And Jayfeather always says marigold gathered at night is stronger than marigold gathered in the daytime."

A grunt sounded outside the medicine den. Jayfeather was crouched in the shadows there. "It's comfrey," he mewed. "Not marigold. But go ahead. Herbs gathered anytime are fine with me."

Sunbeam glanced at the medicine cat, her pelt prickling nervously. She'd heard about his sharp tongue. "What if I gather the wrong leaves?" she whispered to Myrtlebloom as the brown she-cat led her toward the camp entrance.

"Don't worry." Myrtlebloom swished her tail. "Comfrey's easy to recognize. Besides, after you were yowled at by your mother in front of the whole Clan, even Jayfeather wouldn't be so mean as to scold you."

Sunbeam blinked gratefully at the pale brown she-cat. She appreciated Myrtlebloom's words, but she wasn't sure she believed them. ThunderClan had seemed supportive, but Berryheart might have planted doubt in their minds. *Are you sure he's not still running away from you?* The words still stung. If only Nightheart had been

standing beside her. He would have brushed away all doubt. She could have faced her mother proudly rather than defensively. Instead he was at the Moonpool, and Sunbeam had been left to take her mother's scolding alone, in front of a Clan she barely knew. She was sure that Berryheart's performance hadn't made her fit in any better in ThunderClan. *And do I even want to?* She pushed the thought aside. She knew she wanted to be here, for Nightheart. But still, doubts pricked at her mind.

If Nightheart isn't here . . . do I really belong in ThunderClan?



Chapter 4



Frostpaw's nose twitched. She'd woken but hadn't opened her eyes yet. There was no scent of peat or heather. Instead the air was heavy with a warm, rich, musky odor. *Where am I?*

She opened her eyes, shocked to find herself in a vast wooden den, walled on three sides and open onto a meadow where horses shifted at the far end. It was the horses she could smell. Straw was heaped around her, blocking the draft, holding in her warmth. *How did I get here?*

"You're awake!" It was Whistlepaw's voice. The WindClan medicine-cat apprentice sounded relieved.

Frostpaw tried to lift her head, but the pain around her wound made her stiffen. She winced.

"I know it hurts." Whistlepaw crouched beside her. "There's no poppy seed here. But I found thyme nearby." She brushed a few leaves under Frostpaw's nose.

The scent made Frostpaw queasy. She pushed them away.

Whistlepaw replaced them with a mouse—freshly killed, by the smell of it. "Are you hungry?"

"No." Very slowly, Frostpaw lifted her head, groaning as more pain sliced through her neck. She pushed the mouse away, stiffly. "I feel sick."

"You have a fever." Whistlepaw looked worried. "I put fresh ointment on your wound while you were sleeping," she mewed. "But I don't know if it's enough. Are you sure I can't tell Kestrelflight? He'll know what to do."

"No." Pain and nausea swirled around Frostpaw. She fought against them. "I'll be okay," she rasped. "I just need time." She gazed through the open wall of the nest. "Where am I?"

"Horseplace," Whistlepaw told her.

"How did I get here?" The last thing Frostpaw remembered was lying on the moor.

"I half carried you," Whistlepaw told her. "You half walked. Don't you remember?"

"No." Fear tugged at Frostpaw's heart. If she couldn't remember coming here, she must be really sick.

"Try to eat something," Whistlepaw mewed. "You need strength."

"I can't." Frostpaw blinked at her helplessly. "I think I'd throw up." She forced herself to be brave. "I'll get through this."

Whistlepaw gazed back at her uncertainly. "You said yesterday that someone tried to kill you. You said it might be a WindClan cat."

"I don't know," Frostpaw mewed. She was confused. Everything had spun out of control so quickly. "It could be any cat. I thought it was one of my Clanmates. That's why I came to find you. I needed to tell some cat. Some cat outside my Clan. I thought it would be safe to tell you."

"It *is* safe to tell me." Whistlepaw stared back at her earnestly. "I'll do whatever I can to protect you."

Frostpaw searched her gaze. *I can trust you, right?* "I'm so scared." Her throat began to tighten. "Some cat wants me dead."

Whistlepaw moved closer. "Do you know why?"

"I had a vision."

"But I thought you'd stopped training to be a medicine cat."

"I had," Frostpaw told her. "That's why it makes no sense. I thought I had no link with StarClan, but then I was training with Harelight. . . . He was teaching me how to fish, when the river *changed*, and instead of the fish, I could see Reedwhisker." Whistlepaw's eyes widened as Frostpaw went on. "I was in the body of another cat—I don't know who it was, but I was seeing through their eyes. They attacked Reedwhisker. They pushed him off the cliff."

"Reedwhisker was *murdered*?" Whistlepaw's hackles lifted. "I thought it was an accident. Are you sure it was a vision? You weren't just imagining it?"

"Why would I imagine something so awful?" Frostpaw mewed. "Out of nowhere. And it wasn't vague like the visions I had before. It felt real. I'm sure it was a vision. StarClan was showing me what happened. They want me to do something, but I don't know what. The Clan needs to know, but I don't know who to trust."

"Why would any cat kill Reedwhisker?" Whistlepaw asked.

Frostpaw looked at her hopelessly. "I don't know. I've been trying to work it out. Perhaps they wanted to be deputy?"

"Or leader," Whistlepaw mewed darkly. She looked thoughtful. "If Reedwhisker's death wasn't an accident, what about Mistystar? Did the same cat kill her?"

"I'm pretty sure she died of natural causes," Frostpaw told her. "I was there. There was nothing strange about it."

"But she and Reedwhisker aren't the only cats who've died in RiverClan lately," Whistlepaw pressed. "Wasn't one of your Clanmates killed by dogs?"

Claws seemed to press into Frostpaw's heart. "Curlfeather," she whispered, the memory of it still almost too painful to speak of without her voice cracking.

Whistlepaw stiffened, her eyes flashing with horror. "She was your mother," she gasped, remembering. "I'm so sorry."

"Before she died, she told me to trust no cat," Frostpaw whispered.

"Do you think she knew?" Whistlepaw's mew dropped to a whisper too. "About Reedwhisker?"

"I don't know," Frostpaw answered. "But I think she must have suspected that something was wrong." She shifted uncomfortably. "That might be why she died."

"Am I the only one you've told about your vision?" Whistlepaw asked her.

"I told a Clanmate."

"Who?"

"A cat I grew up with." Frostpaw swallowed. "We've always been close."

"They're the only one you told?"

"Yes."

Whistlepaw's gaze darkened. "Do you think they might be the one—"

"No!" The thought snatched Frostpaw's breath away. It was too awful even to imagine. How could Splashtail hurt her? When they'd thought she was destined to become a warrior, he'd agreed he might one day become her mate. Her heart lurched. Had she put him in danger by telling him? She felt dizzy with fear.

Whistlepaw was gazing at her. "This is really serious, Frostpaw," she mewed. "Please let me tell Kestrelflight. The more cats who know, the safer you'll be."

"You mustn't!" Frostpaw wanted to wail. "It'll just put more cats in danger. Whoever hurt me has to believe they killed me."

"But what if they go back to check and find you're gone?" Whistlepaw argued. "They'll know you're still alive."

"They'll see the blood," Frostpaw mewed. "They'll think a fox or a buzzard took me." The thought chilled her. She'd been lucky a predator hadn't snatched her while she'd been so helpless. In this den, with the huge horses to deter scavengers, she was safer. She blinked at Whistlepaw. "Thanks for bringing me here."

"You'll be warm, at least."

The straw felt soft beneath her. "Don't you need to get back to your camp?" she asked Whistlepaw. The sun was high in the sky.

Whistlepaw nodded. "I told Kestrelflight I was going to fetch herbs," she mewed. "But I don't want to leave you alone."

"I'll be okay now," Frostpaw promised, hoping it was true. It was important that Whistlepaw's absence from the WindClan camp not alert Kestrelflight. He might start asking questions, and she couldn't rely on Whistlepaw not to blurt out the truth.

"You need care," Whistlepaw mewed.

"You'll come back, won't you?" Frostpaw asked anxiously.

"Whenever I can." Whistlepaw glanced quickly over her shoulder. "But while I'm gone, I've asked the cats here to keep an eye on you."

Alarm flared in Frostpaw's chest. "There are other cats here?"

"They're not Clan cats," Whistlepaw mewed quickly. "Or loners." She turned her head. "Smoky?"

Frostpaw pressed back into her nest as a muscular gray-and-white tom padded from behind the straw.

Whistlepaw looked back at her. "I couldn't leave you here without some cat to take care of you."

Frostpaw was staring at the tom. Two kits were following him: a gray tom-kit and a tortoiseshell she-kit. They looked about six moons old and stared at her with startlingly green eyes.

Fear pulsed beneath Frostpaw's pelt. "You said you'd tell no cat."

“They’re friendly, I promise,” Whistlepaw mewed. “They live here, at the horseplace. They won’t harm you.”

The large tom stopped beside Whistlepaw and blinked slowly at Frostpaw. His thick fur was smooth and his gaze warm. “It’s okay, Frostpaw,” he mewed. “We’ll take care of you when Whistlepaw’s not here.”

The tortoiseshell she-kit whisked her tail eagerly. “Whistlepaw’s shown us how to make a poultice for your neck.”

The tom-kit nodded. “And I’ve collected heaps of cobwebs to put on it.”

Whistlepaw touched her nose gently to Frostpaw’s head. “Smoky will keep you safe,” she mewed. “The Clans have helped him in the past, and he wants to help you.”

Frostpaw looked past her, her heart thumping. “You know the Clans?” she asked Smoky. *Will he betray me?*

“A little,” Smoky told her. “My son and his mother are Clan cats, and they visit sometimes, but besides that, you’re the first Clan cats we’ve seen in moons.” He padded closer. “They hardly ever pass this way.”

“And if they do”—the tom-kit puffed out his chest—“Smoky told us to tell them that we haven’t seen you.”

“We’re going to keep you a secret,” the she-kit chimed.

Smoky looked at the kits fondly. “This is Coriander.” He nodded to the tom-kit. “And this is Little Daisy.” He touched his nose to the she-kit’s head.

Frostpaw looked at them. They were excited, their tails flicking.

Smoky purred. “Please don’t be scared,” he mewed to Frostpaw. “We’ll do everything we can to help you.”

Frostpaw forced herself to relax. What other choice did she have? Besides, Smoky seemed friendly, and the kits were staring at her with wide, innocent eyes.

Whistlepaw glanced at the sky outside. “I need to get back before Kestrelflight starts wondering where I am.”

“She’ll be in safe paws,” Smoky promised the WindClan medicine-cat apprentice.

Whistlepaw dipped her head to him, then glanced back at Frostpaw. “Try to eat the thyme, at least,” she mewed. “I’ll come back

whenever I can."

Frostpaw blinked at her gratefully. "Thank you."

"Take care." Whistlepaw headed out of the den.

Coriander was sniffing at the mouse she'd left. "I can catch a frog if you don't like mice," he told Frostpaw.

"I'm not hungry," she told him.

"Shall I apply more poultice?" Little Daisy asked. "I've already chewed up some leaves like Whistlepaw showed me."

"I think she needs rest more than anything," Smoky mewed. His gaze rested on Frostpaw. "You look tired."

"I am." Frostpaw felt weak and dizzy.

Smoky leaned down and peered closely at the wound on her neck. "It looks pretty bad," he mewed. "You know, there's a Twoleg that comes to heal the horses. It'd be able to fix you too, I reckon."

"No!" Frostpaw's ears twitched with alarm. "I'm not letting a Twoleg anywhere near me!"

"It helped Little Daisy when she got a cut on her paw a few moons ago," Smoky pressed.

Little Daisy hurried forward and held out a fluffy white paw. "See? Not even a scar."

Frostpaw recoiled. Blood was roaring in her ears. "I don't want a Twoleg touching me!"

"Okay," Smoky soothed. "For now we'll use the poultice Whistlepaw showed us. But your fever keeps coming back, Frostpaw. You need rest, and to stop fighting and let us look out for you."

Frostpaw knew she needed rest. She could feel her body shutting down. "Thank you," she breathed. Weariness was washing over her again.

"Get some sleep," Smoky told her. "We'll be close by if you need anything." He began to nudge the kits away, and Frostpaw settled deeper into her nest as they padded out into the meadow. It felt good to be warm and comfortable. The wound in her neck throbbed, and she felt hot and a little sick, but sleep would make her feel better. She closed her eyes and let herself drift into darkness.

Yowling woke her. It sounded panicked. Fear sparked in Frostpaw's chest. A cat was calling an alarm. She lifted her head with a start, and thorns seemed to stab her wound. It snatched her breath, but her whole body was throbbing with the need to flee. She tasted the air. A sharp tang edged it. A stranger was here. Night had fallen, but a dazzling white light filled the den. She narrowed her eyes against it and saw Smoky a few tail-lengths from her nest. He was the cat yowling!

"What's wrong?" She couldn't see any signs of danger. Only the bright white light. But she couldn't smell any other cats. There was no fire. No dogs. What else could it be?

Why was he making so much noise? Someone would hear. Someone might come.

Smoky kept yowling.

Her heart seemed to crack with fear as she saw a Twoleg coming into the den. The light shone on its flat pink face. Its forepaws swung at its sides. It was looking at Smoky.

"Be quiet!" she hissed. "It can see you!"

The Twoleg was walking straight toward him. Smoky backed away, still yowling. He was moving closer and closer to her nest.

He wants it to come! The thought filled Frostpaw with dread. "What are you doing?" she hissed to Smoky.

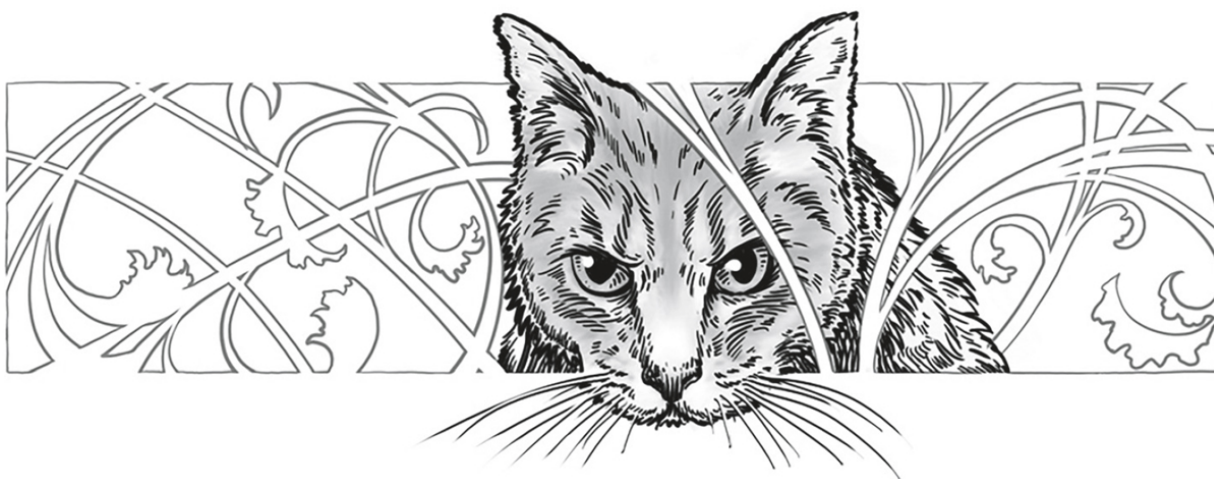
"I'm not letting you die." Smoky glanced at her apologetically, then darted away and hid behind the straw.

Horror gripped her as the Twoleg loomed over her. It paused for a moment, then leaned down, reaching its big pink paws toward her. She lashed out at it with her claws, but it grabbed her nimbly and lifted her into the air.

Her heart seemed to fly into her throat as she was whisked off the ground. Air rushed around her. She felt weightless for a moment, then suddenly heavy as her body hung stiffly—shocked into stillness—between the Twolegs' giant front paws.

Fear surged beneath Frostpaw's pelt, sparking her into movement once more. She shrieked and began to struggle. Pain pierced her neck as her wound split open and blood start to pour, but she didn't care. Panic drove her. She had to get free of this Twoleg.

It gripped harder, pressing her against its chest with a single paw. She lashed out, struggling more fiercely, but it was quick and wrapped its pelt around her, binding her legs to her body so that she was trapped. Then it peered at her neck. She tried to bite it, but it held her still as it reached for something. Blind with terror, she fought not to pass out, until she felt a prick at the back of her neck and the den turned dark.



Chapter 5



"Wake up."

Nightheart felt a gentle paw prodding his shoulder. He jerked awake, blinking into a cold, wet dawn. He'd been curled tightly in a ball at the top of the Moonpool hollow, his fur fluffed against the haze of rain that was sweeping the stone.

Alderheart was leaning over him. "It's morning."

Nightheart scrambled to his paws. *Did I fall asleep?* Bramblestar and Squirrelflight were standing behind the ThunderClan medicine cat, their gazes dark. Were they Squirrelstar and Brambleclaw now? Nightheart looked at them expectantly. "I . . . I'm sorry. I guess I drifted off. What did StarClan say?"

"We couldn't reach them," Squirrelflight mewed.

"Clouds covered the moon." Bramblestar glanced miserably back toward the Moonpool. It rippled in the breeze, its surface reflecting the gray sky. The wind had changed direction, funneling into the hollow, carrying rain and the scent of lake and moor.

Nightheart frowned. "The moon was out when you went down there." The sky had been perfectly clear while he'd waited and when he'd fallen asleep, certain that his Clanmates were sharing with StarClan.

Alderheart shook off the rain that had gathered on his whiskers. "Leaf-fall weather is always changeable," he mewed.

"Storms come, storms go," Squirrelflight mewed carelessly. "It might change again before the end of the day."

Bramblestar didn't comment. Nightheart guessed that he was worrying that it wasn't the season that had affected the weather. *Perhaps StarClan doesn't approve.* Would Bramblestar have to carry on being leader even though he didn't feel strong enough?

"Come on." Squirrelflight jumped down onto the boulders. "Let's head back to camp. They'll be waiting for news."

Nightheart followed her. "We don't have any."

"But they'll be worried." At the bottom, Squirrelflight scanned the lake valley. "Let's take the forest trail home," she suggested.

Nightheart was relieved. Rain was sweeping the moor. The route through the forest, along SkyClan's border, would take longer, but it would be more sheltered.

Bramblestar trailed after Squirrelflight as she led them along the path that wound down toward the woods. Nightheart fell in beside Alderheart. He wanted to know if the medicine cat thought StarClan had covered the moon on purpose, to stop Bramblestar and Squirrelflight from reaching them. But he didn't dare ask. He was too scared of what it might mean for ThunderClan.

Bramblestar must be wondering the same thing. Nightheart glanced at the ThunderClan leader. His tail was drooping; his shoulders were hunched, and not just against the rain. Every slow paw step betrayed disappointment.

Squirrelflight pushed on as though she couldn't feel the rain battering her face, or the wind tearing at her fur. She didn't look as though any doubt had crossed her mind. Was she so sure that it was only a rainstorm and that StarClan would respond if they tried again?

As they reached the cover of the trees, she took a trail that dipped between bracken-covered slopes. The path was covered with soggy leaves that squished beneath Nightheart's paws.

"This isn't the right way," Bramblestar mewed.

Squirrelflight swished her tail. "Of course it is."

Nightheart wasn't sure. It didn't look familiar. Perhaps that was only because ThunderClan didn't hunt here often.

"We should have headed for the Sky Oak," Bramblestar grumbled.

"We *are* heading for the Sky Oak," Squirrelflight told him, pushing ahead.

Bramblestar looked at her. "Across *SkyClan* territory?"

"SkyClan territory is over there." Squirrelflight nodded toward a slope topped with birch. "Beyond that rise."

"We crossed the border a few moments ago," Bramblestar mewed tersely.

"I didn't smell any markers," Squirrelflight told him.

"That's because the rain's washed them away." Bramblestar's ears were twitching irritably. "If we keep following this trail, we're going to end up in SkyClan's camp."

Nightheart was beginning to agree with Bramblestar. This did look a lot like SkyClan territory, with its birch and beech crowding out oak and the forest floor clear of brambles, but he wasn't going to get involved in their bickering.

"Do you think I don't know my own territory?" Squirrelflight growled.

"You've always been stubborn," Bramblestar flicked raindrops from his tail. "If you want us to keep going this way, we will. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"You always think you know best!" Squirrelflight glared at him. "I hope you're not going question every decision I make once I'm—"

"Hush!" Alderheart cut in sharply, his ears pricking.

Squirrelflight pulled up. Bramblestar glanced around warily.

"What's wrong?" Nightheart mewed under his breath.

Alderheart nodded toward the ferns ahead. They were swishing. "SkyClan patrol," he whispered.

Over the rainfall, paw steps sounded on the wet earth. Nightheart's pelt bristled as Rootspring pushed his way through the fronds and stepped onto the trail. Needleclaw and Cloudmist were with him.

Squirrelflight puffed out her chest. "What are you doing here?"

"Patrolling." Rootspring looked surprised. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Heading back to camp," Squirrelflight told him.

Rootspring looked puzzled. "Whose camp?"

"Our camp."

"Are you sure?" Rootspring glanced along the trail. "Because this path heads for the SkyClan camp."

"I told you so," Bramblestar grunted.

"Oh, be quiet." Squirrelflight's wet pelt was prickling along her spine. She dipped her head to Rootspring. "I apologize," she mewed. "We've taken the wrong path. The rain seems to have washed away the scent line."

Nightheart was watching Rootspring warily. Was he angry? He felt a wash of relief as the SkyClan tom dipped his head in return.

"I guess in weather like this, it's easy to lose your way," Rootspring mewed.

Cloudmist's whiskers were twitching. She swapped an amused look with Needleclaw, and Squirrelflight's gaze flashed with annoyance.

"It won't happen again," she mewed stiffly, and turned to head back toward ThunderClan territory.

"Wait."

Squirrelflight glanced back at Rootspring. The SkyClan tom's tail was twitching ominously. "ThunderClan doesn't usually come this far into the forest. You always say the richest hunting is closer to the lake."

Bramblestar seemed to freeze. Nightheart guessed neither cat wanted to explain their trip to the Moonpool. Until ThunderClan's new leadership was established and blessed by StarClan, it was best the other Clans didn't know. Especially with Tigerstar flexing his claws over RiverClan.

Alderheart padded forward. "We were consulting StarClan," he told the SkyClan warriors. "Nightheart has returned to ThunderClan and brought his ShadowClan mate with him. We wanted to ask StarClan whether we should take them in."

Nightheart shifted self-consciously. Even if it was a lie, he didn't like the idea that his return to ThunderClan and his relationship with Sunbeam were problems that needed StarClan's guidance.

But the explanation seemed to satisfy Rootspring, who looked at Nightheart warmly. The SkyClan tom's tail relaxed. "What did they say?" he asked.

Nightheart lifted his chin. "We can stay."

"Good." Rootspring seemed to approve, and Nightheart remembered that the SkyClan tom had been in love with Bristlefrost, a ThunderClan warrior. They'd both been Lights in the Mist—the cats who'd saved the Clans from Ashfur and the Dark Forest. Bristlefrost had died, but in her memory Rootspring had fought for the warrior code to be changed to allow cats to switch Clans to be with their mates. Also, Rootspring had been with him and Sunbeam on the journey to find catmint that leaf-bare. He must remember the early sparks between them.

Squirrelflight began to turn away again, but all the SkyClan warriors seemed to be in the mood to talk. "What do you think about

Tigerstar?" Needleclaw asked.

Squirrelflight looked at the SkyClan she-cat. "I made myself clear at the last Gathering," she mewed. Her eyes narrowed. "Is Leafstar still determined to get ShadowClan out of RiverClan?"

"Yes," Needleclaw told her.

"She's right, too," Cloudmist growled. "One Clan shouldn't be sticking their claws into another Clan's business. Setting a precedent like that could cause trouble for moons."

Needleclaw frowned. "But it seems pointless to fight over something that will sort itself out eventually," she mewed.

Nightheart felt a rush of relief to hear the view of another cat who didn't want war between the Clans. "There's no way ShadowClan will stay in RiverClan forever," he chimed in.

Squirrelflight glanced at him. "Maybe not," she mewed. "But even a moon is too long. Tigerstar should let RiverClan sort out their own problems."

"Right now, he could be the only thing holding them together," Bramblestar grunted.

"You should have more faith in RiverClan," Squirrelflight told him.

Rootspring looked thoughtful. "Could any Clan survive the death of its leader *and* its deputy?" he mewed. "And they have no connection with StarClan now. They might never find a new leader."

"Perhaps there's another solution," Nightheart ventured. It was a thought that had been lurking at the back of his mind since the Clans had started quarrelling over Tigerstar's intervention in RiverClan. He kept wondering why no other cat had mentioned it. The others looked at him, and his pelt felt warm. "SkyClan has a mediator, right?" Had they forgotten about Rootspring's father, Tree? "He's meant to help the Clans come to peaceful solutions. Why doesn't *he* try to find a way to settle this?"

Rootspring pricked his ears. "Of course!"

"Leafstar's been so determined to defend RiverClan, she didn't think of it," Needleclaw mewed.

Bramblestar swished his tail, looking more cheerful than he had since they'd left the Moonpool. "That's a great idea, Nightheart. I don't know why no cat has suggested it." He looked hopefully at Squirrelflight. "It's a good solution, right?"

She looked back at him thoughtfully. "It might work."

"It's worth trying," Rootspring mewed. "I'll suggest it to Leafstar. She can bring it up at the next Gathering." The rain was still falling, dripping from the branches above them. The SkyClan tom whisked his tail. "We'd better finish our patrol," he mewed.

Bramblestar dipped his head. "Sorry for trespassing on SkyClan land. It won't happen again."

"Yeah, sorry." Squirrelflight huffed and headed away.

Nightheart hurried after her with Alderheart and Bramblestar. As soon as they were out of earshot of the SkyClan patrol, Squirrelflight halted and glanced at the sky. "It's a long way back to camp," she mewed. "And the clouds might clear this afternoon. Leaf-fall storms never last long." She looked at Nightheart. "Go and tell our Clanmates what's happened. We'll return to the Moonpool and wait there for the skies to clear. The sooner we get an answer from StarClan, the better."

Nightheart hesitated. He was worried about leaving his Clanmates to travel back alone. But he wanted to go back to camp. Sunbeam would be waiting for him, and he was missing her. "Will you be okay without me?" he asked tentatively.

Bramblestar winked. "I bet our newest recruit will be pleased to see you."

Squirrelflight seemed to soften for the first time that morning. She nudged Bramblestar. "Why do you think I'm sending him back?" she mewed. "Don't you remember when we were young? We always begged to be on the same patrol."

Bramblestar's eyes flashed teasingly. "You couldn't stand to be without me for a moment."

She headed away, flicking his shoulder with her tail-tip. "*You're* the one who used to wait at the camp entrance for me to come home."

"Me?" Bramblestar hurried after her. "It was *you* who waited."

Alderheart purred, following them. "That'll be you and Sunbeam in a few moons," he called over his shoulder.

I can't wait. Nightheart knew the medicine cat was teasing him, but his chest swelled with joy. He began to run through the woods, his paws tingling with anticipation. He wanted to know how Sunbeam

had been managing without him. He just hoped that his Clanmates had kept their word and taken care of her while he'd been away.

He was still running as he neared the ThunderClan hollow but slowed to catch his breath before he reached camp. He didn't want Sunbeam to think he'd run *all* the way. The rain had eased but was still dripping onto the golden leaves lining the trail. Nightheart could smell the scents of the border patrol. They must have left recently. The early hunting patrols would be heading out soon. He'd better hurry in case Sunbeam was on one of them.

"Nightheart!"

Some cat was calling him. His heart quickened eagerly.

It sank as he saw Plumstone and Dewnose padding toward him.

Plumstone must have seen the disappointment in his eyes.

"Were you expecting Sunbeam?"

"Is she okay?"

"Of course," Dewnose told him. The gray-and-white tom swished his tail. "Did you think we'd eat her while you were gone?"

"I thought she might be lonely without me," Nightheart mewed.

"Lonely?" Dewnose snorted. "In *our* camp? The warriors' den is so crowded these days, we'll have sleep two to a nest when Spotfur's kits join us."

"Where is she?" Nightheart began to hurry toward camp once more.

Plumstone blocked his way. "Slow down."

Nightheart blinked at the black-and-ginger she-cat. "Why?"

"How did it go? At the Moonpool?" she mewed. "Where are Squirrelflight and Bramblestar?" She looked past him expectantly.

"They're still at the Moonpool hollow," Nightheart explained. "When the rain came, the clouds covered the moon, so they couldn't share with StarClan. They're waiting for it to pass."

Plumstone's eyes clouded with disappointment. "So we still don't know."

Nightheart brushed past her. He wanted to see Sunbeam. "We'll know soon enough."

Plumstone blocked his path again.

Dewnose came to stand at her shoulder. “‘We’ll know soon enough’?” He looked irritated. “Is that all you’ve got to say?”

“What else can I tell you?” Nightheart blinked at them. They both looked prickly. What was wrong? Dewnose was the mate of Sorrelstripe, the cat who had been like a mother to him. And he was father to Bayshine, Nightheart’s most loyal friend. “Has something happened?”

“If *we’d* been chosen to accompany Bramblestar and Squirrelflight, we’d be taking it a lot more seriously,” Dewnose growled.

“But why would Squirrelflight choose us?” Plumstone mewed sourly. “*We* didn’t abandon our Clan.”

Nightheart faced them squarely. He couldn’t blame them for resenting him. He *had* abandoned his Clan, and his friends. “I know it must seem unfair,” he mewed. “I think she was making up for being so hard on me over my warrior assessments.” Every cat in the Clan knew Squirrelflight had failed him twice. “Perhaps she was right to be that hard,” he conceded. “I made a lot of mistakes.” He wanted them to see he wasn’t being arrogant or taking his privilege for granted. “But I think Squirrelflight wants to give me a chance now to prove myself. That’s why she chose me.” He looked at them earnestly. “I know I’ve got a lot to make up for. I promise I’ll do my best.”

They eyed him warily but didn’t argue. Instead they stood aside and let him pass.

“You’d *better* do your best,” Plumstone called after him.

“I will!” Nightheart called back as he hurried into camp. He meant it. He was determined to show the whole Clan that he was a loyal ThunderClan cat and that whatever decisions he’d made in the past, he was going to put ThunderClan first from now on.

“Sunbeam!” He spotted her beneath the Highledge, among the warriors waiting for Ivypool to announce the day’s patrols.

She turned as she heard her name. Her eyes were shining as she hurried to greet him. “How did it go? Are you okay?”

The rest of his Clanmates were padding after her, their whiskers twitching eagerly as they clustered around him.

“What did StarClan say?” Bayshine asked.

“Where are the others?” Lilyheart glanced toward the entrance.

Ivypool pushed through the crowd. "Did everything go smoothly?"

Nightheart told them what he'd told Dewnose and Plumstone: that the rain clouds had covered the moon before Squirrelflight and Bramblestar had chance to speak with StarClan and that they were waiting at the Moonpool hollow for the sky to clear.

"Perhaps StarClan's hiding," Myrtlebloom mewed.

"Perhaps they don't want to make Squirrelflight leader," Birchfall fretted.

As the warriors drifted away, murmuring nervously among themselves, Sunbeam stayed beside Nightheart. "I'm sure it will be okay," she told him. "Leaf-fall's always stormy."

"That's what Squirrelflight said," Nightheart gazed into Sunbeam's yellow eyes, happiness warming his heart. "I missed you," he mewed.

"I missed you too." She touched her nose to his cheek.

"Was every cat friendly?" He felt a prickle of anxiety.

"They were really nice," she mewed. "Especially Myrtlebloom." Her eyes shone. "And Sparkpelt and Finchlight have been so welcoming. It's hard to believe you didn't used to get along with them. They're so kind!"

Nightheart felt a flash of irritation. Sparkpelt and Finchlight had been hard on him as an apprentice, harder when he'd become a warrior. They'd barely spoken to him after he'd changed his warrior name to Nightheart. And when he'd left to join ShadowClan, they hadn't hidden their resentment about that, either. He felt like an angry kit. As though Sunbeam had betrayed him by bonding with his kin so easily. But he forced his pelt to stay smooth. The past was the past. His kin finally seemed to accept him for who he was. He should be thankful for that.

Sunbeam was staring at him. "You look upset," she mewed.

He lifted his chin. "I'm just happy they're being nice to you."

She held his gaze. "I know they made you very unhappy once, but they're really trying now," she mewed softly.

"Thank you." He felt a fresh wave of love for her. Gently, he touched her nose with his. "I know they're trying, and I'm grateful."

"Nightheart!" Sparkpelt's mew rang across the camp. She was hurrying into camp with Finchlight. "Myrtlebloom said that StarClan

didn't come."

"Squirrelflight and Bramblestar are waiting at the Moonpool until they do," he told them.

"Good." Sparkpelt looked relieved. "We'll probably know something by tomorrow."

Finchlight was winding around Sunbeam. "Your mate's a great hunter," she told Nightheart. "And every cat really likes her."

Sunbeam's pelt ruffled self-consciously. "I hope so," she mewed.

"Of course they do," Sparkpelt told her. "You're going to fit right in here. I think Nightheart has made a good match."

Nightheart caught Sunbeam's eye, his fur fluffing with happiness. Sunbeam was right. Sparkpelt and Finchlight really were trying to make up for the past.

Sparkpelt frowned suddenly. "I meant to ask." She blinked at Nightheart. "Did you see any sign of Frostpaw while you were out?"

Nightheart took a moment to place the name. "The RiverClan medicine-cat apprentice?"

"She's a warrior apprentice now," Sunbeam reminded him.

"Why would I have seen any sign of her?" Nightheart asked Sparkpelt.

"Owlnose and Splashtail stopped by at dawn," Sparkpelt told him. "They said she's missing and they're searching for her."

"*Missing?*" Nightheart felt a flash of surprise. Another RiverClan cat missing? What was happening there?

Finchlight flicked her tail. "RiverClan seems to lose more cats than prey."

Sunbeam's eyes glittered with worry. "I hope she's all right."

"Her Clanmates are looking for her," Sparkpelt mewed. "I'm sure they'll find her soon."

As she spoke, the last patrols began heading out of camp. Ivypool crossed the clearing and stopped beside them.

"Do you want me to hunt?" Sunbeam lifted her tail eagerly. "I could catch up to a patrol."

Ivypool narrowed her eyes. "I have something else planned for you." She looked so solemn. Was something wrong?

Nightheart moved closer to Sunbeam.

"I've planned your first trial," Ivypool told her. "Are you ready?"

Sunbeam's ears flicked nervously. "Yes."

Nightheart could hear a tremor in her mew. *She'll do great.* His heart tightened with worry. *She has to.* Nothing could stop her becoming a ThunderClan warrior.

"Good." Ivypool nodded and headed for the camp entrance. "In that case, you can start straight away."



Chapter 6



Ivypool headed for the camp entrance. “I’ve set everything up.” The rain had eased to a fine drizzle that glistened on her silver-and-white pelt.

Sunbeam’s paws pricked nervously. *Does she want me to follow her?*

Ivypool glanced over her shoulder. “Are you coming?”

“What about the rest of the Clan?” Sunbeam called. When Nightheart had done his trials in ShadowClan, all the warriors had come to watch. “Aren’t we going to wait for them?”

“I don’t see why,” Ivypool mewed. “We’re seeing if you’ll make a good addition to the Clan, not asking you to entertain us.”

Sunbeam felt a rush of relief. And yet the answer didn’t leave her entirely calm. Anxiety still sparked in her belly. She was daunted by facing her first task entirely alone. “Can Nightheart come?” she asked hopefully.

“Sure.” Ivypool glanced toward Nightheart, then nodded to Sparkpelt and Finchlight. “Would you like to join us too?” Her gaze flitted back to Sunbeam. “If that’s okay with you?”

“That would be nice.” Sunbeam wanted to purr but she swallowed down the feeling. She didn’t want Ivypool to know how much she needed some cat to cheer her on.

Nightheart padded to Sunbeam’s side. “You’ll do great,” he whispered.

“Don’t be nervous.” Sparkpelt hurried them on with a flick of her tail. “Ivypool will want you to do well.”

“You’ll pass for sure,” Finchlight mewed.

They don’t even know what I have to do yet. But Sunbeam was thankful for their encouragement. She felt like an apprentice again, facing her warrior assessment. *I have more skills now,* she reminded herself. *And experience.*

She followed Ivypool out of the hollow and deeper into the woods. Drizzle misted the dying ferns, and Sunbeam fluffed out her pelt to keep herself warm. Her heart was racing. *I can do this.* She tried not to think of Nightheart’s trials, which had been dangerous as

well as difficult. How had he passed them so easily? Only now did she realize how nervous he must have been. She glanced at him, admiring him even more than when he'd first finished them; he blinked back at her encouragingly, and her heart ached with more fondness for him.

Ivypool slowed as they neared an opening in the trees. Ahead, a clearing was surrounded by tall, slender birch trees. Raindrops dripped from the branches, and above the treetops the gray sky pressed down gloomily. Sunbeam lifted her chin. She wasn't going to let the weather discourage her.

She blinked in surprise as she saw three kits charging across the grass. They looked almost old enough to be apprentices, but they still had their kit fluff. "Shouldn't they be in camp?" she asked.

"They're helping you with your trial." A queen padded from among the trees. Sunbeam recognized her as Spotfur. She recognized the gray-and-white she-cat, but although she'd seen the kits racing around the camp, Sunbeam didn't know their names.

"Bristlekit, Stemkit!" Spotfur called to them. "Graykit!" They skidded to a halt and looked back at her. "Ivypool's here," she told them. "Remember what I told you about being on your best behavior. No running!"

"But it's the first time we've been out of camp!" The orange-and-white tabby she-kit stuck her tail in the air.

"All the more reason to behave," the queen mewed sternly.

Ivypool purred at them. "Save your energy for Sunbeam's trial."

The white-and-gray tom-kit blinked at her anxiously. "Do we have to fight her?"

"Don't be silly." His brother nudged him. "How will fighting *kits* prove she'd be a good ThunderClan warrior?"

Ivypool padded toward them. "This is Stemkit," she told Sunbeam, nodding toward the orange tom-kit. "This is Bristlekit." She touched the orange-and-white she-kit's tail with her nose. "And this is Graykit." She blinked encouragingly at the gray-and-white tom-kit before turning back to Sunbeam. "I want you and these three kits to catch enough prey to feed the elders. But . . ." She hesitated, and Sunbeam leaned forward, her heart lifting. Catching prey would be easy, even with kits tripping her up. "You mustn't catch any yourself."

Sunbeam frowned, puzzled. "Do you mean the kits have to catch it?"

"Yes." Ivypool's dark blue gaze was steady. "With your instruction."

Nightheart frowned at Ivypool. "It'll be tricky," he mewed. "They've never hunted before."

"That's the point," Ivypool told him.

Behind her, Graykit swiped at Bristlekit's tail. Stemkit's attention had flitted toward a bird singing on the branch above him.

"So it's not a hunting challenge," Sunbeam mewed, understanding. "It's a training challenge."

"*And* a teamwork challenge." Ivypool swished her tail. "ThunderClan warriors work together."

Sunbeam remembered hunting with Finchlight and Poppyfrost the night before—how they'd chased prey into each other's paws. If she was going to become a ThunderClan warrior, she was going to have to learn to think like one.

"It will also give me an idea of what sort of mentor you might be," Ivypool added. "Good mentors make strong warriors, and strong warriors make a powerful Clan." The ThunderClan deputy lifted her chin. "Only power can bring true peace."

But Sunbeam barely heard Ivypool's words. She wasn't worried about power or peace. She was worried about the trial. *I have to teach them how to hunt as a team.* Anxiety fluttered in her belly. Bristlekit had charged across the clearing while Stemkit had pounced on Graykit and was wrestling him on the wet grass. How was she going to teach them to do something she wasn't sure of herself?

We'll learn together, she told herself. "Okay." Sunbeam nodded to Ivypool. "I'm ready."

"We'll keep an eye on you," Ivypool told her. "But we won't interfere."

Spotfur was looking anxiously at her kits. "They've never been out in the forest before," she reminded Sunbeam.

"I'll take care of them," Sunbeam promised. She glanced around the clearing. How was she going to teach three kits how to catch prey when they'd never hunted before? Surely that would take days!

But the elders couldn't wait days for prey. "How long have I got?" she asked Ivypool.

"Until the kits get tired." Ivypool sat down.

Sunbeam hesitated. Did kits get tired quickly?

Finchlight settled beside Sparkpelt while Spotfur hovered at the edge of the clearing. Nightheart blinked at Sunbeam, his eyes bright, and she dipped her head at him before turning toward the kits. Before she took them into the woods to hunt, she needed to get to know them. And they needed to get to know her. They'd be more likely to follow her instructions if they liked her.

Stemkit and Graykit were still wrestling. Bristlekit was sniffing a clump of grass at the far side of the clearing. Sunbeam ignored the nervousness fluttering in her belly. Persuading these three young cats to focus on prey would be like rounding up a pawful of grasshoppers. "Are you ready?" she called to them.

Stemkit scrambled to his paws. Graykit jumped up beside him, and Bristlekit hurried across the grass to join her littermates. Sunbeam felt a flicker of hope. They were eager to get started. That was a good sign.

"Are we going to catch *real* prey?" Stemkit looked dubiously at Sunbeam.

"We can't feed the elders moss balls," Sunbeam told him.

"I nearly caught a mouse in the hollow once," Graykit announced proudly.

Bristlekit rolled her eyes. "*Nearly* doesn't count," she mewed. "Besides, it turned on you and you tripped over your tail running away."

"Did not!" Graykit mewed indignantly.

"He was only *half* a moon old," Stemkit mewed, defending his brother. "The mouse was almost as big as him!"

Sunbeam looked at Graykit. "You were brave to try when you were so young." She blinked at him encouragingly.

"How old were you when you caught your first mouse?" Stemkit asked her.

"I don't remember my first mouse, but I remember my first piece of prey," Sunbeam told him. "It was a frog, and I was about your age."

"A frog?" Graykit looked alarmed.

Bristlekit narrowed her eyes. "Are frogs fast?"

"They can hop out of reach in the blink of an eye," Sunbeam told her.

"What do they taste like?" Stemkit asked.

"A bit like a blackbird," Sunbeam mewed.

"Are they slimy?" Stemkit pressed.

"Not really."

Bristlekit narrowed her eyes. "I suppose they just look slimy because they're wet," she mewed. "Do they have bones like fish?"

"More like birds," Sunbeam told her. "Although I've never eaten a fish. Have you?"

Bristlekit wrinkled her nose. "I'm not a RiverClan cat."

"I'm going to catch a fish one day," Graykit mewed. "I'm going to catch every type of prey in the forest and the lake."

Stemkit looked thoughtful. "That would take a *long* time."

"I'm going to be a *warrior* for a long time," Graykit sniffed.

Stemkit flicked his gaze back to Sunbeam. "Will you still catch frogs now that you're a ThunderClan cat?"

"Are there frogs in the oak forest?" Sunbeam asked.

Stemkit looked suddenly very earnest, as though giving the matter serious thought. "I don't know," he mewed at last.

Bristlekit frowned. "There's never been one on the fresh-kill pile," she reasoned solemnly.

Stemkit seemed to ponder for a moment. "I guess that doesn't mean there are *none* in the forest."

"If there *are* frogs"—Bristlekit turned her attention back to Sunbeam—"will you still eat them?"

"I might." Sunbeam hadn't thought about the prey she'd have to give up now that she was living as a ThunderClan cat. "If I find one."

"But ThunderClan cats don't eat frogs," Stemkit mewed. "Does that mean you'll still be a ShadowClan cat?"

"Does the prey you eat decide which Clan you're loyal to?" Sunbeam asked him.

Stemkit hesitated.

Graykit cut in. "It *can't*," he mewed. "Otherwise, I won't be able to catch every type of prey in the forest without becoming a WindClan

cat and a RiverClan cat and a—”

Bristlekit interrupted. “We get it,” she mewed. “What you eat doesn’t determine which Clan you belong to.”

Sunbeam looked at the she-kit, genuinely curious. “What do you think *does* determine which Clan you belong to?” she asked.

Bristlekit looked puzzled. “It can’t be where you’re born, or Fernstripe wouldn’t be a ThunderClan cat. And it can’t be what you eat.” She frowned.

“It’s who you’re loyal to,” Stemkit mewed.

“I agree.” Sunbeam was impressed. These kits were bright. Her heart lifted. Perhaps she *could* teach them how to hunt before they grew tired. “Your Clan is the one you protect. And from now on, I will protect ThunderClan.” Her belly tightened. What if one of these kits asked who she’d protect in a battle with ShadowClan? She wasn’t going to give them the chance. “Come on.” She headed for the trees. “The elders will be getting hungry. We’d better start hunting.”

“Finally!” Stemkit charged past her.

“Wait!” She called him back. “We don’t want to scare the prey away. Follow me and watch how I move.” She dropped her tail until it was skimming the grass but not touching it and began to pad very softly across the clearing. Glancing back, she saw the kits copying her, wobbling a little as they tried to put one paw exactly in front of another as she was doing. Graykit was frowning with concentration, and Stemkit’s eyes were nearly crossed as he stared intently at the grass in front of his paws. “Very good,” she told them.

“What are we going to catch?” Bristlekit asked.

“I don’t want to catch mice,” Graykit mewed.

“Then we won’t catch mice,” Sunbeam reassured him. “We need to see what we can find.” As they moved into the cover of the trees, she tasted the air. Wet with rain, the forest smelled rich and fragrant. “Open your mouths and tell me what you can smell,” she told the kits. She stopped and waited for them to line up beside her. They all opened their mouths, their eyes clouding with concentration.

“I can smell wet leaves,” Stemkit mewed.

“I can smell moss.” Graykit narrowed his eyes.

Bristlekit padded ahead. “There’s something over here that doesn’t smell like leaves or moss.”

Sunbeam followed her, scanning the forest floor. She recognized the scent at once. "Well spotted!" she breathed to Bristlekit.

Bristlekit looked at her eagerly. "What is it?"

"See that burrow?" Sunbeam nodded to a small, round hole between the roots of a birch tree. "There'll be voles in there." The scents swirling around it were at once sharp and musky. This wasn't just an escape route. It was the entrance to a nest. Her heart began to beat quickly. She'd found their prey; now she just had to work out how to teach the kits to catch it. *Work together*. She remembered the ThunderClan way. "Bristlekit." She nodded to the orange-and-white she-kit. "I want you to go and crouch just behind the hole. Make yourself as flat as you can and be very, very quiet."

As Bristlekit carefully took up position, Sunbeam nodded to Graykit. "I want you to crouch right *next* to the hole and watch for movement inside." Graykit crept toward it.

"Stemkit." Sunbeam looked at the orange tabby tom-kit. His eyes were round with anticipation. "You're going to catch the first one."

Graykit looked up sharply. "But I want to catch—"

"Hush." Sunbeam cut him off with a whisper. "We don't want the prey to hear us. You'll get a turn, I promise," she mewed. "But I need you there for now because *you're* going to chase any vole that comes out of the nest toward Stemkit."

Graykit eyed her thoughtfully, then went back to watching the hole while Sunbeam beckoned Stemkit with a nod and led him a short distance away. She began to push piles of soggy leaves around him, forming a low wall that surrounded him on three sides, opening toward the hole.

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

"I'm making a prey barrier," she told Stemkit. "You're going to hide behind it so the vole doesn't see you until the last moment." She called to Graykit in a whisper. "Chase the vole toward the barrier, and Stemkit will leap out and kill it," she told him.

"How do I kill it?" Stemkit asked.

"Grab it with your foreclaws and hold it still, then nip its neck between your teeth. Nip it hard. A quick kill is kinder. Only rogues torture their prey."

Stemkit nodded solemnly.

"Do you want me to show you by catching the first one?" Sunbeam hesitated. Was that allowed? The kits were meant to be feeding the elders, not her.

"No." Stemkit decided for her. He stood in front of the leaf barrier she'd created. "I want to do it."

"What do I do?" Bristlekit called in a whisper from behind the vole hole.

"You listen," Sunbeam mewed. "Stretch your ears as big as you can and lean in close. As close as possible without giving yourself away. As soon as you hear paw steps, flick your tail." Sunbeam looked at Graykit. "When you see her tail flick, get ready. Then, when the vole comes out, chase it. Try to steer it toward Stemkit."

"Okay." Graykit's eyes were glittering with excitement.

Bristlekit was leaning toward the hole, her ears pricked. Stemkit crouched behind the barrier, claws unsheathed. Sunbeam hoped this technique would work. It seemed like a very complicated way to catch a vole, but she knew she had to keep all the kits involved if she wanted to keep their attention. She suddenly wondered if Ivypool and the others were watching. She glanced behind her but didn't see any cat. Then she glimpsed Nightheart peering out from behind a tree. He blinked at her and she blinked back, glad he was there.

Suddenly, Bristlekit flicked her tail. Sunbeam held her breath as two small beady eyes flashed in the shadowy hole. Graykit shot forward, and the eyes disappeared as the vole shot back inside.

Graykit groaned. Bristlekit huffed.

"Never mind!" Sunbeam called softly. "It'll come back. Voles are curious. It was a good first try. Next time, wait until its tail is all the way out of the hole." Her heart was beating faster than if she'd been her trying to catch the vole herself. She forced her breath to slow. There was no use getting worked up. This was going to take time.

She was impressed by the kits' patience as they waited for the vole to peer out again and felt a rush of pride for Graykit when it did. He held back, trembling with the effort, as it poked its muzzle out, then crept warily from the hole. Only when its tail had snaked from the shadows did Graykit move. He shot forward. The vole darted away in panic. He swerved, turning it, steering it toward the leaf barrier. As it neared, Stemkit leaped and thumped his paws down

excitedly. Sunbeam's heart sank as the vole shot past him and scrambled over the barrier, disappearing among the roots of a tree.

Stemkit lashed his tail. "Mouse dung!" he swore.

"Hush!" Sunbeam blinked at him in alarm. "Your mother's watching."

"*She* says it all the time," Stemkit told her indignantly.

Bristlekit called quietly from behind the hole. "Can I catch the next one?"

"Let Stemkit have another go." Sunbeam felt a prick of guilt as Bristlekit's tail drooped with disappointment. "I know it seems like you've got the least exciting job," she told her. "But listening is an important skill too."

Bristlekit grunted.

"You'll each have a go at listening and chasing and killing," Sunbeam promised. "We've got a lot of voles to catch." She tried to remember how many elders there were in ThunderClan. More than ShadowClan, that was for sure. If they'd only had to feed Oakfur, this task would be easy.

But she was enjoying it. The kits seemed engaged and excited. If only they could make a catch. Worry tugged at her belly. What if they didn't manage to catch a single vole? She'd fail her first trial. That couldn't happen. She whisked her tail eagerly. "Come on," she mewed. "Let's try again. We can do this. I know we can."

She waited while Graykit returned to his position, hoping that there were plenty of voles in this nest. Bristlekit pricked her ears once more and Stemkit dropped into a crouch behind the leaf barrier. "Keep your tail flat," she whispered to him. "And bunch your hind paws up a little more. It'll make your attack quicker." As Stemkit adjusted his position, Sunbeam saw Bristlekit lift her tail.

Graykit hunkered down as another vole appeared in the hole. He waited, and Sunbeam held her breath as the vole crept out. Graykit looked up and caught his brother's eye, as though checking he was ready, before darting forward and chasing the vole toward him.

This time, Stemkit judged his leap perfectly. He landed on the vole and pinned it with his forepaws. It took him a couple of nips to kill it, but he was fast enough to make sure the vole barely suffered. He sat up proudly, the vole dangling from his jaws. Sunbeam

couldn't help but smile to see how big a vole looked compared to these kits. She reminded herself that this task was hard for them, not only because they were inexperienced, but because they weren't fully grown. Graykit wound around his littermate, purring.

"You did it! You did it!"

Bristlekit blinked eagerly at Sunbeam. "Can we swap now?"

"Sure," Sunbeam told her. "Come and take Stemkit's position." As Graykit opened his mouth to protest, she added, "You can try as soon as she's caught one. For now, I need you to do the listening." He began to pad away, his tail dragging. "You did really well," she called after him. "I saw the way you checked to see if Stemkit was ready before you chased the vole. That was like a real warrior."

"Really?" Graykit glanced back at her, his eyes lighting up.

"Really."

Graykit lifted his tail and headed back to his position, puffing out his chest as he went. Sunbeam felt a warm wash of pride—in the kit and in herself. Graykit, Stemkit, and Bristlekit had listened to her and obeyed all her instructions. And she felt she'd really bonded with them. If they kept working this well, they'd catch enough prey for a whole denful of elders. Excitement pricked in her paws. Could she be close to passing her first trial?

By midafternoon, they'd caught four voles. Graykit had told her how many elders there were, whispering the number softly in her ear after Sunbeam had confessed in a quiet mew that she didn't know yet. Each kit had made a kill—Bristlekit had made two—and they were still fizzing with excitement as she told them it was time to head back to the hollow.

"But I want to catch something else," Stemkit mewed.

"I think I could catch a *mouse* now." Graykit was looking around eagerly.

"Can't we stay out a bit longer?" Bristlekit pleaded.

Ivypool slid from behind a tree. "I think you've trained enough for today," she told them.

Spotfur hurried to praise her kits, Sparkpelt and Finchlight padding after her. "You did so well," Spotfur told them, nuzzling each kit in turn.

"They're going to make fine warriors." Sunbeam was relieved and very proud of her little patrol.

"They had a fine mentor." Ivypool looked at her with glowing eyes. "You've passed this trial, Sunbeam," she mewed. "We were all impressed."

"You really made them into a team," Sparkpelt told her.

"And they had fun," Finchlight mewed.

"They're lovely kits," Sunbeam purred.

Spotfur blinked at her warmly. "Thanks." She began to nudge them back toward the clearing. "And they'll sleep well tonight."

"No, we won't," Stemkit told her. "We're going to stay up and practice our hunting crouches."

"I'm going to search the whole hollow for mice," Graykit mewed.

As Spotfur hustled them away, Sunbeam scanned the forest. "Where's Nightheart?" Wasn't he going to congratulate her too?

Sparkpelt blinked at her apologetically. "He had to go back to the Moonpool."

"What?" He hadn't told her he was going back.

Ivypool glanced up, and Sunbeam followed her gaze. The sky was clearing. "There'll be a moon tonight, with any luck," Ivypool mewed. "Squirrelflight and Bramblestar will be expecting him to rejoin them. They'll need a lookout while they share with StarClan."

Disappointment jabbed Sunbeam's chest. Couldn't another warrior guard them? She knew she should be pleased that Nightheart was so loyal and responsible, but it would be her second night in ThunderClan's camp without him. When *he'd* passed his trials, she'd been with him to celebrate.

"He said to tell you he knows you'll do well," Ivypool went on. "And that he'll come home as soon as he can."

Sunbeam tried to look grateful, but her heart felt heavy. The thought of returning to the ThunderClan hollow without him made her feel lonely. *I guess I have no choice but to wait.*

"Come on, Sunbeam." Finchlight was calling her. Sparkpelt was already following the kits across the clearing. "You must be hungry. Let's grab something from the fresh-kill pile." She beckoned Sunbeam with her tail.

Sunbeam hurried after her. She shouldn't feel disappointed. Until Nightheart returned, she would have his kin to keep her company.



Chapter 7



Frostpaw struggled through heavy layers of sleep until, as though rising from the depths of the river and breaking into warm sunshine, she swam into a dream. A meadow stretched down to a chattering river. Its surface glittered beneath a wide blue sky, and as she padded along the grassy riverbank, she relished the breeze in her fur. Her wound was gone, her fur no longer matted with blood. She stopped and stretched, feeling no pain, no tiredness; energy fizzed in her paws. She wanted to stay here, wherever it was.

She stiffened as she saw a large silver tom standing on the shore ahead of her. His long fur was glittering with starlight. *A StarClan warrior!*

"Frostpaw." He knew her name.

Her heart seemed to recognize him, quickening as she stared. Was this the founder of RiverClan? "Are you Riverstar?"

He dipped his head. "Yes."

"Then this is a vision, not a dream?" She had to be sure she wasn't mistaken this time. "Am I really seeing you? Are you . . ." The words dried on her tongue. She might not be here to share with StarClan; she might have become one of them. After all, she'd been so feverish, and Smoky had been so worried about her health that he'd been sure no cat could cure her. She swallowed. "Am I dead?"

"No." He padded closer. "But you've suffered. I'm sorry that you had to."

"Have you been watching me?"

"Yes." His green eyes glittered. "You've been very brave."

"Have you been watching RiverClan too?" Did he know what had been happening on the island?

"The waters there are troubled," he mewed gravely. "The current may yet wash away the whole Clan."

His words frightened her. "Can you fix it?" Then, with a flash of awareness, she realized that she could ask the question she'd been trying to answer for moons. No more murky dreams. No more guessing. Riverstar himself could decide here and now. "Can you tell us who our leader should be?"

"First we must calm the waters," Riverstar mewed.

What did he mean? "Won't a new leader calm the waters?"

"It's gone too far," Riverstar mewed. "Before any cat can lead the Clan, you must smooth the way."

How? "I'm just an apprentice." She stared at him in alarm. "What can I do?"

"Nothing yet," he told her. "To help your Clan, you need to be stronger."

"I don't know if I can be stronger." Frostpaw felt like she could jump out of her skin. Ever since Reedwhisker's body had been found, she had been wishing StarClan would appear to her directly and tell her what to do. Now Riverstar was finally here, but she still couldn't understand what he wanted from her. Helping her Clan had already nearly killed her. What more could she do? "I've made so many mistakes. Everything I do is wrong."

"There's much for you to learn. But don't be frightened. I will teach you everything you need to know."

Her heart fluttered with anxiety. What would he teach her? What if she didn't understand? What if she forgot something important?

He went on. "But you will need help from the living as well as the dead."

She leaned forward. *Help?* Did he have some cat in mind? Did he know a cat she could trust? *Who . . .*, she began to ask, but the dream faded, and Frostpaw woke and found herself once more in the horseplace den.

A sharp tang engulfed her. It was in her fur and on the bright white pelt that was lining her straw nest. She wrinkled her nose. The scent was like an herb, stronger than she'd ever smelled. She wondered if she'd ever be able to get the stench out of her fur.

Outside, the gray afternoon sky was dull, and rain pounded the meadow. She tried to push herself to her paws, but she was weak. Her legs trembled and she sank back against the pelt, suddenly realizing that the wound in her neck felt less painful. The hot, throbbing pain had given way to a prickly ache. And her pelt was clean. No matted blood. She touched a forepaw gingerly to her wound, unable to twist her head to see. It was closed, held together by what felt like a thick, stiff strand of cobweb. Had the Twoleg done

that? She wondered how. It would be useful to know. She could tell Mothwing.

She let her paw drop back down as she realized she couldn't tell Mothwing anything. She couldn't go back to her Clan. Again, frustration seemed to tighten her pelt, making her feel like she might explode. Okay, so she'd have help doing whatever it was she was doing for Riverstar, so she wasn't *completely* alone. But who? And how would they help? *And what will they help me do?*

"Hi, Frostpaw." Coriander's mew made her turn her head. The gray tom-kit was charging across the den toward her.

Smoky trotted after him. "How are you feeling?"

They stopped beside her straw nest.

"Better." She glared at him. She wasn't going to tell him more. He'd set the Twoleg on her. "Is the Twoleg coming back?"

"No," Smoky told her. "If it left you here, then it thinks you'll be okay."

"Left me here?" What did he mean?

"It could have kept you in its den."

The thought of waking to find herself in a strange Twolegplace made Frostpaw's blood run cold. It could have taken her anywhere. Somewhere beyond the lake. She might never have found her way home. "I told you I didn't want a Twoleg near me," she mewed, bristling at his betrayal.

"I know." Smoky dipped his head. "I'm sorry I scared you, but I knew the Twoleg could help. Whistlepaw's herbs weren't enough. I couldn't let you die."

"What if it *had* taken me away?" Frostpaw demanded.

"It's never taken any cat for long," Smoky told her. "And it always brings us back. The Twolegs seem to like us living here."

Frostpaw sniffed. "You're very trusting."

"A Twoleg saved your life," he pointed out.

"I suppose you're right." Frostpaw knew she must sound ungrateful, but Smoky had taken a huge risk against her will. She stiffened as she noticed for the first time that the fur on her flank had been scraped away and there was a wound there, small and neat and held together with the same thread that she'd felt in her neck.

“What’s that?” Her eyes widened with alarm. “I didn’t have a wound there.”

Smoky looked unworried. “That happens to a lot of she-cats the Twoleg healer fixes,” he told her. “It’s nothing to worry about. It’ll heal quickly, and it doesn’t seem to do any harm.”

This cat had far too much faith in Twolegs. Frostpaw shifted uneasily. Why would a Twoleg *make* a wound just to fix it?

Coriander had scrambled onto the side of her nest. “You were asleep for a whole day,” he mewed.

“You must be starving,” Smoky mewed. “I’ll catch you something to eat.”

As he headed away, Frostpaw realized that she *was* hungry, for the first time since she’d been wounded. The thought comforted her—it meant she must be recovering.

“Don’t scratch your wounds,” Coriander warned, balancing on the straw. “If you do, the Twoleg will put a big, stiff collar around your head so that you can’t wash properly.”

“Don’t worry.” Frostpaw shuddered at the thought. “I used to be a medicine-cat apprentice. I know to leave wounds alone.”

“Little Daisy didn’t,” Coriander mewed. “The Twoleg put a collar on her so big she could hardly walk straight.” His whiskers twitched with amusement at the memory. “It didn’t hurt, but she kept bumping into things.” He hopped down from the nest. “I guess now we don’t need all the cobweb I collected.” He sounded disappointed. “And Little Daisy was excited about making Whistlepaw’s poultice.”

“You might be able to use them another time,” Frostpaw told him. “If you get a scratch or a bite.”

“I guess.” He glanced over his shoulder as Smoky padded back into the den, a mouse dangling from his jaws.

He dropped it into Frostpaw’s nest. “We’ll leave you in peace,” he told her. “But if you need anything, just yowl.”

“Thanks.” Frostpaw blinked at him gratefully. He was so kind that it was hard to stay mad at him for calling the Twoleg over to her nest. And she felt so much better; perhaps he had made the right decision. But still—she shuddered again—a *Twoleg*.

She took a bite of the mouse as Smoky led Coriander from the den. As she chewed, she thought about her vision. What had

Riverstar wanted to teach her? What did he mean by “help from the living world”? Whistlepaw? Smoky? Frustration prickled through her pelt. And why did he want *her* to help RiverClan? Nothing she’d done so far had worked out, and now she couldn’t even go back to camp; it wasn’t safe for her anymore. She growled to herself irritably. StarClan visions were more vivid than the vague dreams she’d had while she was a medicine-cat apprentice, but they didn’t seem any more helpful.

Then she frowned. *Perhaps it was another vague dream.* The herb the Twoleg had used on her smelled like nothing she’d smelled before. Could it have made her dreams feel more real than they were? Could it have made them *seem* like visions?

A soft thud sounded beyond the straw where a gap in the wall showed the rain falling outside. Something had jumped down into the den. Little Daisy? Frostpaw stopped chewing and narrowed her eyes. She swallowed the mouthful of mouse she’d been chewing and tasted the air. Her heart lifted as she smelled Whistlepaw.

The WindClan medicine-cat apprentice padded into view and blinked happily when she saw Frostpaw. “You look so much better,” she mewed, hurrying over.

“I *fee*/ much better,” Frostpaw told her.

“I came by yesterday but you were sleeping. Smoky told me what had happened.” Whistlepaw leaned into her nest and examined the Twoleg healer’s work. “They made a neat job of it,” she mewed, sounding impressed. She touched her nose to Frostpaw’s ear. “And your fever’s gone.” As she drew back, her eye caught the fresh wound on Frostpaw’s flank. She clearly hadn’t noticed it last time she’d come. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know,” Frostpaw told her. “Smoky says it’s something the Twolegs do to the she-cats around here. He said it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Not really?” Frostpaw told her. “No more than my neck.” Both wounds stung a little, but there was no throb of infection. They’d stop hurting soon.

“I’m relieved the Twoleg healed you.” Whistlepaw gazed at her earnestly. “I didn’t have the skill. And the herbs didn’t seem to be

working.”

Frostpaw wasn't ready to concede out loud yet that she was grateful for the Twoleg's help. She changed the subject. “Has Kestrelflight noticed you've been slipping out?”

“Yes, but I told him I've been looking for new herbs. That seemed to satisfy him for now.” She leaned closer. “A RiverClan patrol came to the camp,” she mewed quietly. “Owlnose and Splashtail. They said they were searching for you. That you'd disappeared.”

Frostpaw stiffened. “What did you tell them?”

“Nothing,” Whistlepaw mewed. “It was hard, though. They seemed really worried.”

“It's best they know nothing for now,” Frostpaw mewed. She lowered her voice. “Did any of your Clanmates find my blood on the moor?”

“Not yet,” Whistlepaw mewed. “As far as they're concerned, you've never been near WindClan territory.”

“It might be time they found it.” Frostpaw's tail twitched nervously. “Perhaps you can take a few strands of my fur and leave them nearby so they know it was me.”

Whistlepaw's eyes rounded with worry. “Do you want your whole *Clan* to think you're dead?”

Frostpaw felt a surge of guilt. Graypaw and Mistpaw would be devastated. They'd already lost both their parents. When Curlfeather had died, the two had sneaked into the medicine-cat den to comfort Frostpaw. The three of them were all each other had now, they'd said.

Stop. She pushed the thought away. It couldn't be helped. “It's the only way to be sure that the cat who attacked me doesn't come after me again.”

Whistlepaw sat back on her haunches. “I guess,” she conceded. “But you can't pretend you're dead forever.” Her tail stiffened. “Unless you're *never* going back.”

“I just need some time,” Frostpaw told her. Riverstar's words were stuck in her mind. *There is much for you to learn. But don't be frightened. I will teach you everything you need to know.* If this was the message from StarClan she'd been waiting for, then it was unfinished. She needed to hear the rest of it. She needed to know

what Riverstar was going to teach her. "Can you take me to the Moonpool?"

Whistlepaw looked at the ground.

She must be scared. "The murderer won't try again as long as they think they've killed me," Frostpaw pressed. "But I have to share with StarClan. I think I had a vision. They told me I have to help my Clan. But I need to find out more."

Whistlepaw's eyes glittered nervously. "I can't take you," she mewed. "I'm sorry, but Kestrelflight will guess I'm up to something. He might have believed my herb excuse so far, but the Moonpool's a long way. I'd be gone for a whole day. And if he asks me where I've been, I'm not sure I can keep your secret." She looked apologetic. "I'm not good at lying."

Frostpaw blinked at her sympathetically. "I understand," she mewed. She didn't want to put the WindClan medicine-cat apprentice in a difficult position, not after she'd been so kind. "I can travel alone."

"Travel alone where?" Smoky was padding toward them. He nodded to Whistlepaw. "Come to check on your patient?"

"Yes." Whistlepaw dipped her head in greeting. "She's looking well. I think you made the right decision getting the Twoleg to help her."

Frostpaw shot the WindClan medicine-cat apprentice a sharp look but didn't argue. The Twoleg *had* made her feel better.

"She needs to rest." Smoky looked at Frostpaw. "What's this talk of traveling?"

"I need to get to the Moonpool and share with StarClan."

"Now?" Smoky's eyes rounded with worry.

"As soon as possible."

"Is it a long way?" Smoky asked.

Whistlepaw looked at him. "It's on the moor," she told him. "Beyond Clan territory."

He frowned. "That's a hard journey for a cat with healing wounds."

"I have to go," Frostpaw told him. "My Clan's in trouble, and I'm the only one who can speak with StarClan."

Smoky looked at her for a moment. "I'll come with you."

"No." Frostpaw didn't think before she spoke. Smoky had been kind, but she barely knew him. He'd led a Twoleg to her nest when she'd been too weak to escape. He'd done it to help her, and he'd been right. It had probably saved her life. But it had been a risk. A cat who trusted Twolegs was a liability. And her mother's words still lingered in the back of her mind. *Trust no cat*. If Whistlepaw couldn't come, it was best if Frostpaw did this alone. "We'd need to travel through Clan territory," she told him. "It wouldn't be safe for you."

"Will it be safe for *you*?" Smoky asked her.

"I've been there before," she told him. "And it'll be easier for me to stay out of sight if I'm on my own."

Smoky looked doubtful but he didn't argue any further. "Okay," he mewed. "If you're determined."

Frostpaw pushed herself to her paws. The mouse had given her strength, and she felt less shaky this time. She climbed gingerly from the nest, testing the pull on her wounds, relieved when they did no more than prick a little.

Whistlepaw was watching her nervously. "You'll be careful, won't you?"

"Of course."

"What will I tell the Clans if you don't . . . ?" Her mew trailed away as though she couldn't bring herself to say it, but Frostpaw knew what she wanted to ask.

"If I don't come back?" She shook out her pelt. "Let them carry on thinking I'm dead." It sounded callous, but it could be the truth. She pushed the thought away. She had to focus on getting to the Moonpool. "I probably *won't* be back for a while," she mewed. "I think there's something StarClan wants me to do."

Smoky blinked at her. "Are you sure you're well enough?"

"I'll be okay," Frostpaw assured him. "I don't have a fever, and the wounds are so tightly closed they won't reopen if I'm careful." She sat down and scraped a few clawfuls of fur from her tail, which she dropped in front of Whistlepaw. "Sprinkle this where you found me," she told her. "The Clans have to *really* believe I'm dead."

Whistlepaw stared back at her, eyes shimmering. "I wish you didn't have to do this," she mewed. "You've always had so much to

deal with. First your Clan pressured you to choose a leader, and now StarClan wants you to do more? I wish they would give you a break.”

Frostpaw gazed back at her. “StarClan has promised to help me,” she mewed. “They’re going to teach me and I’m going to learn. I’m going to help my Clan properly this time.” Turning away, she headed out into the rain and, without looking back, began the long journey to the Moonpool.

Night had fallen, and the sky was still cloudy as she followed the path toward the boulders that led up to the Moonpool hollow. But the rain had eased, and although her paws ached, her muscles had loosened with the walking. Her wounds had grown supple and felt less sore. But she still felt exhausted and longed to lie down beside the Moonpool and close her eyes. Her thoughts had churned with questions since she’d woken in the horseplace den, and she wanted answers. She wanted to stop guessing and second-guessing and simply follow StarClan’s instructions. She wanted to let someone else decide for a change.

She heaved herself slowly up the boulders, wincing. Scrambling from boulder to boulder stretched her wounds until they stung, and she was relieved when she reached the top and pulled herself over the edge.

She smelled ThunderClan scent. Her pelt spiked. The hollow was filled with it, fresh and pungent, and her heart sank as she saw three ThunderClan cats beside the Moonpool. She recognized Alderheart, Squirrelflight, and Bramblestar. They were waiting at the water’s edge. Why had they come? Frostpaw looked up. The clouds were thinning, tearing apart in places. The ThunderClan cats must be waiting for the moon to shine. But why did they need to speak with StarClan? And why did it have to be *now*?

Frustrated, Frostpaw hurried toward the shadows beneath the cliffs. She ducked behind the rocks there and crouched in the darkness, relieved that the breeze was spiraling out of the hollow and would take her scent with it. She didn’t want to explain her presence here to any cat, and besides, she was supposed to be dead. If ThunderClan realized that she was still alive, the rumor could start her attacker searching for her again.

She settled down in the shelter of the rocks, relieved to rest. She was exhausted and had no idea how long the ThunderClan cats would stay. Hidden here, she could risk closing her eyes for a moment.

She didn't intend to drift into sleep, but moments later she opened her eyes and saw the sunny, green pastures of StarClan. She sat up, surprised. She hadn't touched her nose to the Moonpool. But she was here. Even though the sky was bright and blue, stars swirled around her. She watched, feeling dizzy, as they encircled her, slowing, finding shape in the glittering light, becoming warriors. Their thick, glossy pelts seemed familiar, and she sensed she was among Clanmates. Her heart quickened as she recognized Mistystar and then Reedwhisker, their fur sparkling with stars. Were all these cats her RiverClan ancestors? She looked around hopefully. Was Curlfeather here? But there was no sign of her mother's pale brown pelt.

A snowy white she-cat with green eyes padded forward and stopped in front of her, blinking with a calm, steady gaze. "I'm Moth Flight." The ancient medicine cat gave a slight nod. "It was brave of you to travel to the Moonpool," she mewed. "But there was no need. Now that we have made contact, we can reach you wherever you are."

Reedwhisker stretched his muzzle forward. "I'm sorry these past moons have been so hard on you," he mewed. "I always knew you were determined, but you've shown how courageous you can be too."

"I had no choice."

"You could have stopped pushing," he mewed. "You could have given up, but you didn't." He padded nearer and touched her head with his nose. "Keep going, Frostpaw. There's much left for you to do. And lots for you to learn if you're going to help the Clan."

Mistystar leaned closer. "We need you, Frostpaw."

"I know." Riverstar had already told her that, but the urgency in her Clanmates' meows was frightening. Everything seemed to depend on her. And she wasn't sure she was strong enough to help. "Why *me*? Every time I've tried to help, it's only caused more trouble for RiverClan. I want to fix whatever I've broken, but I don't know if I

can. I don't know if I'm strong enough. Perhaps you should choose a better cat, some cat who's more—"

"Who's more *what*?"

Frostpaw jerked her muzzle around to see who'd cut her off. Riverstar was gazing at her. "You came back." She felt relieved. Was he going to teach her how to help her Clan as he'd promised?

He padded closer, his thick tail swishing gently. "What cat is better able to save RiverClan than you?" he asked.

"Icewing," Frostpaw answered. "Harelight, Mothwing . . ." There were so many cats better than her. "*Any* cat," she mewed in desperation. "Any cat but me. I'm not strong enough."

Riverstar looked at her kindly. "You've survived so much already, and you've only just begun."

The thought made her tremble. Was there more to survive? "What do you want me to do?"

"We want you to choose RiverClan's new leader."

Not this again. She felt a surge of exasperation. "But I've already *failed* at that!"

"This time we will help you," Riverstar told her.

Why didn't you help me before? She didn't get the chance to ask.

Riverstar went on. "You need to *become* the cat who can save RiverClan," he told her. "You need to make a journey."

Was this his idea of help? How could she travel now? "Can't you see I'm wounded?"

"I can see," he mewed softly. "But there isn't much time. You must learn and grow. You will discover how to put the Clan back together. But first you must learn how to break it."

"*Break* it?" She backed away. "I don't want to *break* it. I want to *fix* it." Suddenly she wanted to run home to her Clan and snuggle into her nest in the apprentices' den. She wanted to feel the warmth of Mistpaw's pelt beside hers. She wanted to be awakened by Graypaw's snoring. She wanted to tell Mothwing everything and let her former mentor comfort and reassure her.

But that wasn't going to happen. Her attacker was probably in the RiverClan camp, and once they saw she was still alive, they might try again to kill her. "Please choose another cat," she begged.

"I've chosen you." Riverstar's gaze didn't waver, and his voice seemed to reach into Frostpaw's chest. She stared back at him, amazed by the faith she saw shining in his round green eyes. He really believed in her. Perhaps she could believe in herself a little. She lifted her chin. "I'll try," she mewed shakily.

Riverstar dipped his head.

"But I'm so tired," she went on. She longed suddenly for her mother. If she couldn't go back to her Clan, then perhaps at least she could speak with Curlfeather. "I don't know if I have the strength. Perhaps if I could just see Curlfeather . . . ?"

Riverstar touched his nose to Frostpaw's cheek. "Little one," he mewed, "I wish I could do that for you."

"But she's safe in StarClan, right?" Frostpaw searched his gaze. "She's okay?"

"We must focus on the future," he told her.

She pulled away. Why wouldn't he let her speak to Curlfeather? Was there some reason her mother wasn't with them?

"And you must rest before your journey," Riverstar added.

Frostpaw shivered. She knew she should feel comforted, surrounded by so many former Clanmates, but instead she felt frightened and alone. "What if my wound reopens? Or gets infected?" She stared desperately at Riverstar. "You're asking too much of me."

Mistystar stepped forward. "We're not asking you to do this by yourself," she mewed gently.

"You've faced this alone until now," Riverstar conceded. "But not anymore. You'll have a companion. Some cat to travel beside."

"A *real* cat?" Frostpaw stiffened. She'd *tried* to imagine who it could be, but besides Whistlepaw, who'd refused to come with her, she couldn't think of anyone she could trust. "Curlfeather said I should trust no cat," she told Riverstar. "There's a murderer in the Clans." Her gaze flitted toward Reedwhisker. "You've seen them!" She remembered her vision. He'd faced his attacker as they'd pushed him off the cliff. "Can't you tell me who it was? Help me protect our Clanmates?"

Reedwhisker shook his head sadly. Frostpaw looked down at her paws, unsurprised, but still disappointed.

"You'll learn everything when you're ready," Riverstar told her. "For now, just listen." He held her gaze, his green eyes darkening. "You can't think about the past. Or even the present. There isn't time. You must think of the future. You must follow your paws. Help will come, and when it does, you must let them in. I know everything that's happened has undermined your faith in others, but you can rely on this cat. You must trust them."

"Who is it?"

"You'll know when you find them."

Frostpaw's belly was tight with frustration. Why did StarClan have to be so vague? *How* exactly would she know? "Okay," she mewed angrily. "Then at least tell me where I should follow my paws *to*."

"Follow the sunrise," Riverstar told her.

Around her, the vision began to fade.

"When should I leave?" Frostpaw called, her heart pounding.

"By dawn," Riverstar answered. The StarClan warriors were disappearing, their sparkling pelts dwindling into darkness. All that remained was Riverstar's voice. "No later. Time is running out."

How long should I follow the sunrise? Where to?

Frostpaw woke with the questions ringing in her mind and blinked toward the sky. The moon still hadn't broken through the thinning cloud. She scrambled to her paws. Had the ThunderClan cats given up and gone home? She peered over the rock, her breath billowing into the cold, night air. Squirrelflight, Bramblestar, and Alderheart were still waiting quietly beside the pool.

If I'm leaving before dawn, I have to rest. But not here. It was too cold. She tiptoed across the rock, back to the boulders, and jumped down them, one by one, careful not to tear her wounds. At the bottom, instead of following the trail back along the stream, she nosed her way into the bracken. She pushed her way deep inside, until she felt sure her scent had been covered by its musty odor. Then she curled down into the fallen fronds and closed her eyes.

StarClan wanted her to make a journey. Did she have a choice? Riverstar had promised the journey would make her stronger. She doubted whether any journey could turn her into a cat strong enough to put her broken Clan back together. But Riverstar had promised to

send help. She felt sleep twining around her weary limbs and let it pull her into darkness.

When she woke, she'd figure all of this out. As exhausted as she was, she knew she would do everything she could to save her Clan.



Chapter 8



Nightheart shivered. Even with his fur fluffed out, he was cold. How long had he been sitting up here on the rim of the Moonpool hollow? When he'd arrived, Bramblestar, Squirrelflight, and Alderheart were already at the water's edge. He'd nodded to them but kept his distance. He was here to keep watch, not to take part in their sacred ritual. Clouds were still veiling the sky, but they were beginning to thin; there was still a chance the moon would show itself before dawn.

He wondered: Had Sunbeam passed her first trial? She'd been doing well when he'd left. The kits had already caught two voles, and they'd seemed eager and engaged in the task. They must have caught two more. Nightheart had watched for as long as he could, but his duty lay at the Moonpool with Squirrelflight and Bramblestar. He just hoped Ivypool had passed on his message. Sunbeam would understand why he'd left, wouldn't she? He felt a pang of guilt that she would be spending her second night alone in the ThunderClan camp.

From here he could see the moor and the forest, and the lake in between, no more than shadows beneath the sky. It would be dawn soon, and the moon was still hidden. Would another night pass without ThunderClan being able to share with StarClan?

The cold seemed to have reached his bones. He'd probably feel warmer if he paced the edge of the hollow. As he stood and stretched, Bramblestar glanced up at him. From so far away, Nightheart couldn't make out the ThunderClan leader's expression, but it was clear from the stiffness in Bramblestar's shoulders that he was nervous.

As Nightheart padded farther around the hollow rim, his nose twitched. *Cat-scent*. Was someone spying? It smelled a little like RiverClan scent, but it was mingled with a harsh tang Nightheart didn't recognize. He followed the smell to a string of rocks edging the hollow and peered warily into the shadows behind them. Whichever cat had been hiding here was gone. He slipped into the gap and sniffed the stone. It was definitely RiverClan scent, and was that

blood? His paws pricked uneasily. Some cat had hidden here—a cat who'd tried to disguise their identity with a strange herb, a cat who'd recently been injured.

He followed the scent around the rim of the hollow until it petered out, then backtracked and traced it to the top of the boulders. Bramblestar, Squirrelflight, and Alderheart were crouching at the water's edge now. Were they hoping the moon's faint glow through the clouds would be enough to let them contact StarClan?

Quietly, not wanting to disturb them, Nightheart hopped down in pursuit of the strange cat's scent, jumping lightly from boulder to boulder until he reached the grass at the bottom. He picked up the trail easily. Whatever this cat had used to disguise their scent was strong, and sourer than any herb. As he followed the stench into the bracken, he remembered that a RiverClan cat had died near here. Curlfeather? Was that her name? She'd been torn apart by dogs. His heart began to thump as he pushed his way through the stalks. Curlfeather had been on her way to the Moonpool, but why had another RiverClan cat come this way? Then he remembered Sparkpelt's question when he'd returned to camp earlier. *Did you see any sign of Frostpaw while you were out?* His pelt ruffled. Was this *Frostpaw's* scent? Had he found her?

As he pushed deeper, the clouds suddenly parted and the moon lit the bracken. Through the fronds, he saw a shape on the ground. A gray pelt. A small body. Nightheart stiffened. It wasn't moving. "Frostpaw?" he whispered. Was she dead, like Curlfeather? "Frostpaw? Is that you?"

Still the body didn't move. He padded closer. Even if it wasn't Frostpaw, it was definitely a she-cat, and he could see dried blood on her flank. The fur around her neck was gone, showing another, longer wound near her throat. Barely breathing, he reached out a paw and poked her.

"What?" A head lifted and jerked around. Wide, frightened eyes stared at him through the moonlight.

He'd been right: it was Frostpaw.

Nightheart backed away. "I didn't mean to scare you," he mewed quickly.

She scrambled to her paws and shrank away from him, hissing. Her eyes were slits; her ears were flattened to her head. She was terrified.

"I thought you were dead—" He hesitated. He didn't want to scare her more. "I could smell blood. You're hurt."

"Who are you?" Her gaze flitted over him.

"Nightheart," he told her. "From ThunderClan."

"ThunderClan?" Her eyes flashed with suspicion. "Didn't you move to ShadowClan?"

"I moved back," he told her.

She opened her eyes a little wider as though trying to get a better look at him. But they still glittered with fear. Why was she so scared of him?

"I promise, I'm not going to hurt you," he mewed.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I escorted Bramblestar and Squirrelflight to the Moonpool," he told her. "They wanted to share with StarClan."

"Why?"

"I'm just escorting them." He needed to keep their mission secret. "They wanted to ask StarClan something." He took a step closer, half expecting Frostpaw to turn and run. But she held her ground. "You're Frostpaw, right?"

"So what if I am?" she growled.

"Your Clanmates are looking for you," he told her. "They came to our camp yesterday, asking after you."

She eyed him warily.

"You smell injured," he pressed.

"Some cat tried to kill me."

Nightheart blinked. "Who?"

"I don't know." She was stiff with fear.

Now he knew why. "When did this happen?"

"A few days ago."

"Do you need a medicine cat?" he asked. "Alderheart's at the Moonpool right now. I can fetch him if—"

"No!" she hissed. "No cat can know I'm here."

"Why?"

"No cat!" she hissed again. "Do you *understand*?"

He felt a rush of pity for the RiverClan apprentice. "I understand," he mewed gently. "I won't tell any cat I've seen you."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

At last her shoulders loosened a little and her pelt began to smooth. She sat down, but he could see she was trembling.

"Are you sure you don't need a medicine cat?" he asked.

"I'm sure."

The wounds on her flank and on her neck showed clearly in the moonlight. Something had really hurt her. And yet the cuts looked dry and tightly closed. Someone had tended to them. "Have you already been seen by a medicine cat?"

She didn't answer.

Some kind of thick thread was binding the wounds shut. "It looks like whoever treated them did a good job," he mewed.

She looked away as though she was embarrassed. "It was a Twoleg healer," she mumbled.

"A Twoleg?" Surprise flickered in his chest. "And it let you go?"

"Yes."

Nightheart found it hard to believe, but the threads binding her wounds didn't look like anything a medicine cat could do. Even so, she must still be in pain. And she was a long way from home. "Do you want me to escort you back to RiverClan?" he offered.

"No!" She recoiled. Was she scared of her own Clanmates, too? "They mustn't know I'm alive."

Nightheart frowned. "Why not?"

"I think it might have been one of them who tried to kill me."

He wondered for a moment if she was in her right mind. Perhaps she'd lost a lot of blood. Or the Twoleg had frightened her so badly, it had muddled her thoughts.

"I know it sounds unbelievable," she mewed as he stared at her. She suddenly seemed very small beneath the bracken arching over her head, her eyes shimmering in the moonlight. "But there's something wrong in RiverClan."

That was true at least.

She went on. "You know about Mistystar and Reedwhisker and Curlfeather?"

He nodded.

"You probably think it was just unlucky," she went on, "all of them dying so close together, but it wasn't bad luck. . . ." Her mew trailed away. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "I don't really know what's going on yet, but I'm going to find out. My whole Clan is in danger, and I have to help them."

"On your own?" He suddenly felt more worried than ever for the RiverClan apprentice.

"Maybe not on my own." Her eyes rounded with interest. She was looking at him as though trying to decide something. "Can I . . . trust you?" she mewed at last.

"I've already promised I won't tell any cat I saw you here," he told her.

"I need more than that," she mewed.

He frowned. Did she want him to take a message to someone? Or try to find out what had happened in RiverClan while she was missing? "I'll help if I can," he offered doubtfully.

"I had a vision," she mewed. "StarClan told me to go on a journey. They said they'd send me help." Her gaze moved slowly over Nightheart. "I think they sent you. I think you're meant to come with me."

Nightheart blinked at her in surprise. "Don't be silly," he spluttered. "Why would StarClan choose me to help a RiverClan cat?" But she was still looking at him. His pelt started to prickle self-consciously. "I can't go on a journey," he told her. "I've just returned to my Clan. With Sunbeam. We're mates now. She's waiting for me in the ThunderClan camp. If I don't go back, she'll think something's wrong. They all will. They might even think I've left the Clan again!" It was impossible even to imagine traveling just when he'd started to earn his family's respect. And Squirrelflight's. But Frostpaw's gaze didn't waver. "There's no way I can go on a journey now," he insisted. "No way."

She narrowed her eyes. "That's a shame." She didn't sound too disappointed. Perhaps she had another cat in mind. Someone else she could ask instead. Then she sniffed. "I guess StarClan must have meant some other cat." She sniffed again. "It's not surprising. You're not exactly who I was expecting. I mean, I'm sure you're a

great warrior, but the cat they send will probably be pretty amazing, because StarClan implied they would . . .” She stopped and looked away as though she’d lost interest in him.

Nightheart leaned closer. “Implied they would what?”

“Nothing, really.” Frostpaw began to lick a forepaw. “Only that whoever helped me would be helping to save the Clans.” She paused and looked at him. “They’d be kind of famous,” she mewed.

Nightheart tried to ignore the excitement sparking in his pelt. “How would this journey help save the Clans?” he asked as casually as he could.

“It’ll help me fix RiverClan,” Frostpaw told him.

“That’s just one Clan,” Nightheart pointed out.

“I guess.” She looked at him, her blue eyes glowing in the darkness. “But SkyClan might attack ShadowClan if Tigerstar doesn’t pull his warriors out of RiverClan territory. And ThunderClan and WindClan will have to take sides. There could be a war.”

Nightheart shifted his paws. It was exactly what he’d been fearing. If there was a war with ShadowClan, Sunbeam might leave him. He looked away. He couldn’t let Frostpaw draw him in. He had to go home. But curiosity was worming in his belly. “Are you certain it was a vision?” he asked. *Isn’t she a warrior apprentice now?* “I thought you had no connection with StarClan.”

“That was before,” she told him. “This one was real.”

She sounded so sure. A cold shiver ran down Nightheart’s spine. Could it be true that StarClan wanted him to help her? His thoughts quickened. If this journey stopped a war, Sunbeam wouldn’t have to choose between ThunderClan and ShadowClan. And if he went with Frostpaw and helped save the Clans, no one would ever think of him as just Firestar’s kin. He’d be *Nightheart*. They’d respect him for who he was, not who he was related to. “How far is this journey?” he mewed.

“I don’t know.”

At least she was being honest. He narrowed his eyes. Could he turn StarClan down? And could he let this young cat travel alone? She was wounded and vulnerable. Some cat had tried to kill her and they might try again. She’d been terrified when he’d found her, and

although she was acting casual now as she tried to persuade him to go with her, he guessed she was still scared, and with good reason.

"Will you come?" She searched his gaze hopefully.

He looked back at her. He wanted to prove himself. He wanted to obey StarClan. But most of all he wanted to protect this cat in need. If he didn't and something happened to her, he'd never forgive himself. "I'll come," he mewed.

Relief shone in her gaze. "We have to leave now." Her mew was suddenly urgent. The sky above the distant forest was growing light. "StarClan told me to leave before dawn."

What? Nightheart stared at her, stunned. He was ready to help her, but *right now*? "I have to tell my Clanmates," he told her. "Wait here." Turning, he nosed his way from the bracken and leaped up the boulders. Bramblestar, Squirrelflight, and Alderheart were still crouching beside the Moonpool. Their noses were touching the bright water now, and their eyes were closed.

Nightheart's paws pricked anxiously. *I can't disturb them.* StarClan could be granting Squirrelflight her nine lives. He couldn't interrupt that. What if StarClan didn't give her another chance? But Frostpaw was waiting for him. His heart began to pound. Dawn was lighting the sky. What if she left without him?

He lifted his chin. His Clan would be worried if he disappeared. Sunbeam would be upset. But StarClan had told Frostpaw to leave now, and he had to go with her. *I'm sorry.* He glanced at the fading stars. *Tell them I'll be back. Let Sunbeam know I haven't deserted her.*

He scrambled down the boulders and headed for the bracken. Frostpaw had pushed her way out and was gazing toward the distant forest.

"Which way do we go?" he asked her.

She squared her shoulders, looking more determined than a warrior heading into battle. The dawn sunshine lit her face. "*This way,*" she mewed.



Chapter 9



A cold wind was spiraling down into the ThunderClan hollow. It found its way through the tightly woven walls of the warriors' den and seemed to curl into Sunbeam's nest beside her. She shivered.

Chilly sunshine filtered through the den entrance. The other warriors had already left to hear which patrol they'd be assigned to. But Sunbeam didn't get up. There was an ache in her heart. She knew she should be grateful that ThunderClan had been so welcoming. And yet she couldn't help feeling stung by Nightheart's absence. He'd left her to sleep alone in an unfamiliar Clan for a second night. *He's on an important mission*, she told herself. What could be more important than changing leaders? *He could have said goodbye*. She sat up. *How? You were busy with your first trial*. And Ivypool, Sparkpelt, and Finchlight had all been watching.

Despite her reasoning, Sunbeam still felt ruffled and a little hurt. She'd left ShadowClan to be with Nightheart, and he wasn't here. She shook out her pelt. It was no use sulking. And it wasn't fair to Nightheart. He loved her. He'd said so, and when he was with her, she felt sure of it. He was affectionate and thoughtful. She'd definitely made the right decision moving to ThunderClan.

She hopped out of her nest. She should join one of the patrols. As she headed for the entrance, she heard excited mews outside.

"You're back!"

"What did they say?"

Sunbeam's heart leaped. Nightheart's patrol had returned. She ducked out of the den, narrowing her eyes as the sunlight dazzled her. ThunderClan warriors were crowding around Squirrelflight and Bramblestar in the clearing.

Alderheart nosed them away. "Give them some space," he mewed.

Cherryfall waved her denmates backward with her tail. "Did StarClan approve?"

Ivypool called down from Highledge. "Did they give you nine lives?"

Squirrelflight's eyes were shining. "Yes."

“Squirrelstar!” Cherryfall called.

“Squirrelstar!” Myrtlebloom yowled.

Sunbeam could sense her new Clanmates’ relief. It felt as though a fog had lifted from the camp, but she shifted her paws uneasily as Lionblaze joined in the cheer and Bayshine puffed out his chest. She knew Squirrelstar would make a good leader—but she also knew that this change would take ThunderClan one step closer to a battle with ShadowClan. Sunbeam tried to look pleased as Sparkpelt whisked her tail beside her, even though her belly was fluttering with anxiety. She watched Spotfur cheering beside the nursery with Stemkit, Bristlekit, and Graykit while Brackenfur and Cloudtail peered from the elders’ den. *Could I really stand with these cats against my old Clanmates and kin if it came to war?*

Finchlight paced excitedly. “It’s settled at last!”

Jayfeather sniffed. “About time too,” he grunted before disappearing into the medicine den.

At least there was one thing to be completely happy about. The mission was over. Sunbeam began to purr. Nightheart would finally be able to spend time with her. She wouldn’t have to spend another night alone in ThunderClan. She scanned the crowd. Where was he? There was no sign of his sleek black pelt. Had he stopped to hunt? Surely not. He’d want to come home. He’d know she was waiting for him. And yet she saw no sign of him. Her belly tightened. Had something happened? Had there been a fight? Had they bumped into a WindClan patrol as they were crossing the moor? She scanned Squirrelstar, Brambleclaw, and Alderheart for scratched muzzles or torn fur, but the three cats looked fine. So where was Nightheart?

Squirrelstar was still addressing the Clan. “Ivypool is now deputy. We’ll hold her official ceremony later, once the fresh-kill pile is full. Brambleclaw will become an elder, though of course he will stay in the leader’s den with me.” She glanced at him fondly. “But he will be treated as an elder.”

“I may be an elder, but I’ll take care of my own ticks.” He glanced toward Stemkit, Graykit, and Bristlekit. They’d be apprentices soon, and they’d already begun running errands for the elders. “I won’t need youngsters rummaging through my fur.”

“Wait till you get one lodged at the base of your tail!” Brackenfur called. “You’ll need young paws to reach it.”

Squirrelstar moved closer to Brambleclaw. “I’ll be there to take care of him.”

Brambleclaw looked at her affectionately. “I can take care of myself,” he purred. “Besides, you have a Clan to run.”

“Just so long as you take it easy.” Squirrelstar nudged him softly with her nose. “You need rest.”

It was the first time Sunbeam had seen the two warriors looking relaxed since she’d arrived in ThunderClan. That, at least, made her pleased the leadership had been settled at last. But worry was still sparking through her fur. Crossing the clearing, she slid between Bayshine and Lionblaze and stopped in front of Squirrelstar. “Where’s Nightheart?”

Alderheart glanced away guiltily. Brambleclaw shifted his paws. But Squirrelstar stared back at her steadily. “He left while we were sharing with StarClan.”

“*Left?*” Sunbeam’s chest tightened.

“He was gone when we came out from the hollow,” Squirrelstar told her.

Sunbeam searched her gaze. Why wasn’t she more worried? “Is he finding his own way home?”

Around her, the ThunderClan warriors began to murmur.

“Has he left ThunderClan again?” Myrtlebloom looked surprised.

“Did he go hunting?” Bayshine asked.

Sparkpelt pushed her way through the crowd. “Did you search for him?”

Sunbeam was relieved that she wasn’t the only cat who was worried. Squirrelstar seemed far too calm considering one of her warriors had disappeared. Wasn’t she alarmed? Only yesterday a RiverClan patrol had come to the camp in search of Frostpaw. Didn’t any cat think it strange that *two* cats had now gone missing?

Squirrelstar looked around the Clan, her green gaze calm. The murmuring died away. “We checked to see if there had been a fight.” She looked at Sparkpelt. “But there was no sign of a struggle. I’m sure nothing bad has happened to Nightheart.”

“Then where is he?” Cherryfall demanded. “He’s only just come back. He can’t have left us again, surely!”

Sunbeam saw the ginger she-cat’s gaze flash toward her. Her pelt felt hot. Did Cherryfall think *she’d* had something to do with Nightheart leaving?

“Did he say anything to you?” Cherryfall asked her sharply.

Squirrelstar stood in front of Sunbeam. “It’s true that Nightheart has only recently returned to ThunderClan,” she mewed. “But he returned a stronger and more loyal warrior.” Her voice was firm. “If he has left, we must have faith in him. Every cat is entitled to wander from time to time. Nightheart will return soon. A true warrior will always remain a true warrior.”

Lionblaze was frowning. “Are we sure he *is* a true warrior? He did leave us for ShadowClan.”

Sparkpelt turned on him. “He came back!” she snapped.

Finchlight was still staring anxiously at Squirrelstar. “Are you sure nothing bad has happened to him?”

“We checked thoroughly,” Squirrelstar promised. “There was no sign of an attack—no fox-scent, no blood.”

Blood. Sunbeam was relieved they’d found none, but the thought that they’d had to check in the first place made her flinch.

Brambleclaw moved closer. “I’m sure he had a good reason for leaving.”

Sunbeam’s thoughts were whirling. How could Nightheart have left? What would she do without him? Was she supposed to stay here *alone*? She had two more trials left. Didn’t he want to be here to support her?

Squirrelstar looked gravely at her Clanmates. “I’m sure you realize that there’s no need to share Nightheart’s absence with the other Clans. I suggest we carry on with our day as usual.” She looked up at the new ThunderClan deputy. “Ivypool, have you decided on the day’s patrols?”

“Not yet.” Ivypool scrambled down the rock tumble. “I didn’t want to send them out until you’d returned.”

The ThunderClan warriors turned toward her, the crowd breaking up as they responded to her calling their names.

Sunbeam felt a pelt brush hers.

Myrtlebloom had stopped beside her. "I'm sure he'll be back soon," she whispered.

"Do you think so?" Sunbeam hoped it was true.

"He wouldn't have left you without a good reason," Myrtlebloom told her before padding toward Ivypool.

"Why did he bring her here if he was just going to leave?"

Sunbeam stiffened as she heard Plumstone's mew.

The black-and-ginger she-cat padded past her with Dewnose.

"He didn't *bring* her," Dewnose answered. "She *followed* him."

Sunbeam watched them pass, stung by their conversation. Had they meant for her to hear it?

Her mother's words rang once more in her mind. *Are you sure he's not still running away from you?* A chill gripped her heart. Why had Nightheart left *now*, just after she'd arrived? Was he avoiding her? Did he wish she hadn't followed him?

She watched numbly as Ivypool announced the border patrol, then the first hunting patrol of the day. Warriors began to head out of camp. Sunbeam didn't want to join them. She suddenly felt out of place. She wanted to hide. She slid into the warriors' den before Ivypool could call her name.

In the shadows of the den, she gazed sadly at her nest. She'd thought she'd be sharing it with Nightheart. But he'd disappeared. *He didn't leave you*, she told herself. He must have had something important to do. She could feel her heart pounding. *Where is he?* Why had he gone alone? Her breath caught in her chest. Was he in danger? Should she try looking for him?

"Sunbeam?" A soft mew sounded at the entrance. "Are you in here?"

Sunbeam saw Squirrelstar peering inside. "Yes," she answered thickly. "I'm sorry I didn't go on patrol. I was too—"

"I understand." Squirrelstar slid inside. Her ginger pelt glowed in the gloom of the den. "You must be worried."

"Yes."

"There's something I couldn't tell the others." Squirrelstar padded closer, her mew barely more than a whisper.

Sunbeam pricked her ears. "What?" She felt a glimmer of hope. Did Squirrelstar have an explanation for Nightheart's

disappearance?

"At the end of my nine lives ceremony," the ThunderClan leader mewed, "StarClan gave me a message about Nightheart."

Sunbeam felt a glimmer of relief. There *was* an explanation. "Is he safe?"

"I can't tell you that." Squirrelstar held her gaze, her eyes dark. "But Nightheart is strong and resourceful. I only know that he *had* to leave."

"Why? For how long?" Sunbeam's heart was pounding. "Where's he gone?"

"There's something StarClan needs him to do." Squirrelstar kept her mew calm. "Something important. He'll come home when he's done. I'm sure it won't take long."

At least I know why he's gone. But she didn't know where, or for how long. Her paws pricked nervously. A mission from StarClan might be dangerous. Did it have something to do with the tension between the Clans? Or RiverClan's troubles? There was no way for her to find out. Meanwhile, she was in a strange Clan, far from her kin and the cats she'd grown up with. Nightheart had left her alone here. Sunbeam felt suddenly pitiful. "Why did StarClan send him away *now*?" She tried to keep her mew steady.

"I don't know." Squirrelstar gazed back at her sympathetically. "I've told you everything StarClan told me. I'm sure they have a good reason. The timing's bad, I agree. You must wish he were here. But you're safe in ThunderClan whether Nightheart is here or not. I know it's unfamiliar, but we'll do our best to help you feel at home."

Sunbeam was grateful to the ThunderClan leader, but she didn't want cats tiptoeing around her trying to make her feel welcome. She wanted Nightheart.

"You must keep this a secret," Squirrelstar went on.

"From every cat?" Sunbeam asked her. "Even Sparkpelt and Finchlight?"

"Even them. We can't tell any cat where he's gone or why." Squirrelstar blinked at her encouragingly. "Just be patient with us and with Nightheart. If this is where you really want to be, then I'm sure everything will work out. You're going to make a fine ThunderClan warrior."

"I hope so." Sunbeam dipped her head, scared Squirrelstar might see in her gaze the doubt that was tugging at her heart.

"Come out and let Ivypool find you a patrol." Squirrelstar headed for the entrance. "Hiding in here isn't going to make you feel any better."

Sunbeam padded after her, fluffing out her fur. Without Nightheart, she was going to have to try even harder to fit in. As she stepped into the daylight, she lifted her chin, relieved to see the clearing almost empty. The patrols had left.

"Sunbeam." Sparkpelt was still in camp. As Squirrelstar leaped away, up the rock tumble to the Highledge, Sparkpelt crossed the clearing. "I've been wondering where you were. Are you okay? You must be worried."

"I'm fine," Sunbeam told her, although she wasn't sure it was true.

Finchlight padded into camp. "I can't find her outside—" She paused as she saw Sunbeam. "You're *here*!"

"She was in the warriors' den with Squirrelstar," Sparkpelt told her.

Finchlight looked surprised. "What did Squirrelstar want?"

"Just to tell me not to worry," Sunbeam mewed quickly.

Sparkpelt brushed her tail along Sunbeam's spine. "Nightheart's always been one to follow his heart," she told Sunbeam. "Otherwise he wouldn't have gone to ShadowClan or brought you back here. I'm sure he's just doing something he believes is important."

Finchlight nodded. "He'll be back soon."

"Aren't you worried about him?" Sunbeam blinked at the two she-cats.

"Of course," Sparkpelt mewed. "This is . . . very unusual. But I just keep reminding myself that Brambleclaw and Squirrelstar said they didn't see any signs of trouble. So I choose to believe that he knows what he's doing."

"He came home last time," Finchlight added. "He'll come home this time too."

"Come on, let's distract ourselves. Come hunting with us." Sparkpelt blinked warmly at Sunbeam. "It'll keep us both from worrying."

"I can show you the best place to catch rabbits." Finchlight began to head for the entrance, beckoning Sunbeam with a flick of her tail.

Sparkpelt hurried after her. "Some fresh air is just what we need."

Sunbeam followed them gratefully into the forest. They were being so kind to her. She wasn't even a real ThunderClan warrior yet, but they were treating her like kin. She remembered how ShadowClan had treated Nightheart when he'd first arrived, and how they'd treated Fringewhisker, her brother's mate from SkyClan. Some cats had been welcoming from the start, but most had taken a while to warm to him, and some had seemed determined never to accept an outsider. Berryheart had been the worst. Her mother seemed to believe that ShadowClan would be tainted by cats who hadn't been born there, or that ShadowClan would become less special if it let outsiders in.

But Sparkpelt and Finchlight were trying their best, not only to include her, but also to make her feel comfortable. It felt as though they really liked and valued her. Sunbeam quickened her pace. Maybe she'd learn to like it here, even without Nightheart.

Sunbeam shuffled backward, moving into the shadow of the trees. In front of her, the island clearing was bathed in moonlight, even though it wasn't yet a full moon. This was a special Gathering, called by Squirrelstar to announce her leadership of ThunderClan.

The other Clans didn't know yet, and the SkyClan and WindClan warriors talked in hushed whispers, their curious gazes flashing toward the ThunderClan cats. ShadowClan hadn't arrived and neither had RiverClan. Sunbeam watched the long grass, looking for signs of movement. It was the only way to the clearing from the tree-bridge.

Her heart was beating quickly. Part of her didn't want her former Clanmates to see her and wished Squirrelstar hadn't asked her to join the Gathering patrol. The other part of her wanted to face them. She'd made the decision to join ThunderClan and she wasn't ashamed of it. Even if Nightheart had disappeared. Even if she felt homesick every time she padded out of the warriors' den and saw the stone cliffs towering around the camp, hemming in the sky and

blocking the scents of the forest. She wasn't going to change her mind. She didn't want to.

"Come and join us." Sparkpelt beckoned her toward the group of SkyClan cats she was sharing tongues with. "Don't hide over there in the shadows."

As Sunbeam joined her, Sparkpelt lifted her chin proudly. "This is Nightheart's mate," she told the SkyClan cats. "She's decided to join ThunderClan."

Sunbeam resisted looking at her paws. Sparkpelt's introduction made her feel like she'd betrayed her kin and her friends to start a new life. She forced her gaze to meet Rootspring's and was pleased to find he was looking at her warmly. She remembered, with a flash of gratitude, that Rootspring had loved a ThunderClan she-cat, Bristlefrost. It was at his urging that the Clans had changed the code to allow mates to switch Clans. Not to mention, he had gotten to know Nightheart and Sunbeam on their shared journey to find more catmint. She blinked at him happily. "Hi."

"Hi, Sunbeam." Rootspring dipped his head. "I met Nightheart in the forest yesterday. He told us you'd moved to ThunderClan with him. I hope you're settling in okay."

"I'm settling in fine," she told him.

"Is Nightheart with you tonight?" Rootspring glanced around the ThunderClan cats.

Sunbeam hesitated. The other Clans couldn't know he'd left. "He's sick," she mumbled.

"Just a *little* unwell," Sparkpelt added. "We thought it best he stay in camp."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rootspring mewed.

"I hope it's not whitecough again." The yellow tom beside Rootspring narrowed his eyes. Sunbeam didn't recognize him. Had he been to Gatherings before?

Rootspring seemed to notice her puzzlement. "This is my father, Tree," he told her.

Tree dipped his head. "After all the trouble we had recently, whitecough turning to greencough, Clans running out of catmint, then coming together to send out a patrol . . . ," he mewed. "Well,

you remember! You were with my son on the patrol that brought the herb back. But the last thing we need is another outbreak.”

“Jayfeather wouldn’t let that happen,” Sparkpelt mewed. “He’s guarding that catmint like a newborn kit.”

Tree’s gaze flicked toward the long grass. Sunbeam smelled ShadowClan scent. “Here comes trouble,” the SkyClan tom mewed. Was he joking? She couldn’t tell.

She tensed as Tigerstar led his Clanmates into the clearing.

“Are they the reason ThunderClan asked for this meeting?” Rootspring asked Sparkpelt.

“Not this time.” Sparkpelt got to her paws. “Come on, Sunbeam. Let’s join the others.” She nodded politely to the SkyClan cats, and Sunbeam followed her back to the edge of the clearing, where Finchlight was talking to Alderheart and Cherryfall was talking to Plumstone. The other ThunderClan warriors were spread around the clearing, sharing gossip with WindClan and SkyClan. But Sunbeam’s attention was on ShadowClan as Tigerstar led his warriors past the Great Oak, his chin high, his tail swishing confidently. Did *he* think this Gathering had been called because of ShadowClan? They still had cats in RiverClan’s camp, and every cat knew that Squirrelstar shared Leafstar’s disapproval of ShadowClan’s interference. How would they react when they found out she was now ThunderClan’s leader? Sunbeam’s tail twitched nervously. How close were the Clans to war?

She wished more fervently than ever that Nightheart were with her. How was she supposed to face her former Clanmates without him? She’d already been lectured by Berryheart right in the middle of ThunderClan’s camp, and her mother probably wasn’t the only ShadowClan cat who was angry about her decision to leave. Surely Nightheart knew how hard it would be—he’d been hurt by how hostile his former Clanmates had been after he’d left ThunderClan. And yet he’d still left her to face it alone. She remembered her mother’s warning—never trust a cat from another Clan. Had Berryheart been right?

Sunbeam shook out her pelt. *Of course not.* And yet, as ShadowClan began to settle on the other side of the clearing, she felt exposed and anxious. She forced her breathing to slow.

Nightheart's on my side, even if he's not here. He'll be rooting for me wherever he is. But where was he? She felt a pang of worry. *Is he safe? Is he alone?* What did StarClan want him to do? She tried not to think about it. The only thing she was certain of right now was that she would have to face this without him.

Finchlight had left Alderheart and Cherryfall and settled behind Sunbeam. She was watching the gathered Clans. "What do you think they'll say when they hear Squirrelstar's our leader?"

Sunbeam was hardly listening. "I don't know," she mewed distractedly. Tigerstar was standing defiantly in front of his Clanmates as though daring the other Clans to speak to them. Dovewing was fidgeting beside him. Berryheart was with them, too. Sunbeam tried to catch her eye, but her mother was staring resolutely across the crowded clearing, as though refusing to acknowledge any cat.

"Here comes RiverClan," Finchlight whispered in Sunbeam's ear. The long grass shivered again and RiverClan padded out. They held their heads high, but there was something hollow in their proud stride.

"They look miserable," Sunbeam mewed quietly.

"I'm not surprised," Finchlight answered. "Being pushed around by ShadowClan—" She stopped and glanced guiltily at Sunbeam. "I mean," she went on quickly, "having no leader must be really hard."

Sunbeam looked at her. "The warriors that Tigerstar sends to the RiverClan camp have been trying their best not to seem pushy." She wanted Finchlight to understand that ShadowClan cats were not so different from ThunderClan. "They really only want to help RiverClan. I should know; I was sent there in one of the early patrols."

"Really?" Finchlight looked surprised. "That must have been hard."

"Yeah." Sunbeam didn't want to think about it. If she hadn't left ShadowClan, she would be among their patrol in RiverClan now. That was partly what had pushed her to leave. She turned back to the RiverClan cats. They looked humiliated. Minnowtail was glancing self-consciously around the clearing. Shimmerpelt's fur was ruffled. Duskfur was staring at her paws.

Then she spotted Lightleap. Her former friend was padding wearily with Flaxfoot and Whorlpelt alongside the RiverClan cats. Sunbeam's heart pricked with guilt. She was meant to be standing beside her friend. Instead she'd come to ThunderClan.

Finchlight was watching them too. "Are those the cats guarding RiverClan now?"

"They're not *guarding*," Sunbeam corrected Finchlight. "They're observing."

"But why are there so many of them?" Finchlight frowned.

"Some of RiverClan's warriors tried to harm one of the ShadowClan patrols," Sunbeam explained. "So Tigerstar sent more warriors to make sure ShadowClan was safe in the RiverClan camp."

Finchlight blinked at her. "Did they try to hurt *you* when you were on patrol there?" she asked anxiously.

"No." Sunbeam gaze drifted back to Lightleap. "I guess the situation wasn't as tense at the start." *Or maybe it was and I didn't realize.*

Lightleap looked exhausted, her dark brown pelt dull, her gaze downcast. Flaxfoot and Whorlpelt looked tired too. Sunbeam remembered how uncomfortable she'd felt during the few days she'd spent patrolling the RiverClan camp. Knowing that RiverClan hadn't wanted her there had taken its toll.

Finchlight leaned closer. "Do you miss them?" she asked.

"It would be strange if I didn't," Sunbeam told her. "I didn't leave ShadowClan because I was unhappy there. I left to be with Nightheart."

"Do you think Berryheart's cooled down yet?" Finchlight was clearly thinking of the scene Berryheart had created in the ThunderClan camp.

Remembering how her mother had embarrassed her lit a fire in Sunbeam. She lifted her chin, looking over at Berryheart. She didn't really *need* Nightheart to hold her up, did she? She had been strong in standing up to her mother before. She could do it again, and perhaps they could get to the bottom of this. "I should find out." The meeting hadn't started; Squirrelstar hadn't even begun heading toward the Great Oak. There wouldn't be a better time. "I'm going to

talk to her.” She didn’t wait for Finchlight’s reaction but padded across the island clearing.

Berryheart was sitting between Spireclaw and Tawnypelt. Sunbeam stopped a few tail-lengths away, but her mother didn’t seem to notice. She was still staring over the heads of the gathered cats.

“Berryheart?” Sunbeam took another step closer.

Berryheart turned away.

Sunbeam froze, a sharp ache in her chest. Her mother was ignoring her. Hadn’t Berryheart said she’d be waiting to welcome her home? Was that still true? Had her mother stopped loving her?

Sunbeam looked around for Sparrowtail. Perhaps her father would be more forgiving. But there was no sign of him.

Spireclaw padded forward to meet Sunbeam. “I know it’s hard. But I have to believe that Berryheart will come around eventually,” he whispered.

Sunbeam’s throat tightened. “Really?”

“She can’t do this forever, can she?” he asked her gently. “Leave it for now.”

She looked at him but couldn’t speak. Sadness choked her and she turned away. Lightleap was nearby, flanking the RiverClan cats. Perhaps her old friend would be kinder. “How are you?” She forced herself to blink cheerfully at the dark brown tabby she-cat.

Lightleap turned her weary gaze toward her. “Fine,” she mewed.

“Has it been hard being in RiverClan?”

“What do you think?” Lightleap’s mew was curt.

Sunbeam forced herself to keep trying. “I’ve passed my first trial,” she mewed, “to become a ThunderClan warrior. I had to teach kits how to hunt.”

Lightleap looked at her without enthusiasm. “Good for you, I guess?” she said flatly.

“Thank you.” How could Lightleap be so cold? She must understand that sometimes love was worth sacrifices, worth discomfort. She’d become mates with Blazefire, a cat Sunbeam had loved since she was a kit, and almost destroyed their friendship to follow her heart. But Lightleap’s gaze remained chilly.

Sunbeam looked around at the other ShadowClan cats. Fringewhisker gave her a nod. Dovewing glanced at her, a flicker of sympathy in her eyes. But the others didn't even acknowledge she was there. Her heart aching, Sunbeam turned away and padded back to the ThunderClan cats.

"What did they say?" Finchlight asked as she sat down beside her.

"Spireclaw was the only one who'd speak to me."

Finchlight pressed against her side. "They'll get over it soon," she mewed.

As she spoke, Tigerstar leaped onto the long, low branch beside Leafstar and Harestar. Squirrelstar hadn't crossed the clearing yet, and the leaders were looking expectantly at ThunderClan, clearly waiting for Brambleclaw to take his place beside them.

Squirrelstar padded forward. Tigerstar narrowed his eyes, watching with a frown as she padded through the crowd, then leaped onto the branch beside him.

Tigerstar bristled. "What are you doing?" His glaze flashed toward Brambleclaw. "Deputies only take their leader's place if the leader isn't here."

"I'm Squirrelstar now, leader of ThunderClan." Squirrelstar didn't look at him but gazed at the cats below.

They glanced at each other uneasily.

"Bramblestar's right over there. How could she be leader?" Tawnypelt called.

Squirrelstar lifted her chin. "Brambleclaw is a ThunderClan elder now," she announced. Her emerald-green gaze was unflinching as murmurs of surprise rippled through the crowd. "StarClan has granted me nine lives," she went on. "Brambleclaw has served ThunderClan with great courage and honor, but after his time in the Dark Forest and the battle with Ashfur, he deserves rest."

Beside her, Harestar narrowed his gaze. Only Leafstar seemed pleased. The SkyClan leader dipped her head to Squirrelstar, then curled her tail contentedly over her paws.

Sunbeam tensed as Tawnypelt pushed forward through the crowd. Was she going to object to her brother's change in status? She stopped as she reached him. "I didn't realize you'd been

suffering so much.” Her eyes glistened with sadness. She took another step forward and touched her nose to his head. “You’ve served not only ThunderClan loyally, but all the Clans. You’ve earned some peace.”

In SkyClan and WindClan, warriors nodded. RiverClan dipped their heads. Sunbeam was aware of ThunderClan pelts smoothing around her.

“That was easier than I expected,” Finchlight commented as Tawnypelt returned to her Clanmates. “I thought ShadowClan would kick up more of a fuss.”

“Even Tigerstar can’t argue with StarClan,” Twigbranch growled. Cherryfall glanced at her. “Are you sure?”

In the Great Oak, Tigerstar’s hackles were twitching. But he didn’t get a chance to speak. Splashtail was pushing his way through the crowd. He stopped below the leaders and looked up. “One of our Clanmates is missing,” he told them.

Leafstar looked surprised. “Frostpaw hasn’t come home yet?”

“No,” Splashtail told her.

Leafstar frowned. “But it’s been almost a quarter moon since you came looking for her.”

Alderheart looked worried. He was sitting with the other medicine cats at the bottom of the Great Oak. They exchanged anxious glances. “Is there no trace of her at all?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Splashtail told him. “We’re worried she’s been taken by a fox.” He turned to the gathered warriors. “Has any cat seen her? Or found any traces?”

“Perhaps she ran away,” Rootspring mewed.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Berryheart mewed sourly. “If I’d claimed to have visions from StarClan that turned out to be nothing but dreams, I’d run away too. She must feel humiliated.”

Mothwing glared at her from beside Alderheart. “She thought she was helping!” the RiverClan medicine cat mewed defensively.

“She was making things worse,” Berryheart huffed.

Sunbeam noticed Whistlepaw shifting uneasily between Mothwing and Kestrelflight. Her eyes were glittering with anxiety. Kestrelflight nosed her forward, but Whistlepaw seemed to resist,

digging her claws into the ground. But Kestrelflight clearly wanted her to speak.

"Whistlepaw might have news of her," he called.

Splashtail's eyes lit up hopefully.

"I found traces," Whistlepaw mumbled.

"Speak up!" Oakfur called from the back of the crowd. The ShadowClan elder was pricking his ears. "I can't hear."

"I found traces," Whistlepaw mewed louder. Her pelt was twitching along her spine. It must be daunting, a young apprentice addressing so many cats. Sunbeam tried to catch her eye, blinking encouragingly. "On the moor. I found blood. And . . ." She hesitated. "And fur. It looked like a buzzard had snatched her. There are a lot around at the moment." She looked at Kestrelflight as though hoping for confirmation.

He nodded. "Whistlepaw showed me the spot," he mewed. "The fur smelled of RiverClan."

Splashtail was staring at him, horror in his eyes. At the far side of the clearing, the RiverClan warriors exchanged looks of alarm.

Graypaw's eyes glittered. "She can't be dead!"

"How long ago was this?" Mistpaw called across the crowd.

"Whistlepaw showed me yesterday," Kestrelflight told her. "The blood traces were stale. She must have been attacked a few days ago."

Graypaw's tail had bushed. "What was she doing on the moor?"

"We don't know." Whistlepaw dropped her gaze.

Sunbeam felt suddenly cold. Had a buzzard really taken Frostpaw? What if the same thing had happened to Nightheart? He'd disappeared close to the moor. *No*. She pushed the thought away. Squirrelstar had said they'd seen no sign of a struggle. She wouldn't believe it. Nightheart was coming home.

In the Great Oak, Leafstar was eyeing Tigerstar. "It's strange that the *one cat* in RiverClan who could communicate with StarClan has disappeared," she mewed icily.

Tigerstar stared back at her. "What are you insinuating?"

"The longer it takes for RiverClan to choose a leader, the longer you can keep your warriors on their land," Leafstar growled.

"Do you think I *want* to be there?" Tigerstar snapped.

Leafstar snorted. "Of course you do, or else you'd never have crossed their border in the first place."

Tigerstar's tail lashed angrily. "RiverClan was a mess!"

"They still are," Squirrelstar mewed. "Even with your help."

Tigerstar glared at her. "Are you saying the loss of Frostpaw is my fault?"

Squirrelstar didn't answer, but stared at him challengingly.

"I can't be responsible for RiverClan's every move." His gaze flashed angrily to Leafstar. "And Frostpaw *couldn't* communicate with StarClan. She admitted it right here. She was no closer to choosing a leader than any other RiverClan cat. Even if you were right and I wanted to stop RiverClan deciding on a new leader, why would I target *her*?" He flexed his claws. "Your argument makes no sense. You're just looking for an excuse to start a war." He stared out across the gathered cats. "I want *peace*," he mewed. "And maintaining stability in RiverClan is the best way to make sure *all* the Clans thrive." He looked at Lightleap. "My warriors are taking good care of RiverClan. I'm proud of them. They're making sure RiverClan is protected and fed, and that its territory is secure."

Sunbeam frowned. Lightleap didn't look pleased by her father's praise. She only gazed back at him with tired, anxious eyes while RiverClan glared at her with contempt on their faces.

Tigerstar went on. "My warriors are honorable. RiverClan is in safe paws."

Sunbeam shifted uneasily. If ShadowClan's guardianship of RiverClan was going so well, why did RiverClan seem so resentful and why did her former Clanmates look so exhausted?

Sunbeam felt a rush of pity for them. They must be longing to return home. She dragged her gaze away from them to find that Squirrelstar had taken Tigerstar's place and was addressing the crowd. Her heart lurched as the ThunderClan leader said her name.

"Sunbeam is doing well in ThunderClan," Squirrelstar declared proudly.

Sunbeam glanced apologetically at her mother, but Berryheart was staring defiantly into space.

"She has already passed her first trial." Squirrelstar shot a look of triumph at Tigerstar.

Don't make it worse than it is. Sunbeam shrank beneath her pelt.

But Tigerstar wasn't looking at Squirrelstar. He was staring at the ThunderClan cats. "Speaking of Sunbeam . . . where's Nightheart?" he asked.

Squirrelstar's tail-tip twitched. "He's resting in camp."

"Really?" Tigerstar eyed the ThunderClan leader. There was suspicion in his mew. "Berryheart mentioned he's been busy lately. Too busy to sleep in his own nest."

Squirrelstar fluffed out her fur. "He escorted me and Brambleclaw to the Moonpool," she told him stiffly.

Tigerstar looked at her. "It's a convenient time for a change in ThunderClan's leadership, don't you think?" he mewed. "Bramblestar—I mean *claw*—wasn't really opposed to my helping RiverClan, was he?" He narrowed his eyes. "But *you* are. And now you've replaced him. Whose idea was it to pass leadership to you?"

Brambleclaw got to his paws. "It was mine!" he yowled.

"And yet I can't help feeling this change in ThunderClan has taken us closer to a war Squirrelstar seems to want."

"That's not true," Squirrelstar hissed.

Sunbeam glanced at her. *Isn't it?*

"Leafstar's already threatened to drive us off RiverClan land if we don't leave," Tigerstar pressed. "And now that Brambleclaw's no longer in charge of ThunderClan, SkyClan has a new ally."

Squirrelstar's hackles spiked across her shoulders. "We're just trying to protect RiverClan."

"Are you sure that's all you're doing?" Tigerstar's gaze slid to Leafstar. "Are you sure you're not simply after their land? It would be easy to take while they're so weak."

"How dare you!" Leafstar looked outraged.

But Tigerstar's gaze had moved on to Harestar. "And what about you?" he mewed icily. "Are you with them?"

Sunbeam drew her paws closer to her belly. Around the clearing, cats from all Clans were shifting nervously. They eyed each other. Tails flicked uneasily. She felt a dark tug of foreboding in her belly. Frostpaw was dead. RiverClan was bristling with resentment. No wonder Tigerstar was being defensive. Events were beginning to spiral out of control. And if the worst came to pass, she still feared

what she would do when faced with the prospect of fighting her kin and former Clanmates. She loved Nightheart. But did she love him enough to fight ShadowClan?

Harestar sat stiffly on the branch. He didn't seem to know what to say. Tigerstar's eyes had narrowed to slits.

Sunbeam's mouth grew dry. *Please don't fight.*

Squirrelstar lifted her tail. "No Clan wants to lose lives over this," she called across the gathered cats. "But since we can't decide a way to settle this peacefully, then I have a suggestion."

Sunbeam leaned forward eagerly.

"It was actually *Nightheart's* suggestion," Squirrelstar went on. "And I think it's a good one."

Nightheart? Sunbeam's ears twitched. He hadn't mentioned anything to her before he left. Her heart swelled with affection. *He knew how worried I was about fighting ShadowClan.* Nightheart had been thinking about her all along.

"Tree." Squirrelstar's gaze settled on the yellow tom whom Sunbeam had spoken to earlier. "You were appointed Clan mediator several moons ago," she mewed. "It was decided then that a wise, even-tempered tom, born far away from the Clans, would be able to find a path to peace when we could see no way forward."

Tree returned the ThunderClan leader's gaze amiably, and Sunbeam felt hope flutter in her chest as Squirrelstar beckoned him to come closer. Had Nightheart thought of a way to ensure peace? Then her chest tightened. As the SkyClan tom nosed his way through the crowd, she noticed pelts ruffling around him, almost as though a loner had pushed his way into the Gathering.

"What has he done to help the Clans lately?" Cherryfall yowled.

"He was only appointed as a mediator because he was too lazy to be a real warrior," Oakfur called.

"He's watched this situation escalate for moons without lifting a claw," Splashtail scoffed. "Why would he start trying to help now?"

Sunbeam was puzzled. Surely they should give this cat a chance. Anything to relieve the tension between the Clans, before a war broke out.

Tree didn't seem worried by the cats grumbling around him. He stopped below the branch, his pelt smooth, and looked calmly up at

the leaders. "I will help if I can."

"Thank you," Squirrelstar told him before lifting her gaze and sweeping it over the gathered cats. "Tree has brought peace to the Clans in the past. He can do it again now."

"He's a *SkyClan* cat." Tigerstar was glaring down at the yellow tom. "He'll side with SkyClan."

Tree blinked at him slowly. "I will side with peace," he mewed.

"A peace that kicks ShadowClan out of RiverClan," Tigerstar muttered, "and leaves RiverClan undefended."

"A peace that satisfies *every cat*." There was a calmness in Tree's mew that surprised Sunbeam. She'd have been trembling if she'd had to face down the five leaders, with a crowd of unsympathetic Clan cats at her tail. "If mediation is what the Clans truly want," he went on. "I will meet all the Clan leaders and listen to what they have to say. I will treat everything they tell me with secrecy and find a solution that they can all agree on."

Tigerstar looked unconvinced, but he didn't argue.

Squirrelstar dipped her head to the yellow tom. "Thank you, Tree."

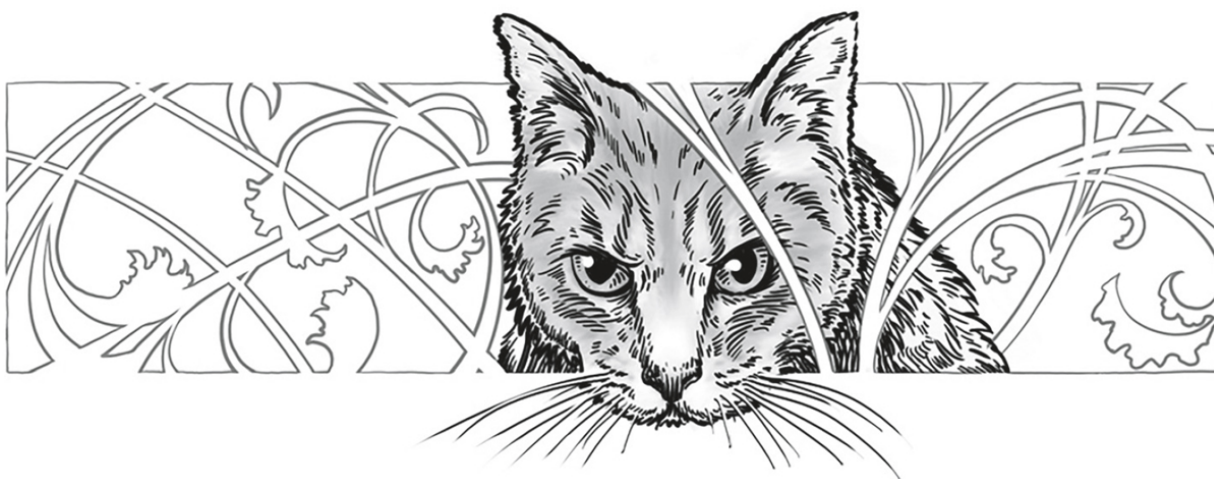
"I trust in your sense of fairness," Leafstar told him. "I hope you will consider the needs of the other Clans as you would our own."

Sunbeam felt Finchlight's breath at her ear.

"Do you think he really can be impartial?" she whispered.

Sunbeam glanced at her. "I hope so," she mewed. "Peace might depend on it." As she looked anxiously toward Berryheart once more, Tigerstar leaped down from the Great Oak.

Harestar was already crossing the clearing toward his Clanmates. The Gathering was breaking up. As her shoulders loosened, Sunbeam realized how tense she'd been. War had never felt so close. She felt suddenly afraid. What if Tree couldn't find a peaceful solution? What if she did find herself facing a war between ThunderClan and ShadowClan? Which side would she choose? If only Nightheart were here, it might be easier to decide. Longing pierced her heart. *Come home, Nightheart. Please.*



Chapter 10



Three days had passed since Frostpaw had left the moor with Nightheart. They had skirted the lake and trekked beyond the forest, pointing their noses each morning toward the rising sun. She didn't feel any more comfortable with Nightheart than when they'd set out. Was he really the cat StarClan had chosen? Why had it been so hard to persuade him to come? She couldn't help wondering if she'd stumbled into the wrong cat and left the right cat behind. The cat she was meant to travel with might be waiting for her back at the lake. Her mother's words had buried roots in her heart. *Trust no cat.* But Riverstar had told her she must learn to trust again, and so she was trying to open herself up and have faith in others once more. But what if she let the wrong cat in?

Nightheart *seemed* friendly. He chatted amiably about his Clan and his kin and about Sunbeam, his mate. Frostpaw reasoned that he would have harmed her by now if he'd been planning to. Unless he wanted her as far away from the Clans as possible before he killed her so that her Clanmates would never know what had happened to her. But how could Nightheart be Reedwhisker's murderer? Why would a ThunderClan cat be killing RiverClan cats? Instinct told her that the cat who'd killed her deputy had come from her own Clan. And yet she didn't want to imagine any of them killing a Clanmate. Wondering about it prevented Frostpaw's heart from settling into an easy rhythm. It seemed to race ahead of her as they traveled. Perhaps it was better simply not to think at all, but to keep going and hope that StarClan was watching over her.

Walking each day from dawn to dusk had been tiring, but Frostpaw had felt herself growing stronger and stronger, her muscles hardening, her wounds hurting less. Now the sun was behind them as they climbed a slope and pushed through dying flowers into a wide, grassy meadow. Her paws ached, but the dragging exhaustion that had only the day before made her feel hot and prickly and close to collapse was now no more than a satisfying weariness.

Frostpaw stopped and looked back toward the Thunderpath running like a dark river at the bottom of the hill. Monsters streaked

along it, their eyes lit up as the daylight faded. From here their roar was no more than a faint growl. There was a thicket close by, where bushes crowded against a steep bank and hawthorn trees sprouted. It would make a good den for the night.

"Let's stop." She nodded toward it. "I'll make nests while you hunt." Nightheart had done most of the hunting as they'd traveled. She'd offered to help at first, but he'd told her that it was easier hunting alone. Was he worried that an apprentice would scare more prey away than she'd catch? She hadn't argued, even though she was proud of how far her hunting skills had progressed in her short time as a warrior apprentice. She needed to rest. But she hadn't admitted that to Nightheart. She didn't want to betray any weakness to the ThunderClan warrior. Not while she was still unsure of him. Besides, she liked to have time alone.

Nightheart gazed across the meadow, his eyes narrowing. He was scanning the distant hedgerow, assessing it for prey. She should begin putting the nests together. The sooner she got them done, the sooner she could drop into one and close her eyes. As she headed toward the thicket, he hurried after her.

"I'll come and check the bushes first," he mewed. "There might be a fox."

"I've already tasted the air," she told him. "There's no danger."

"I don't like leaving you alone out in the open," he mewed.

"I'll be fine." She didn't tell him that she felt safer when he was away hunting. It was a warrior that had attacked her on the moor, not a fox. Clan cats were still more dangerous predators than foxes as far as she was concerned.

She watched him cross the meadow, then nosed her way between the bushes, pleased to find a sheltered hollow beyond. The grass was soft and she circled into it, happy to rest her paws. Laying her head on them, she closed her eyes, and sleep rolled in like fog and engulfed her.

She woke into a dream. A river flowed beside her, sliding smoothly between lush riverbanks. She got to her paws and padded to the edge, staring into the crystal water. Was she in StarClan's hunting grounds again? The air carried the scent of earth and the sharp tang of distant pines.

"Frostpaw."

She recognized Riverstar's deep mew at once and turned to see him standing on the bank, his eyes as bright and green as the grass around his paws. "Is this StarClan?" she asked.

"This is where the Clans were born," he told her. "This river once nurtured and protected me."

She padded closer, her heart quickening. At last she could be sure. "Is Nightheart the cat I'm supposed to trust?"

He looked at her warmly. "If I tell you he is, will it be *him* you trust, or me?"

She shifted her paws impatiently. "Just *tell* me."

"Listen to your instincts," he told her. "They will guide you." He swished his tail. "They have guided you this far on your journey. You've been brave and determined. I know how hard it has been to travel when you're hurt." He glanced at the wound on her neck. "Does it still hurt?"

"Not much." She frowned. "Did StarClan see who did this to me?"

"Who attacked you?" His gaze darkened. "I wish I could tell you."

"Does that mean you don't know?"

"It means I can't tell you."

Her exasperation burst out in a growl. "Why do you have me wandering around in the middle of nowhere if you can't help?"

"We can help and we will," Riverstar promised. "It's just that we can't tell you everything. Not yet."

"So you're waiting for me to find out something you already know." Her paws itched with frustration.

"You're not ready to hear it yet," Riverstar told her. "You have further to go."

"I *am* ready," Frostpaw snapped. "Just *tell* me!"

"You'll understand when this is over." Riverstar's mew remained steady, his green gaze as calm as the river. "For now, follow the Thunderpath with three stripes."

"Stripes?" Badgers had stripes, not Thunderpaths. "What do you mean, *stripes*?" But the dream faded. "Come back!" she called into darkness as deep sleep overtook her.

She woke, rising from sleep, more rested than she'd felt in days. Her wound no longer hurt at all. She stretched her paws and yawned. It was still light. Was Nightheart back from hunting? She heard the bushes swish, and the ThunderClan tom padded into the hollow. How long had she slept? Then she noticed that the grass beside her had been trampled into a nest. It was still warm. She frowned, disoriented. "Have you slept too?" she asked.

"Of course." He picked a dead rabbit kit from the grass and dropped it in front of her. "You were sleeping when I got back last night. I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to wake up. It's nearly sunhigh."

Had she slept through the whole night? Her belly growled. She was hungry.

"You look better." Nightheart sounded pleased. He sat down. "Eat before we leave. It won't do any harm to start a little later today."

Frostpaw sat up and took a bite of the rabbit, grateful for its sweet, soft flesh.

Nightheart was watching her curiously. "What were you dreaming about last night?" he asked.

"How do you know I was dreaming?"

"When I got back from hunting, you were talking in your sleep," he mewed. "You sounded cross."

She remembered her conversation with Riverstar. "I was talking with StarClan," she grunted, and took another mouthful.

"Are StarClan cats annoying?"

She chewed and swallowed. "They are when they won't tell you what you need to know."

"So they still haven't told you where we're going."

"No." She tore another lump from the rabbit.

"Not even a hint?"

"No."

Nightheart narrowed his eyes. "It's not just StarClan who's being annoying," he muttered.

She glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

"Sometimes I wonder whether you're using StarClan as an excuse not to tell *me* what I need to know. Like why we're making

this journey and why some cat tried to kill you.” His amber gaze darkened. “In fact, it feels like there’s a lot you’re not telling me.”

She stared at him. It was true. She’d refused to answer any of his questions about why she was running away from RiverClan, and apart from telling him she’d had a vision, she’d given him no clue about why they were making this journey. “There’s not a lot I *can* tell you,” she mewed.

“Because you don’t know, or because you don’t want to?” When she didn’t answer, he kept staring at her. “You’re asking me to trust you, but you don’t trust me.”

Her pelt twitched guiltily. She *wanted* to tell him everything. It would be a relief to share some of the burden of this journey. And yet she still found herself hesitating. She was sure now that this cat wasn’t Reedwhisker’s murderer. Riverstar would surely have warned her if he were. And he was a good hunter and pleasant company. But she couldn’t shake the suspicion that he was only here because he wanted to be remembered as a great warrior. Was that enough? Did he care about RiverClan’s future at all? He wasn’t a RiverClan cat. He was barely a ThunderClan cat. How many times had he switched Clans now? If the journey got hard, he might give up and go home. Was she ready to share everything with a cat who might abandon her before this mission was over? She looked back at him, her mouth full of rabbit. It was beginning to grow tasteless on her tongue. She remembered Riverstar’s words. *Listen to your instincts. They will guide you.* Nightheart seemed loyal enough to the cats he was close to. He’d talked of hardly anything but his Clanmates and his mother and sister for days. And Sunbeam. His love for his mate had sounded so warm and kind. Perhaps that warmth and kindness would stretch to her and to RiverClan. If she gave him the chance.

She forced herself to swallow. “I’m sorry,” she mewed. “I’m scared. I don’t know who to trust.”

“I get it. Some cat tried to kill you.” His tail flicked. “But it wasn’t me. I don’t even know why any cat would do something like that.”

“Me neither,” Frostpaw mewed, her heart suddenly heavy. She felt emotion swelling in her chest. “I don’t know what’s going on except that there’s something very wrong happening in RiverClan, and StarClan told me that if I make this journey, I’ll be able to fix it.”

Nightheart was still looking at her. *Can I rely on him?* She wanted to, but fear held her back. *Not yet.* “StarClan said that once the journey is over, I’ll understand everything,” she mewed. “When I do, I’ll tell you about it.”

Nightheart dipped his head. “In that case,” he mewed, “I guess we’d better keep going.”

The day’s journey brought them to the top of a valley. As they looked down the grassy slope to the river winding below, Frostpaw licked her lips. They hadn’t eaten fish since they’d set out, and she longed for the sweet, delicate taste of a trout. Nightheart couldn’t possibly argue with a RiverClan cat taking the lead on fishing. “Let’s head to the shore,” she mewed. “I can catch something for us to eat before we find a place to spend the night.”

“You mean fish?” Nightheart looked dubious. “I’ve never eaten fish.”

“You’ll love it.” Frostpaw marched downhill, and Nightheart trotted after her. As they walked, she tried to persuade Nightheart that a freshly caught trout tasted better than any land prey she’d ever eaten. But Nightheart wasn’t convinced. He was eager to learn a few fishing skills, though, especially when she told him he could hook fish from the shallows without even getting his tail wet.

As they crossed a meadow and scrambled down the steep bank to the shore, Frostpaw felt almost happy. Whatever was happening back at camp, she was doing her best to fix it. And right now, as the warm leaf-fall day began to fade into evening and a chill sharpened the air, promising a first frost, she found her heart quickening. Was the river here good for swimming? Could there even be a salmon lurking in the deepest channels?

She felt a flash of surprise as she saw a pile of fish on the riverbank. She stopped and scanned the wide stretch of brown water tumbling past. Was a cat hunting here already?

Nightheart stopped beside her. He looked at the fish pile and, hackles twitching warily, tasted the air. He unsheathed his claws. “Let’s find somewhere else to hunt.”

“Why?” Then her heart began to pound as she smelled a scent sharper and muskier than a cat. It wasn’t fox, either. She couldn’t tell

what it was. “Do *badgers* fish?” she asked Nightheart.

“I don’t know,” he growled softly. “But I think we should get out of here.”

“There’s no one around.” The shore was empty, and there was nothing swimming in the river. “Perhaps a Twoleg left them.” She nodded to the fish.

Nightheart shifted uneasily. “Let’s go and hunt in the meadow,” he suggested.

But Frostpaw’s mouth was watering. There were trout and loaches and chub in the pile, still glossy, their scales glistening in the dying sunlight. “Or we could grab one each and take it back up the hill,” she suggested.

Nightheart looked along the shore. “I don’t know,” he murmured. “Perhaps we should—”

Frostpaw didn’t let him finish. Of course he wouldn’t want to take a fish—ThunderClan cats preferred squirrels and mice—but she was hungry and hadn’t tasted fish in days. She crept forward, glancing one way, then the other. This pile of fish was completely unguarded. Her nose twitched happily and she began to sniff it, nudging her muzzle deeper just in case a small salmon was hidden inside.

She smelled one and grabbed it between her jaws, then jerked it from the pile.

Movement flashed at the corner of her eye. Something dark was sliding from the water. She stiffened and stepped back as a brown creature pulled itself onto the riverbank. Another popped up beside it, hooking wide, webbed paws onto the shore and hauling itself out. They looked like huge rats, with round stubby heads and thick tails, flat ears, and broad, black noses. She backed away, the juvenile salmon between her jaws.

“Let’s get out of here.” Nightheart tugged her backward.

The two creatures stared at them, their beady eyes bright with rage. *Otters!* The word came to Frostpaw suddenly. She’d never seen one by the lake, but she had heard Clanmates tell tales about the powerful creatures. They were formidable fighters—dangerous to cats.

Frostpaw turned, ready to flee, but one of the otters leaped for her. It moved faster than a snake, its short legs skittering over the

ground, and she felt its teeth latch on to her hind leg. Pain shot through her like lightning. She stumbled, slowing, unable to pull free. The other otter flung itself at her, biting her leg and scrabbling at her with its thick webbed paws. She fell and felt them swarm over her, wet and heavy and stinking of the sludge at the bottom of the river. Panic bursting in her head, she lashed out, slashing her claws along an oily, wet flank. But the hide was as tough as bark, and her claws slid over it, barely leaving a scratch. She kicked out, trying to shake the creatures off, but they bit down harder and she shrieked, fear choking her cry.

Nightheart's black pelt surged toward her. He grabbed one of the otters, and she screeched as he hauled it away. It let go of her leg and turned on him. Frostpaw flipped over, trying to escape the remaining otter, raking its belly as it clung on like a pike. She struggled to her paws and kicked out with her hind legs, her claws catching its muzzle. She felt the soft flesh of its nose split, and it released a high-pitched squeal as it let go.

She turned and faced it and saw blood welling on its nose. Nightheart was wrestling with the other otter a tail-length away. "Aim for its muzzle!" she wailed.

Had Nightheart heard her? He grunted as the other otter pinned him to the ground, hissing.

Frostpaw dragged her gaze away. Her attacker was darting toward her once more. She swiped at its face, hooking its tiny round ear. She felt it tear and swiped again, catching its eye with a claw. It squealed again and this time backed away, fear showing on its face and blood welling at the corner of its eye. It stared at her, then glanced at its companion, then turned and plunged into the river, disappearing beneath the surface.

Nightheart was on his back, ducking one way then the other as his attacker lunged at his head. It was snapping at his ears. His hind legs were tucked beneath it, but it was clinging on with powerful front paws, and even though he was pushing at it, grunting with the effort, he couldn't seem to dislodge it. Suddenly it let go and, twisting back on itself like a weasel, sank its teeth deep into Nightheart's leg.

Frostpaw saw Nightheart's eyes gleam with pain. He screeched and kicked out, trying to throw the otter off, but it hung on, and

Frostpaw smelled Nightheart's blood as it began to pump from his wound. She flung herself at the creature, catching its slippery fur in her claws as she wrapped her paws around its chest and heaved it backward. Nightheart screeched again as the creature's teeth tore open his leg. The otter fell back with a thump onto Frostpaw. The force unbalanced her, but she clung on as she collapsed onto her side. She felt the otter wriggling like a powerful fish between her paws, her heart lurching with terror as it threw back its head, its teeth snapping beside her cheek. It twisted in her grip and she found herself face-to-face with it, her muzzle a whisker away from its stinking mouth. She saw its jaws open as it leaned back, ready to take a bite that would rip into her cheek.

Black fur flashed behind it. A paw swung toward her and raked claws across the creature's face. Nightheart loomed above her, slashing again and again, slicing its eye. It thrashed on top of her, squealing in pain, then rolled away and slithered into the water.

Frostpaw lay panting for a moment, feeling the bitemarks in her paw and her leg, wondering if her old wounds had opened. But her neck felt okay. And the bites weren't deep. Relief swamped her and she scrambled up.

Nightheart was hunched on his belly, panting.

"We need to get away from here." She nudged him to his paws. His eyes were glittering with shock, but she pushed him toward the meadow, shoving him forward until he broke into a clumsy run. Together they raced up the riverbank and onto the grass, stumbling up the slope. Frostpaw could see a birch copse at the top. She steered Nightheart toward it. He could barely raise his head, and she pressed close to steady him. "We're nearly there," she breathed as he lurched at her side.

As they reached the trees, she pulled up, and he staggered forward and collapsed. He seemed to be struggling to stay conscious, his head swaying as he twisted around to look at his hind leg.

Frostpaw saw a deep gash running along it and blood dripping onto the ground beneath. She knew how to stop the bleeding—at home. Mothwing had trained her well. But they were days from the lake, and she didn't even know what herbs grew here. *I have to do*

my best. . . . She looked around, fighting panic as Nightheart gave her a look shimmering with pain, then fell back, his eyes closing as he collapsed into unconsciousness.



Chapter 11



Nighthear opened his eyes. He was lying on a thick bed of leaves. More were piled around him, and he wondered how long he'd slept here—enough time for the leaves to have gathered in drifts against him? His hind leg throbbed. He felt weak and sick as he blinked into the sunlight streaming between birch trees. He vaguely remembered staggering here with Frostpaw.

Where was Frostpaw? His belly tightened. Was she okay? Had she abandoned him? The RiverClan apprentice had been stiff and distant since they'd set out on this journey. He'd tried to become friends with her, but it was like trying to make friends with a prickly fir cone. She didn't trust him. She checked prey he brought her as though it might be full of thorns, and most days she was already awake when he opened his eyes each morning at dawn. Even so, he'd done his best to take care of her, walking slowly when her wounds were clearly bothering her, suggesting gentler paths, refusing her offer to help hunt so that she could rest. But it felt like her claws were always unsheathed, as though she was frightened any moment that he'd attack her.

He lifted his head, wincing at the stabbing pain behind his eyes. "Frostpaw?"

"I'm here."

Relief swamped him as he heard her mew. She was lying a tail-length away and pushed herself, yawning, to her paws.

"How long have I been sleeping?" he asked.

"Since last night." She peered at him. "How are you feeling?"

"My leg aches," he mewed. "My head aches." He remembered, with a shudder, the slippery creatures that had attacked them. "Are you okay?" He scanned Frostpaw's pelt for wounds.

"Just a few scratches," she told him. "Nothing serious."

The wound on her flank, where the Twoleg had scraped her fur away, looked as though it was unharmed, and there was no fresh blood on the threaded gash on her neck. The water creatures hadn't wounded her. He looked down at his sore hind leg. If only he'd been

as lucky. He could see blood clumped in the fur, but the wound was hidden beneath cobweb swathed thickly over his fur.

"There were marigold leaves and horsetail up the hill." Frostpaw nodded to the slope stretching beyond the small birch wood. "I made a poultice for your leg. The wound's deep but it's clean. It'll sting for a while, and it bled a lot, but you'll be okay if we take it easy for the next day or two."

There was no reproach in her mew, although he knew this mission was important to her. He blinked at her apologetically. "I'm sorry." She probably disliked him even more now. "I'm supposed to be helping you, but I'm slowing you down."

"You saved me from an otter." Frostpaw blinked back at him. "It was my fault they attacked us. I shouldn't have tried to steal their fish."

From what Nightheart remembered of the fight, she'd saved *him*. It had felt like the otter had been trying to tear his leg off. The memory made him feel sicker. "I guess we saved each other." He glanced back at his leg. He didn't want to imagine what his wound would feel like without the poultice and cobweb holding it together. "I'm glad you're a medicine-cat apprentice."

"I'm not a medicine-cat apprentice anymore," she reminded him.

Frostpaw spoke so little about herself that he'd forgotten. *That's right*. . . . Sunbeam had reminded him only a few days ago that Frostpaw had become a warrior apprentice. His heart ached suddenly, even more than his leg. *I miss you*. How was she managing in ThunderClan without him? How many trials had she passed, or had her fortunes turned on the first one? Was she struggling now? He'd wondered the same thing countless times over the past few days. She must have been disappointed when she'd found he'd left without saying goodbye. *But she must know I'm coming back*. Perhaps when they had spoken to Squirrelflight at the Moonpool, StarClan had found a way of telling her he was helping Frostpaw. He felt a stab of guilt, remembering that he'd left his leader and deputy at a crucial point in his Clan's history, but reminded himself of his higher purpose. *I'm doing this for us*. By helping RiverClan, he would prevent a war. He would stop Sunbeam from going back to ShadowClan. His paws pricked self-consciously. And

he would prove he was a warrior in his own right and not just Firestar's kin.

"Are you okay?" Frostpaw leaned closer. "You look like you're in pain."

"I was thinking about Sunbeam," he told her.

"You miss her."

"Yeah." He searched the RiverClan apprentice's gaze. It was as unreadable as ever. Would he ever manage to draw her out? "You must miss your Clanmates too," he prompted.

"Some of them." Her gaze flitted nervously away.

Perhaps he shouldn't have asked. Though she hadn't said it in so many words, he suspected she thought it was one of her Clanmates who had tried to kill her. But perhaps if he could persuade her to talk about it, she'd realize that *he* wasn't a threat; she'd trust him. "Could one of them have hurt you?" he pressed.

She stared stiffly into the trees. "I don't want to think about it." Her mew was so curt that he thought he might have hit a tender spot. Perhaps she had some cat in mind already. If she did, she clearly wasn't ready to admit—even to herself—that they would hurt her.

Nightheart decided to change the subject. "You're a good fighter." He had been impressed with how fast and fiercely she'd moved when they were fighting the otters. "How long have you been training as a warrior?"

"Not long," she told him.

"You clearly have healing skills, based on how well you treated my wound. Do you miss being a medicine cat?"

"I did like training to be a warrior," she told him. "I never really chose to be a medicine cat. It was just what I was supposed to be, right from when I was a kit."

Nightheart was puzzled. "*Supposed* to be?"

"Curlfeather thought I was destined to become a medicine cat." Frostpaw's eyes glistened with grief. Her mother's death still clearly hurt.

He felt a flash of pity for the young RiverClan she-cat. She'd been through so much. "Didn't you *want* to become a medicine cat?"

"I didn't really think about it," she admitted. "I just wanted to please Curlfeather."

He knew how she felt. "Kin always think they know what's best for us," he mewed. "Sparkpelt wanted me to be like Firestar."

"Like *Firestar*?" Frostpaw seemed shocked. "But he was amazing." She seemed to hesitate and added quickly, "Not that you couldn't be amazing too, but . . ."

"Yeah, I know." Nightheart brushed her comment away gently. She was trying to be kind, but it was obvious she knew he'd never be another Firestar. "It was a lot to live up to." Before he'd left for ShadowClan, the weight of his mother's ambitions had pressed down on him like stone. "She even named me Flamekit so I'd be more like him." He held up his forepaw. "Look! I'm as black as a crow and she called me *Flamekit*!"

Frostpaw sighed. "Trying to please your kin and your Clan is hard work."

For the first time since he'd found her beside the Moonpool hollow, he felt as though she'd sheathed her claws. Her prickliness had vanished. They'd found something they had in common.

"For the longest time," he told her, "I didn't feel like I truly belonged to ThunderClan. I wasn't the cat they wanted me to be. That's one of the reasons I joined ShadowClan."

"But you went back."

"Yeah," he mewed. "I couldn't stop caring about my Clan."

"I guess I've gone back too."

"What do you mean?" She was here, with him, and it didn't sound like she was ready to go anywhere near RiverClan ever again.

"I've gone back to being a medicine cat," she explained. "Or I *will* go back. Maybe." She looked at him uncertainly. "Just as I was beginning to find my way as a warrior apprentice, StarClan started sharing visions with me. *Real* ones." She frowned. "I think Curlfeather was right all along. I think I am *destined* to be a medicine cat." She looked away, toward the meadow. "I guess we'll find out at the end of this journey."

"Do you know where the end *is*?" he asked.

"Not yet," she told him. "I just know we need to keep going." She glanced at his leg. "But it's okay if we have to rest for a day or two."

"I can walk on it now." He moved his leg. The wound was sore, but he could feel that the muscles and bone were still strong. It might

hurt to walk, but he didn't think it would do any harm. His nausea was fading and his headache beginning to clear. He began to get to his paws. "The sooner we get moving, the better."

Frostpaw nudged him back down. "Let's leave at sunhigh," she mewed. "We need to eat first." She scanned the slope below. "You rest while I hunt."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She blinked at him warmly. "I *have* trained as a warrior, remember?"

"Okay, but don't go near the river." He didn't want her to run into the otters again.

She winked at him. "Why?" Her lightheartedness took him by surprise. "Are you scared I'll bring you back a *fish*?"

He purred, and as he watched her head away, he felt cheerful despite the stinging of his wound. Had he finally persuaded the nervous RiverClan apprentice that he could be trusted—that they might even become friends?

Once his leg had grown accustomed to walking, the pain eased a little. Frostpaw had applied another poultice before they left and wrapped fresh cobweb tightly around the wound. As the afternoon wore on, Twoleg dens had begun to dot the meadows, here and there at first, then in clusters, until the two cats found themselves heading into a Twolegplace.

They followed a smooth, stone trail that ran along a Thunderpath.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Nightheart asked, eyeing a monster as it rumbled past.

"We have to head toward sunrise," Frostpaw told him. "And . . . there's something else. Riverstar appeared to me in my dream. He told me to look for a Thunderpath with three stripes."

"Really? *Riverstar*?" Nightheart looked at the young RiverClan cat, impressed, but she turned away awkwardly. Perhaps it was still hard for her to share things with him. Still, this news cheered Nightheart. If Frostpaw was getting advice from RiverClan's founder, there could be no doubt that their mission was very important.

She held her head high, but she looked scared, and he nudged her farther from the edge, keeping himself between her and the

monsters. "I just hope we get out of this place before dark." He didn't want to spend the night among monsters and Twolegs. They'd already passed dens where dogs had barked at them and Twolegs had grunted, and every now and then he picked up the scent of a rogue over the acrid monster stench.

"Look." She padded closer, pausing as another monster roared past, then nodded to an extra white stripe running along the stone, a tail-length in from the edge. Her eyes were bright with excitement. "Could that be it? The Thunderpath with three stripes." She nodded to the two white stripes on either side of the Thunderpath. "There are three *here*," she mewed. "This must be the way."

Nightheart stiffened as she hopped off the stone trail, down onto the Thunderpath. "Come back!" he hurried after her. "It's dangerous."

"Haven't you noticed?" She blinked at him. "The monsters don't run over this part."

Nightheart watched with alarm as she stood perfectly still while a monster howled past, so close its breath ruffled her fur. But she was right. The monster stayed on the other side of the white line as though there were an invisible wall.

"We have to follow it." Frostpaw beckoned him to join her with a flick of her muzzle.

"But we can track it from over here." Nightheart stayed firmly on the stone trail.

"Riverstar said we have to *follow* it, not track it," Frostpaw insisted.

Reluctantly, Nightheart joined her, shuddering as another monster thundered past. Its hot breath swept over him, but its paws didn't even touch the white line. "It's like they're scared of it," he commented.

"I guess Riverstar knew they would be," Frostpaw mewed.

As she spoke, something trilled behind them, loud and shrill. Nightheart's pelt spiked as he jerked around. A monster was racing toward them, *inside* the white line. It was bony and only had two skinny paws, and it looked like it would fall over at any moment. But it was moving fast and heading straight for them.

"Quick!" He shoved Frostpaw back onto the stone trail and leaped after her as the monster whirled past. Its paws glittered as

they spun, and a Twoleg was clinging to its spine. Nightheart stared—was it giving the Twoleg a badger ride? The Twoleg's pelt was bright orange, its head was covered by a hard blue shell, and it was hunched over, hanging on to the monster's antlers as though it was terrified of being thrown off.

Frostpaw backed away, her tail bushing. "There's a whole herd of them!"

Nightheart spun around and saw a string of bony monsters speeding toward them. They were *all* carrying Twolegs, with pelts and shells colored like a rainbow, heads bowed, legs pumping, flat faces set into determined grimaces as they fought to hold on. "We need to get out of here!" He saw a gap between the Twoleg dens—a track running away into shadow. "This way!"

He nudged Frostpaw toward it and together they fled, as behind them the pack of bony monsters whirled closer. The cats burst out into sunlight, but a fence blocked their path.

"Up here." Nightheart leaped up it, swallowing back a yowl of pain as fire seemed to engulf his injured leg. At the top, he clung on and steadied his breath, the pain easing into a dull throb.

"Are you okay?" Frostpaw scrambled up beside him, wobbling on the narrow strip of wood.

"Yes," he told her through gritted teeth. He glanced back along the track, relieved when he saw that the bony monsters hadn't followed.

A row of small, square meadows edged by fences stretched ahead of them, backing onto a line of Twoleg dens. They looked deserted and safer than the Thunderpath. "Let's head this way," he mewed.

"What about the stripes?" Frostpaw looked back through the gap.

"We can find our way back once those bony monsters are gone," he promised. He dropped onto the grass below, wincing as his injured leg touched down.

"Let me look." Frostpaw landed beside him and lifted the cobweb dressing with a paw. She peered beneath it. "It's started bleeding again," she told him. "But only a little."

"It'll be okay." He nudged her away. "It's just a bit of ripped pelt." He was determined to be brave. "The bone's not broken, and it

doesn't feel sprained." Trying to hide his limp, he headed across the grass. He wasn't going to let Frostpaw down.

He pushed through a stretch of shrubs to the bottom of the next fence and climbed up carefully, grateful for the slats, which were well spaced and easy to grip. The next meadow beyond was wider, and he led Frostpaw across it, his fur twitching nervously as he scanned the Twoleg den for movement. No dogs here. No kittypets. Relieved, he nodded Frostpaw on. Her ears were flat, her tail pressed down. "We'll find a gap soon," he promised. "I'm sure—"

He broke off as a clatter racketed from the Twoleg den. Shrill yelps rang over the meadow as a gap opened in the wall and a gaggle of Twoleg kits burst out. Chattering like magpies, they raced across the grass, their tiny eyes sparkling with excitement as they saw Nightheart and Frostpaw.

"Run!" he yowled, but Frostpaw was already haring toward the next fence. The kits broke into a run, too, charging after them, reaching out with their forelegs. Nightheart pushed harder, racing for the fence. Frostpaw had already reached it and was hauling herself up. She looked back, her eyes wide with panic as Nightheart leaped and, clinging to the slats, began to climb. The kits clamored, squealing behind him. He felt a furless paw graze his tail and snatched it clear as he reached the top. "Keep going!" he yowled.

Frostpaw jumped down. He dropped onto the ground beside her. His leg felt as though teeth were biting through the bone, but he fought the pain and pelted across the grass at Frostpaw's heels. Halfway across, he heard a howl that made his heart burst with terror.

Frostpaw looked back, her pelt spiking.

A huge white dog was pounding across the grass toward them. Its eyes were wild with fury, and its bark echoed around the stone walls of the surrounding dens. Frostpaw kept running, tail streaming behind her. Nightheart pelted after her, terror scorching through every hair on his pelt as, together, they scrambled up the next fence.

He heard the dog's jaws snap behind them and expected any moment to feel pain shoot up his tail. But the dog had missed. Angrily, it thumped itself against the fence. Nightheart clung on as the fence shuddered beneath him.

“Stupid furball,” Frostpaw hissed, glaring down at the dog.

Frenzied with rage, it hurled itself against the fence again.

“Keep going!” Nightheart yowled. The fence felt flimsy. What if the dog broke through?

He jumped down after Frostpaw, surprise sparking through his fur as he saw a square pond ahead. It was covered with a sheet of blue ice. Was it frozen over? How? There hadn’t even been a frost.

The dog was still thumping against the fence behind them. Nightheart looked back, his heart skipping a beat as he saw the wood begin to split. The dog hit it again. Splinters sprayed across the grass. *It’s going to break through!* He stared in alarm, running blindly forward, expecting it to burst open any moment. “Don’t stop running —”

His breath caught as he felt water rush around his paws. He looked down. *No!* He’d run onto the blue ice!

But it wasn’t ice. It was soft and wet. His heart seemed to explode with horror as he felt it fold like a great wet leaf beneath his paws. He sank, water rushing over the leaf and engulfing him. It tasted sharp and made his eyes sting and felt like fire in his wound. The leaf began to wrap itself around him and pull him deeper. Bubbles rose from his mouth, and he looked up and saw the surface disappearing above his head as the leaf closed over him. Fear was throbbing through him, but he forced himself to stop struggling. The more he fought, the more tangled he’d become in the leaf. Pressing his panic to the edge of his thoughts, he held still, his lungs aching for air. *I have to live. Sunbeam’s waiting for me.*

When he forced himself to hold still, the leaf gradually began to unfurl, buoyed by the water beneath. The bit that covered his head slipped away. He glimpsed sky and, very gently, began to push up toward it. Kicking out with his hind legs, he ignored the slicing pain from his wound and fought his way toward daylight, gulping air as he burst from the water.

“Nightheart!” Frostpaw was at the edge of the pond, her eyes bright with fear. He tried to pull himself toward her, but there was nothing to catch hold of. *How am I supposed to grip water?* He slipped under once more and pushed up, flailing as he broke the surface, glimpsing gray fur through a haze of water.

Frostpaw had leaped into the pond. *No!* She couldn't drown too! He sank again, fought again, managed to surface once more. Frostpaw was swimming toward him now, her paws moving strongly and smoothly through the water. He stared at her desperately, the water dragging him down, fighting to stay afloat as she reached him and grabbed his scruff between her jaws. He felt her tug him backward with a jerk and drag him to the edge of the pond.

He reached for the stone as they bumped against it, and, gasping for air, he dragged himself out.

Frostpaw scrambled out beside him. "Are you okay?" She leaned over him as he crouched and coughed up water, his fear easing enough to hear the dog howling with rage. It was still thumping against the fence.

"We have to get out of here," he spluttered.

She nudged him to his paws; then, tucking her shoulder beneath his, she began to guide him toward the next fence. His legs shook and he coughed again, convulsing as he staggered beside her. His wounded leg throbbed with pain, and he struggled to keep his balance as Frostpaw swayed beneath his weight. He was leaning on her too heavily. But fear pushed him forward, and as they neared the fence, he managed to clear the last of the water from his chest. He took a deep breath, hesitating at the bottom of the fence. Frostpaw heaved him upward, shoving him with her shoulders until he was pulling himself up.

At the top, he paused while she climbed up after him. He was stiff with cold and shock. Pain pulsed in his leg. He tried not to think about it. Ahead, a track led back between the Twoleg dens, toward the Thunderpath. A way out. Relief swamped him.

"How's your leg?" Frostpaw stopped beside him. She was wet and trembling. He felt a flash of guilt. What if he'd drowned? She would have been stranded here alone. And Sunbeam would never know where he'd gone.

"I'm sorry," he croaked.

"It's okay. It worked out," she told him. "You're alive, although . . ." She glanced at his wound. "Is your leg okay?"

"It will be," he told her, hoping it was true.

“Okay. We’d better go, then.” Frostpaw jumped down and led the way between the dens.

Nightheart followed carefully and peered out as they reached the end. The Thunderpath lay in front of them, the third white stipe still running along it. He looked both ways, scanning the path for bony monsters. But the Thunderpath was clear. He hopped down onto it.

Frostpaw followed, her wet fur spiked along her spine. A chilly wind was streaming over them, and Nightheart shivered as cold reached through his dripping pelt.

“Are you okay?” He glanced at Frostpaw.

“I will be. You scared me. But I’m glad you’re okay.” She stared ahead. Was she disappointed in him?

They padded side by side, gazing silently ahead, their ears pricked for the sound of monsters coming up behind.

The pain in Nightheart’s leg was fiercer than ever, and as the path narrowed and led them from among the Twoleg dens out into fields once more, he slowed. “Do you think there will be herbs around here?” he asked Frostpaw hopefully.

She glanced at his leg. “Is the pain bad?”

“Yes.” He didn’t dare look at her. StarClan had sent him to help her, but she’d had to save his life twice—first from otters and now from drowning. Shame wormed through his fur. He’d joined Frostpaw on this journey to prove to every cat that he was a great warrior. But all he’d proved was that he couldn’t even take care of himself, let alone another cat.



Chapter 12



Despite her heavy heart, Sunbeam was hungry. She'd spent the day patrolling and hunting and hadn't eaten since morning. She was used to ThunderClan territory now, and she was growing skilled in their hunting techniques. They weren't as different from ShadowClan's as she'd first thought. True, there was more cooperation between warriors on patrol, but the basic stalking and pouncing were the same. Now, as evening closed in around the camp, she crouched beside the squirrel she'd help catch earlier and bit into it.

It had been four days since Nightheart had left, and the rest of the Clan seemed to have accepted his absence as though it was nothing special. Though Sparkpelt and Finchlight seemed to feel a little concern, they still believed that Nightheart would return when he was ready. Perhaps they'd done enough worrying when he'd first moved to ShadowClan. *Perhaps they have more faith in him than I do.* She chewed miserably. *Am I a bad mate? Should I be as unworried as everyone else?*

No. She swallowed the mouthful. It wasn't surprising for her to miss him and worry about him. She loved him. Her heart ached all the time, and she wished with every bone in her body that he'd come home. *Where are you?*

Sparkpelt and Finchlight were sharing a rabbit beside her.

"I don't know how you squeezed down that burrow today," Sparkpelt told her. "But I'm glad you did."

"Me too," Finchlight mewed. "This rabbit is the juiciest one I've had since greenleaf."

Bayshine had finished his mouse and was washing beside the warriors' den. He paused and glanced at Sunbeam. "You wouldn't catch me going into a rabbit warren." He shuddered. "It's too dark. I'd never find my way out."

"Just follow the scents," Sunbeam told him.

Myrtlebloom was a few tail-lengths away, picking mud from between her claws. "I thought it was just WindClan cats who dug into rabbit holes."

Around the clearing, ThunderClan's warriors were sharing tongues. Only Lionblaze seemed to be worried that Squirrelstar, Brambleclaw, and Ivypool hadn't yet returned from the meeting with Tree. The golden warrior was pacing beside the entrance, pricking his ears every time a bush rustled or a twig snapped beyond the entrance. But it wasn't until twilight had faded completely that Squirrelstar led her small patrol into camp.

Lionblaze hurried to meet them, but Squirrelstar brushed past him with a polite nod and padded to the middle of the clearing. She looked around the Clan, and they stopped talking and sat up, turning their attention toward her.

"How did it go?" Lionblaze asked.

"Did Tigerstar agree to leave RiverClan alone?" Plumstone mewed.

"Tigerstar has never agreed to anything in his life," Dewnose growled beside her.

Squirrelstar lifted her chin. "He wants to keep his ShadowClan patrol in RiverClan for now," she told them. "But he won't increase their number. And he agrees that they are only there temporarily, until RiverClan has a solid leader."

Sunbeam felt a glimmer of relief. But she was worried about Lightleap. Her friend had looked so hollow-eyed, and the rumors Sunbeam had heard since the Gathering—that some of the RiverClan warriors were still plotting to harm them—had been worrying her. Lightleap would be replaced eventually, but any ShadowClan cat sent to RiverClan faced danger. "Do you think he'll pull out his warriors altogether?"

"He's not prepared to go that far," Squirrelstar mewed. "He's convinced that RiverClan would fall apart without ShadowClan's presence. He believes that if one Clan falls, we all fall."

Lionblaze snorted. "Nonsense! The Clans didn't collapse when ShadowClan fell apart under Rowanstar. We gave them shelter until Tigerstar returned."

"Perhaps we should suggest taking in RiverClan cats now," Sparkpelt suggested.

"Splashtail wouldn't allow it," Ivypool told him. "He wants RiverClan to be allowed to decide their own future, without help."

Sparkpelt looked surprised. "Is Splashtail speaking for RiverClan now?"

"He was the warrior representing RiverClan at the meeting," Squirrelstar told him.

"He's very young to be taking a leader's place," Sparkpelt mewed.

"What about Icewing?" Finchlight asked. "Was she there?"

"She came with him," Squirrelstar mewed. "But she didn't say much. Mallownose was there too. He and Splashtail did most of the talking."

Sunbeam frowned. From what she remembered from her time in the RiverClan camp, Mallownose had been particularly resentful of ShadowClan's presence, bristling at her and her Clanmates with every look and mew. Could such an angry warrior negotiate a peaceful solution?

Ivypool swished her tail. "Splashtail claims that he only showed up to the talks because Havenpelt is expecting Sneezecloud's kits—he wants RiverClan's problems sorted out before they're born."

"That doesn't give them much time," Plumstone grunted.

Finchlight looked worried. "It doesn't sound like Tigerstar is going to back down before then."

"He has no intention of ever backing down," Lionblaze growled. "Not now that he's got his claws on RiverClan territory."

"We shouldn't give up hope," Squirrelstar mewed. "Agreeing not to increase the patrols is a step forward."

"It sounds like Tigerstar's managed to make us grateful he's not causing more trouble," Plumstone muttered.

"Perhaps we should be," Ivypool mewed darkly.

Lionblaze flexed his claws. "Tigerstar *enjoys* causing trouble."

As murmurs of agreement rippled around the ThunderClan cats, Sunbeam forced her pelt not to ruffle. They were being unfair to Tigerstar. He was a good leader and a true warrior. And he was trying to do the right thing. Couldn't ThunderClan see that? All he wanted was to find a way to help RiverClan when they clearly couldn't help themselves.

"Let's wait and see," Squirrelstar mewed. "Tree thinks that peace can be achieved as long as every cat keeps talking."

Lionblaze's tail twitched sulkily. "Tigerstar's just playing for time."

"At least we're talking and not fighting," Squirrelstar told him.

"For now," Lionblaze murmured.

Sunbeam shifted her paws uneasily. He made it sound as though fighting could break out at any moment.

"All we can do for now is keep negotiating." Squirrelstar dipped her head and headed for the fresh-kill pile. Her Clanmates returned to their meals. Sunbeam looked at her half-eaten squirrel. She'd lost her appetite.

Finchlight glanced at her. "Do *you* have any idea what Tigerstar might be planning?"

Sunbeam glanced at her. "Why would I?" she mewed. "I live here now."

Sparkpelt shot Finchlight a look, then dipped her head to Sunbeam. "I think Finchlight was just wondering if you could give us any clues as to how we might persuade Tigerstar to see sense."

"He already thinks he's seeing sense," Sunbeam pointed out.

"But we need to change his mind," Sparkpelt pressed.

Finchlight was looking at Sunbeam hopefully. "Is there any cat he might listen to?"

Sunbeam looked at them. They meant well. But why were they asking *her*? "Why not try Dovewing?" she mewed. "Tigerstar listens to her, and he respects her opinion."

"Of course!" Finchlight's eyes lit up. "Dovewing could persuade him."

"Maybe." Sunbeam felt doubtful. Why would Dovewing agree with ThunderClan's point of view? She was a ShadowClan cat now. And she had always supported Tigerstar. But maybe in private she could change his mind. If she could, it would keep ShadowClan and ThunderClan from fighting. "But how can we persuade Dovewing? She doesn't visit ThunderClan."

"True." Finchlight was looking at Sunbeam. "But I know a cat who might visit ShadowClan," she mewed knowingly.

Ivypool had liked Finchlight's idea. But she didn't want Sunbeam to visit the ShadowClan camp. Instead she'd gone to the

ShadowClan border herself to ask for a meeting with her sister, Dovewing, the next night.

"You should stay away from the ShadowClan camp until Berryheart has calmed down," she'd told Sunbeam. After the frosty reception her Clanmates had given her at the Gathering, Sunbeam was grateful. She didn't relish a visit to the ShadowClan camp, especially if it was to reason with Dovewing.

Ivypool did ask Sunbeam to escort her to the meeting place at the halfbridge, which jutted into the lake on ShadowClan's shore. They arrived after dusk, having kept a tail-length from the water's edge since they left ThunderClan territory to avoid ruffling SkyClan's fur.

Sunbeam paced, too nervous to stand still, as they waited for Dovewing to arrive. The sun had set and shadow swathed the lake valley. A warbler flitted over the water and disappeared among the reeds near RiverClan's territory, and Sunbeam wondered if Lightleap was still in the RiverClan camp, or whether another patrol had replaced them.

She pricked her ears as she heard paw steps among the pines. She recognized Dovewing's soft gray fur as the ShadowClan she-cat padded from the trees and crossed the shore. Her heart quickened as she saw Sparrowtail following behind.

Was her father as angry as Berryheart that she'd left? He hadn't been at the Gathering, so she hadn't spoken to him since she'd moved to ThunderClan. As Ivypool padded forward to greet her sister, she tried to catch his eye, but his attention was fixed on Ivypool and Dovewing as they met beside the water.

"You came." Ivypool purred and nuzzled Dovewing's ear.

Dovewing's green eyes were round with worry. "Has something happened? Why did you want to see me?"

"Things were strained at the Gathering," Ivypool mewed. "And the mediation doesn't seem to be getting anywhere."

"So?" Dovewing narrowed her eyes.

"I thought we could talk about the situation with RiverClan," Ivypool mewed.

"And sort it out behind Tigerstar's back?" Dovewing bristled.

Sparrowtail's eyes were dark. "Does Squirrelstar know about this?" he asked Ivypool.

"Not yet," she replied. "I thought I'd see how it went before I told her." Her gaze flicked back to Dovewing. "I just wanted to find out if you thought there was any chance Tigerstar might change his mind about RiverClan."

Dovewing's tail twitched irritably. "Isn't that what the mediator's for?"

Sunbeam was surprised at the sharpness in Dovewing's mew. Her heart fluttered uneasily. *Was this meeting a bad idea?* She wondered suddenly what *she* would have said to ShadowClan cats who'd come to ask her to influence ThunderClan on their behalf. *I'd probably refuse just like Dovewing, and she's lived with ShadowClan far longer than I've lived with ThunderClan. She even has kits there.*

Ivypool seemed to understand her sister's reaction. She dipped her head. "I'm sorry," she mewed. "I'm just trying to keep the peace, and I thought you might give us a better idea why Tigerstar's so determined to control RiverClan."

Outrage sparked in Dovewing's eyes. "He's not *controlling* them; he's helping them! Don't forget, RiverClan got themselves into this situation. If they'd been honest about what was happening from the start, things would never have gotten this bad."

"Can't you just talk to him?" Ivypool pleaded. "Try to persuade him to see it from our point of view."

"I'm not a leader," Dovewing told her. "Or ShadowClan's deputy. And I'm not going to exploit my relationship with Tigerstar to make him change his mind." She lifted her chin defiantly. "It's unfair of you to ask me. You're putting me in a difficult position. I don't want to let my kin down, but I'm not going to betray my mate and my Clan."

"I'm not asking you to betray any cat," Ivypool pressed. "But if you could just feel him out. Explain how much is at stake."

"He knows how much is at stake," Dovewing snapped. "Tigerstar's not a fool. Neither am I." Her tail was swishing angrily. "I'm not letting you manipulate me into manipulating him!"

As disappointed as she was that this meeting had taken a bad turn, Sunbeam couldn't help admiring Dovewing for holding her ground and refusing to be swayed.

Sparrowtail stepped forward. "I think we should go," he whispered to Dovewing.

Sunbeam looked at him in alarm. Wasn't he going to speak to her at all? She leaned forward. "Stay a bit longer," she pleaded.

He met her gaze, his eyes rounding with apology. She felt a rush of hope. *He wants to speak to me, but he can't. Not here.*

Ivypool was still looking at Dovewing. "I don't want to manipulate any cat," she mewed. "Perhaps, if we could talk alone . . . ?" She glanced at Sparrowtail.

Sparrowtail eyed her suspiciously, but Dovewing waved him away with her tail.

"I'll talk to her," she told him. "But I won't forget which Clan I belong to."

Sunbeam's belly tightened as Ivypool followed Dovewing across the pebbles until they were out of earshot. She was alone with Sparrowtail. She blinked at him nervously. "I'm sorry I left. I had to."

He looked at her, and she held her breath. Would he lecture her as Berryheart had?

"Are you really not coming home?" he asked softly.

Her heart seemed to twist into a knot. He looked so disappointed. "I'm sorry," she whispered. Would telling him how much she loved Nightheart make it okay? "I have to be with Nightheart," she mewed. "And if that means joining ThunderClan, I have no choice."

"But you were born ShadowClan." He sounded bewildered. "You belong with us. How can you trust cats you didn't grow up with? How can you ever feel at peace there?"

His words pierced her like thorns. What if he was right? She might hunt with ThunderClan and train with them, but she didn't feel like one of them. Not yet. What if she never did?

It's just because Nightheart's not here, she told herself. *It'll all be okay when he gets back.* She met Sparrowtail's questioning stare. "When Nightheart left ShadowClan, it was like my heart left too," she told him. "I can't feel at peace in ShadowClan without him. I trust him, and I'll learn to trust ThunderClan the same way. Once—" She broke off. *Once he returns.* She couldn't tell Sparrowtail that Nightheart had left. Not just because the other Clans weren't supposed to know. He'd ask her why she'd stayed in ThunderClan if

the reason she'd joined was gone. He'd think she was a fool to be so trusting of a cat from another Clan. He'd say all the things Berryheart had said. He'd say them gently and kindly, in a way that might make them seem true, and she wouldn't have a good answer to any of them.

She looked at him. He stared back, still confused. "I'm happy in ThunderClan," she told him. "Honestly, I am. Besides, if I'd stayed in ShadowClan, I'd have been sent to live in the RiverClan camp again. And I couldn't do it. It felt wrong."

Sparrowtail leaned closer, his eyes brightening. "If that's what's worrying you, you won't have to." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "If Berryheart's plan works, you'll never have to go to RiverClan. You can come home."

She stiffened. "What do you mean?" *Berryheart's plan?* "How can Berryheart change anything?"

Sparrowtail drew away.

Anxiety sparked in Sunbeam's belly. "What's she planning to do?"

Her father didn't answer. He turned and watched Ivypool and Dovewing as they padded back along the shore. They seemed to have made their peace. Their pelts were smooth and they touched muzzles before Dovewing headed toward the pines, beckoning Sparrowtail to follow with a flick of her tail.

"Goodbye," Sunbeam called after him quietly.

"Goodbye." He glanced back at her, his eyes filled with reassurance. What was he trying to tell her?

Ivypool's tail was swishing as the two ShadowClan warriors disappeared between the trees. "Dovewing won't budge," she growled.

But Sunbeam was barely listening. She was thinking about Sparrowtail's words. *If Berryheart's plan works . . .*



Chapter 13



Frostpaw stared over the churning water, her heart sinking. The third stripe they'd been following had come to a sudden halt a few days earlier, leaving only a regular Thunderpath, which soon turned away from the rising sun. Lacking another vision from Riverstar, Frostpaw had begun to doubt that they were still headed in the right direction, so they'd left the Thunderpath behind and struck out across the fields. She'd been happy to put the Twolegplace behind them, but Nightheart's injured leg had slowed them down. Hunting had been tricky too. Nightheart didn't have the speed to chase anything faster than a beetle. But slowly they'd developed a technique where Nightheart stalked prey until he was only a few paw steps away, then frightened it into her waiting paws.

She missed the taste of fish. The rabbits and mice they'd hunted had filled her belly, but she longed for river prey. She wouldn't be able to catch any here, though. The current was fast and the water frothed angrily as it tumbled past.

At least the rain had stopped, but it would take a day or two for the river to drop. Colder weather had brought morning frosts and short, chilly days. They found themselves traveling more and more in darkness.

Nightheart paced back and forth along the water's edge, his tail twitching nervously as he eyed the river. "You don't want us to swim across, do you?"

"No." *She* might make it across, but she'd watched Nightheart nearly drown in a tiny pond only a few days before. The river would pull him under the moment he dived in. She pressed back a sigh. The ThunderClan tom was good company, but how could he really be the help StarClan had promised? She seemed to be the one helping *him* most of the time. She blinked at him encouragingly, hoping he couldn't tell what she was thinking. "Let's head downstream. There might be stepping-stones, or a fallen tree."

He was staring past her eagerly. "Look!"

She turned and followed his gaze. In the distance, a bridge seemed to stretch across the river. It seemed like their first piece of

luck in days. Was this StarClan's way of letting her know they were right to turn away from the Thunderpath and follow the rising sun? She felt a rush of relief as she headed toward it. "Come on."

She quickened her pace as she neared it, her chest aching with hope.

Nightheart trailed behind, limping. "Wait for me! I'm coming as fast—" The rest of his mew was whipped away by the icy wind.

But Frostpaw wasn't listening. She could see the bridge properly now. Her heart sank. The middle part had been torn away, leaving jagged stone and jutting wood sticking out on both sides of the river.

As Nightheart reached her, his face fell. "Are you sure we need to cross this river?"

She sat down, feeling suddenly weary, and fluffed her fur against the cold. "Of course we have to cross." She tried not to sound grumpy. "The rising sun is on the other side."

Nightheart looked suddenly doubtful. "But you said you weren't sure where StarClan wanted us to go," he fretted. "Maybe you misunderstood their directions. Maybe they said the *setting* sun. We might have been heading the wrong way since the start."

She swallowed back irritation. She knew he was worried about leaving his Clan and his mate without telling them where he was going. But did he have to doubt her at every paw step? *I mustn't be angry. He's taken a big risk for me.* "We've come the right way."

"Are you sure?" He blinked at her.

"Yes." Riverstar had been clear about the direction, at least. "I'm certain."

He seemed relieved to hear this. His tail stopped quivering.

Frostpaw headed along the grassy bank. "We just need to find a way over this river." There had to be a crossing somewhere.

She walked slower this time so Nightheart could keep up. As they trekked silently side by side, sunhigh passing and then the afternoon slipping toward dusk, she felt frustration rising. Where the river narrowed, the water raged harder, swirling and frothing. Where the current eased, it widened, the far bank out of reach even for the strongest swimmers in RiverClan. Why had StarClan put so many obstacles in her way? She growled crossly beneath her breath.

Nightheart glanced at her. "Are you okay?"

“Why does StarClan have to be so vague?” she grumbled. “Couldn’t they just say we’d come to a river and tell me where to cross?”

“Perhaps they don’t want to make it too easy,” Nightheart ventured.

“Why not?” Frostpaw snapped. “They want me to save RiverClan, don’t they? Shouldn’t they make it as easy as possible? It’s like they *want* me to fail.”

“Didn’t you say Riverstar spoke to you?” Nightheart asked.

“Yes.”

“He was the founder of RiverClan, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then he won’t want you to fail.” Nightheart touched his tail-tip to hers reassuringly. “He’ll want you to succeed as much as you do.”

She looked at him gratefully. Despite his own doubts, he was ready to support her. He did have faith in her. She just hoped she was worthy of it. She scanned the meadows stretching beside them. The sky had turned purple and the sun was sliding behind the distant hills. “Perhaps we should hunt before it gets any darker,” she mewed.

Nightheart glanced at the river. “Can you fish here?”

“The current’s too strong,” she told him. “It’d sweep me downstream.”

“Then let’s find a rabbit instead.” Nightheart headed for the long grass and pushed his way into it.

Frostpaw followed, feeling suddenly weary. How many more days would they have to do this?

They couldn’t find a rabbit, but they dug up a mouse nest and, tucked among the jutting roots of a fallen oak, ate two each. They were sheltered from the wind, and once they finished eating, they swept piles of leaves into nests and settled into them.

The moon was out, stars glittering around it in the crow-black sky. Frostpaw had already found fresh herbs and applied a poultice to Nightheart’s wound. It was healing, but slowly. At least there was no sign of infection.

He stretched his injured leg out and began to wash it gingerly, avoiding the wound. "We'll find a way to cross tomorrow," he told her between licks.

"I just wish StarClan were more help," she sighed. "Before I set out, Riverstar promised he'd teach me what I needed to know to fix RiverClan. But since then, he's only told me the bit about the Thunderpath. And since it ended, nothing more. I still have no idea where we're heading or why."

"He must know what he's doing," Nightheart told her. "He's a StarClan warrior."

Frostpaw frowned. "I still don't know why he chose *me* to make this journey. RiverClan has stronger, more experienced warriors." A new, more alarming thought struck her. "Perhaps he's *found* another cat to save RiverClan. Perhaps that's why he's not speaking to me anymore." Her heart began to pound. "He's guiding them instead of me."

Nightheart stopped washing and looked at her. "I don't know anything about Riverstar, but he was a true warrior, right?"

"I guess."

"Of course he was," Nightheart insisted. "He led RiverClan. A true warrior would never abandon a Clanmate." He shifted position. "Stop worrying and have some faith in yourself. Riverstar will talk to you when the time is right."

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course." He began washing his tail. "Try to relax. Let the visions come to you. I'm not a medicine cat, but it must be like waiting for prey to come out of its burrow; you can't force it. You just need to be ready when it does."

"I guess." She blinked at him gratefully. Her paws ached from walking, and her eyes felt heavy. She laid her muzzle on her forepaws and listened to Nightheart's tongue rasping over his fur. Her thoughts grew muddled as she slipped into sleep.

"Frostpaw."

Riverstar's mew jerked her into a dream. She lifted her head and found herself once more beside a calm blue river that sparkled in the sunshine. Riverstar was standing in front of her.

"Are we nearly there?" she asked him quickly, frightened he'd disappear before he gave her the answer.

"You'll know when you are," Riverstar mewed.

"But we've come such a long way, and now there's a river to cross, and I'm not sure how we can—"

"You can do this." His green eyes seemed filled with emerald fire. "You're strong enough and brave enough and smart enough."

"Am I?" She wished it were true.

"Just listen to what the river is telling you," Riverstar mewed steadily.

"It's telling me not to cross right now," she mewed. "The water's too high and we can't find a bridge."

"You'll find a way," Riverstar assured her. "Cross the river and keep going until you find a tree the color of a salmon's flesh. You'll find cats there who can help you."

"Really?" Excitement fizzed in her paws. Then she stiffened. *The color of a salmon's flesh?* Salmon flesh was sort of pinkish. Did he mean a blossom tree? "But it's nearly leaf-bare," she mewed. "None of the trees will have blossoms." As she stared at him, Riverstar began to fade. "Don't go!" The river and grass were growing pale. "You have to tell me—" It was no good. Darkness closed around her, and she sank into a deep sleep.

When she woke, dawn light was filtering through the trees. Nightheart was still sleeping, and she got to her paws and stretched before hopping out of her nest. She padded to the shore and watched the river race past. The water had dropped, but the current was still too fierce to swim. She scanned the water, up and down, hoping the morning light might reveal a place they could cross.

Leaves rustled behind her as Nightheart climbed from his nest. He stopped beside her and stretched. "Any new ideas?" he asked, watching the water.

"Not yet." Should she tell him about her dream? She didn't want to get his hopes up when she wasn't sure they could even find a salmon-colored tree until newleaf. "I think we just need to keep following the river and hope we come to a crossing." As she spoke, a branch quivered above her head. She looked up. A bright green

kingfisher had settled there, its feathers flashing in the early morning sunshine as it scanned the river. Then, suddenly, it dived, plunging into the rushing water. A moment later it burst out, carrying a minnow in its beak. Flitting over the water, it landed in a hazel on the far bank.

Frostpaw realized she'd stopped breathing. Energy was tingling along her spine. *It's a sign.* She was certain. "We can do it!" She jerked her gaze toward Nightheart. "We can cross."

"Where?" He looked startled.

"I don't know, but we'll find a way." Her heart felt lighter than it had in days. "We *have* to. We've got to get to the other side."



Chapter 14



Nightheart was happy that Frostpaw sounded more confident this morning. Her doubts last night had worried him. Now he followed her bright gaze and saw a kingfisher, perched on a branch among the trees crowding the far shore. It looked tasty; he licked his lips. "Shall we hunt before we find a place to cross?"

She didn't answer. Instead she padded downstream, never taking her eyes from the riverbank opposite, her tail swishing eagerly as though she thought one of the trees might suddenly reach over and scoop her up.

His leg was stiff, but for the first time in days, it didn't hurt. The wound itched where a hard scab had formed. It was healing well thanks to Frostpaw's herbs. She truly was a gifted medicine cat . . . not only in her ability to heal, but in her connection to StarClan. He recalled with wonder that StarClan had chosen him, out of all the living Clan cats, to accompany her. *Why?* He had to do something to prove that StarClan had been right to choose him. He was determined to find a way across this river. If she really believed they could do it, he would make it happen. Hunting would have to wait.

The kingfisher flitted to another branch, then another, its beady gaze on the water. It fluttered among the trees on the far bank, then swooped back across the river. *It's showing off*, Nightheart thought enviously. *If only we had wings and could flit from branch to branch.* He paused, an idea sparking in his mind. *We don't need wings.* He hurried along the bank, brushing past Frostpaw.

"What is it?" She scampered after him as he followed the riverbank, hopping over tree roots and ducking beneath branches until the river curved sharply.

"I have an idea," Nightheart mewed. As they rounded the bend, his heart leaped with joy. Just as he'd hoped, the trees here were taller, the river narrower. "Look!" He pointed his nose toward the branches stretching out across the water on both sides. They were reaching toward each other like paws. There was a short gap between the tips of the branches. *Short enough.* "Those elm trees nearly touch."

Frostpaw gazed at them and seemed to guess what he was thinking. Her ears pricked. "Do you think we can do it?"

"Yes!" Nightheart looked at the thick trunk of the elm on this side of the river. It was gnarled and bumpy. It would be easy to climb. He padded toward it and looked up. Sunlight sparkled between the bare branches and he narrowed his eyes.

Frostpaw circled the base of the tree, her tail high. "I knew we were going the right way!" She stopped in front of him and blinked. She looked happy. "I had a dream last night."

"Did StarClan speak to you again?" Nightheart gasped.

"Riverstar told me we have to cross the river and look for a salmon-colored tree," she mewed. "If we find it, there'll be cats who can help us."

"Salmon-colored?" Nightheart was puzzled. "What color is that?"

"Pink," she told him. "Like honeysuckle, or dog rose."

Nightheart's excitement began to fade. "But it's nearly leaf-bare," he mewed. "There won't be pink trees anywhere."

"Riverstar said it would be salmon-colored, so it will be." Frostpaw seemed unperturbed. She reached her forepaws up the trunk and hooked her claws in. "We'll know when we see it."

Nightheart watched her haul herself up and hop onto the lowest branch. He climbed up after her. "Did Riverstar say anything else?"

"No." Frostpaw scrambled up to the next branch. "But that must mean we're heading the right way."

Nightheart climbed up after her, relieved to hear the hope in her mew. Despite their setbacks, they seemed to be making progress. As the branches grew thicker, he slid past Frostpaw and led the way, squeezing between jutting twigs and clambering around burrs bulging from the trunk. His hind leg gave an occasional twinge, and it felt stiff, but his other three legs were strong. They'd get him across.

At last they reached the branch that stretched farthest across the river. Nightheart padded onto it, pleased that it felt sturdy beneath his paws. It tapered toward the end, forking into thinner branches, but he could see a straight run of wood that would support their weight until they were close enough to leap to the elm on the other side. "Come on." He began to walk along it, tail bent to help him balance.

As the branch narrowed beneath his paws, he picked his way more carefully. The river was rushing beneath him, and he tried not to look at the water. It made him dizzy, churning so far below. He looked back, expecting to find Frostpaw at his heels.

He blinked in surprise when he saw her clinging to the branch a few tail-lengths away. "Are you okay?" As the words left his mouth, he realized that he needn't have asked. Her belly was pressed to the bark and she looked terrified. *I guess RiverClan cats don't climb trees.* "It's all right," he called. "The branch is really strong, and as long as you don't look down, you'll be fine."

She didn't move but only stared at him with wide, frightened eyes.

He padded back toward her. "You can do this," he promised. "I'll stay close and grab you if you lose your balance. And even if you fall in the water, you can swim."

"It's not my balance I'm worried about." Her mew was small.

"What is it?" He leaned closer. Her eyes were dark. She looked haunted. "Have you had a vision?"

"No." She shook her head. "I don't like being up here."

"Are you scared of heights?"

"No." She seemed to take a moment to steady her breath. "The last time I climbed a tree was to escape the dogs."

"What dogs?" Nightheart stared at her.

She stared back, grief suddenly flashing in her gaze.

He remembered. Curlfeather had been torn apart by dogs. Had Frostpaw been there when it had happened?

"Curlfeather and I were on our way to the Moonpool," she mewed. "They came out of nowhere. Curlfeather told me to climb the tree, and there was nothing I could do. I could only watch while they —" Her mew cracked.

Pity swelled in Nightheart's chest. Frostpaw had suffered so much, and she was still trying. After everything she'd been through, she was making a journey only StarClan knew where to save her Clan. "You've been so brave," he told her gently. "I promise I'm going to get you through this. There aren't any dogs here. And Curlfeather is safe in StarClan now."

She looked at him, anguish furrowing her brow. "But I miss her."

Sadness swept over Nightheart. "She'll be watching over you," he mewed. "She'll be rooting for you to save your Clan. And I'm not going to let anything bad happen." He held her gaze, wishing he could do more to ease the young cat's pain.

She nodded slowly.

"First we have to cross this river," he mewed. "We can do it. We've come so far. We must nearly be there. Just one small jump and then we can find that salmon tree, okay?"

"Okay." She took a deep breath and very carefully got to her paws.

She looked wobbly, and Nightheart felt a twinge of fear. Would she be able to make the leap?

One paw step at a time. "Stay right behind me," he told her, and, turning, he began to head along the branch once more. He moved slowly, glancing back to check she was still following, relieved when he saw she was. As they reached the end of the branch, he stopped. The next branch was only a short jump away. Hardly more than a tail-length. Maybe two at most. And it looked strong.

"It might dip when you land," he told her. "But just cling on with your claws and wait for it to stop swaying before you move on."

She nodded solemnly.

"Can you do this?" he asked her.

"Yes." She still looked frightened, but her eyes shone with determination.

"I'll go first," he told her. "Watch what I do and copy me." He was suddenly thankful Lilyheart had been so tough on him when he was an apprentice. She'd made him practice tree climbing over and over again, until he'd wondered if she thought she was training a squirrel, not a warrior. But now he was glad of the training. He faced the gap, ignoring the river racing below them. Fixing his gaze on the thick branch of the elm on the far shore, he crouched, bunched his muscles, gathered as much strength as he could in his hind legs, and leaped. Pain sparked in his wound, but he'd pushed off neatly. Like a bird he soared through the air, and exhilaration surged beneath his pelt as he felt bark beneath his paws. He gripped it and hung on as the branch swayed under his weight, bounced up and down, and gradually grew still.

Heart pounding, he stood up and padded toward the trunk, then turned and looked back at Frostpaw.

She was already crouching, ready to make the leap. He felt a rush of admiration for the young she-cat. No matter what she suffered, she didn't run away. She kept going. He watched her, willing her on as she narrowed her eyes and flattened her ears. He saw her hindquarters sway, then tremble as she prepared to jump.

With a grunt of effort she leaped, and the branch quivered behind her, but she sailed smoothly through the air and stretched out her forepaws. She reached for the next branch and grabbed it, hauling herself forward and gripping on as it bobbed up and down beneath her. It grew still and she opened her eyes and looked at Nightheart. "We made it." She sounded delighted, and Nightheart broke into a purr.

"I told you we would," he mewed happily. He waited for her to reach him, then turned and padded toward the trunk. They slithered and hopped from branch to branch until they reached the lowest one.

Frostpaw seemed to draw back as Nightheart leaned forward, ready to jump down.

He hesitated. "Are you okay?"

"I can't get rid of the feeling there might be dogs down there." The haunted look had returned to her gaze.

Nightheart sat up and blinked at her. "Taste the air," he told her.

She tasted it.

"Can you smell dogs?"

She shook her head.

"I promise, there are no dogs here."

"There shouldn't have been dogs on the moor." Her mew was barely more than a whisper. She closed her eyes for a moment, then shook out her pelt. "Come on," she mewed. "Let's find that salmon tree." She leaped down, landing lightly, and Nightheart leaped after her.

His hind leg gave a twinge, but no more, and he padded after Frostpaw as she headed toward the sun lifting in the sky.

They traveled across a stretch of moorland that opened into fields. Beyond them, a Twolegplace rose against the sky. The sun was setting by the time they reached it, and they picked their way

carefully between the Twoleg dens, following Thunderpaths and dodging monsters until they came to a tall fence woven from hard, black branches that had been twisted together to form neat arches.

They stopped beside it. The sky was dark, and dazzling Twoleg lights blanched the ground.

Nightheart peered between the curved branches of the fence. Inside, a meadow of short grass was edged by bushes and trees. Paths wound between them. There was a neatness about it that reminded him of the last Twolegplace they'd traveled through. "It looks like one of the meadows we crossed behind those Twoleg dens," he mewed.

"This one's much bigger." Frostpaw was staring at it too.

"I can't see any Twolegs."

"It's late," she mewed. "They must be in their nests."

"Let's go in," Nightheart suggested. "There might be prey." They'd caught a vole earlier and shared it, but now his belly was rumbling with hunger.

Frostpaw squeezed between the black branches. Nightheart slid after her.

Inside, it felt peaceful. They were away from the glaring lights and the Thunderpath. Nightheart tasted the air as they padded across the short, soft grass. It sloped toward a willow tree that trailed its branches in a shallow pond. They pushed through them and skirted the edge. A frog splashed into the water a few tail-lengths ahead, but Nightheart was scanning a neat row of bushes sprouting beyond the next stretch of grass. Mice or voles might be hiding there. He began to head toward them. "Let's hunt—"

"Wait." Frostpaw sounded excited.

He turned back. "What?"

She was staring across a stretch of stone toward a tree. Its branches were still thick with leaves, and it stood alone, lit by small stars sunk into the ground around it.

Nightheart's breath caught in his chest. The stars bathed the tree in soft pink light.

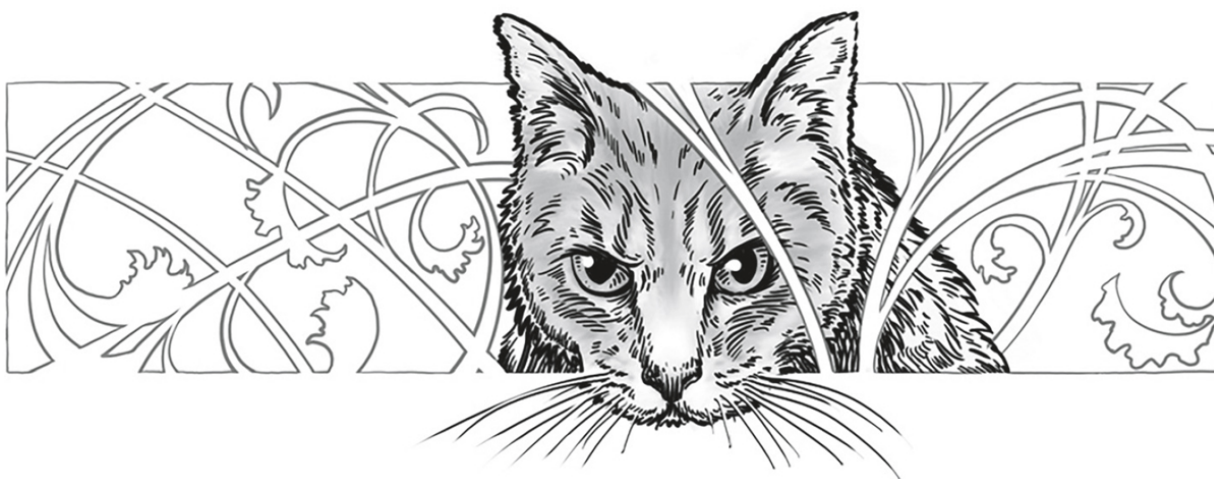
"The salmon-colored tree!" Frostpaw stared at it, her eyes glowing with joy. "We've found it."

But Nightheart had caught sight of something else. He stiffened. Cats were prowling beneath the tree. "There are rogues here," he warned.

The cats turned to look at them. Their eyes gleamed warily in the strange pink light. His hackles lifted. He unsheathed his claws. "We should leave," he whispered. "We're outnumbered."

Frostpaw didn't move. Did she want to stay and fight? But her gaze wasn't on the cats. It was focused on something else. Something far away. She seemed frozen in a dream, and as he watched, she nodded and her eyes glowed with understanding, Nightheart realized she was looking at something he couldn't see.

"There's no need to flee," she told Nightheart, still gazing into the distance. "We're here. We've found what we're looking for."



Chapter 15



As ThunderClan ate the midday meal beneath a bright blue sky, Sunbeam tore a mouthful from the rabbit she was sharing with Finchlight and Sparkpelt. Movement caught her eye. She stopped chewing. Ivypool was padding toward her.

Sunbeam swallowed and sat up quickly. The ThunderClan deputy had warned her she would face her second trial soon. She'd hoped it wouldn't take place until Nightheart had returned to camp. But it looked as though Ivypool intended to hold it today.

Nightheart had been gone for more than a quarter moon. The weather had turned chilly, with clear days bringing sunshine and the first frosts of the season. Sunbeam had become used to facing ThunderClan without him. Myrtlebloom and Bayshine always welcomed her on their patrols, and Sparkpelt and Finchlight made sure she never had to eat alone. But Sunbeam was aware of the doubtful glances of some of their Clanmates. Brackenfur, old and a little forgetful now, looked surprised whenever he saw her, as though he'd only just remembered she'd switched Clans. Cloudtail had asked her if she intended to stay now that Nightheart had left. What if he never came back? Could she still say she was ThunderClan even if the cat who'd led her there was gone? He'd seemed more curious than hostile, but the question had flustered her. She had met his gaze, forcing herself to be calm, and told him that Nightheart would be back any day now and that she was going to wait for him. But it was hard not to feel like an outsider when Plumstone and Dewnose kept their distance, and Cherryfall watched her suspiciously when she played with Spotfur's kits, as though she was worried Sunbeam would convince them that frogs made the best prey or pine needles made the softest nests.

Finchlight nudged Sunbeam from her thoughts. She nodded toward Ivypool, who was waiting for her Clanmates to look up from their food. "Is it time for your next trial?" Finchlight whispered.

"I don't know." Sunbeam's heart was pounding.

Plumstone, who was sharing a vole with Dewnose, glanced up and narrowed her eyes. Cherryfall paused in sharing tongues with

Lilyheart, sniffing as Ivypool nodded to Sunbeam.

"Are you ready?" the ThunderClan deputy asked.

Sunbeam scrambled to her paws. "For my trial?"

"Yes." Ivypool looked up at Squirrelstar. The ThunderClan leader was sharing a rabbit with Brambleclaw on the Highledge. When Squirrelstar dipped her head approvingly, Ivypool turned back to Sunbeam. "Are you still sure you wish to join ThunderClan?" she asked.

"Yes." Sunbeam didn't hesitate.

Dewnose and Plumstone exchanged glances.

"Even if Nightheart doesn't come home?" Dewnose asked.

Sunbeam lifted her chin. "He *is* coming home, and I'm going to wait for him."

Plumstone sniffed. "But Nightheart's the only reason you're joining, right?"

"What's wrong with that?" Sparkpelt got to her paws. "That's why the Clans changed the warrior code, remember?" she mewed sharply.

"Any cat can switch Clans to be with their mate," Lionblaze chimed.

Sunbeam blinked at him gratefully.

"But her mate's not here," Plumstone pointed out.

"This is only Sunbeam's second trial." Ivypool swished her tail. "Nothing will be decided yet. But when we do decide, if Sunbeam wants to go through with joining ThunderClan, then we'll support her."

"We should be thankful to have an extra warrior," Sparkpelt mewed. "And it means ShadowClan will have one less."

"Can I start?" Sunbeam looked imploringly at Ivypool. The idea that her decision would weaken her former Clan made her uneasy. "What do you want me to do?"

Ivypool nodded to the very top of the cliff encircling the hollow. "Do you see that stone?"

Sunbeam looked up. Even from here, she could see a large stone jutting over the edge. "Yes."

"It's dangerous," Ivypool mewed. "A hard frost might crack the rock beneath it, and it could fall."

Sunbeam blinked. Did Ivypool want her to move it? *Alone*? The stone was huge. It would be impossible.

"I want you to push it back from the edge," Ivypool told her. "A few tail-lengths will do."

"But—" Sunbeam began to object, but Ivypool went on.

"Cherryfall, Bayshine, and Alderheart will help you." The ThunderClan deputy nodded to the three cats.

"Great!" Bayshine snatched another bite of the squirrel he'd been eating before scrambling to his paws.

Alderheart padded from the medicine den, swishing his tail enthusiastically. "It's about time we did something about that rock."

Cherryfall didn't speak, but crossed to the entrance and waited there, her tail flicking.

"Good luck," Ivypool told Sunbeam. "Although I'm sure you won't need it."

"You'll do fine," Sparkpelt mewed.

Sunbeam glanced at the stone looming far above the camp. She narrowed her eyes against the dazzling sun, then ran her gaze over the sheer cliff face and back down into the hollow. She'd barely noticed the rock before, but now that Ivypool had pointed it out, she sensed it hanging perilously over the camp; its shadow seemed to reach across the clearing like a massive paw darkening the smooth, well-trodden earth. If it fell, it could smash the Highledge, or crush a den, or maybe two. Her paws pricked nervously. What if she made a mistake? What if she ordered the patrol to push it just a nose-length out of place and sent it crashing down into the camp? She pushed away the thought. *I can do this*, she told herself. But how?

"Any ideas?" Bayshine was blinking at her eagerly.

"Let's climb up and have a look." Sunbeam wasn't even sure how to get to the top of the cliff. She hadn't explored that part of ThunderClan territory yet. Was there a trail there? *Do we climb up*? But Cherryfall was still waiting at the camp entrance, so there had to be a path. Sunbeam led Bayshine and Alderheart across the clearing, relieved that the rest of the Clan had returned to their meals. All she had to do was avoid crushing them with a rock as they ate and everything would be fine.

Cherryfall had already ducked through the thorn tunnel by the time Sunbeam, Alderheart, and Bayshine reached it. She was clearly eager to get this over with. Sunbeam was relieved. *She can show me the way to the top.* She let the ginger she-cat lead the patrol through the forest to a steep trail and followed her up it.

"I don't know how we'll even get our paws around such a big rock," Bayshine mewed.

"That's why Ivypool chose it," Alderheart guessed. "It's a trial, after all."

Sunbeam was thinking. Four cats could probably shift it if they worked together, but it was overhanging the edge of the cliff. One wrong push and it might tip over.

At the top, the forest opened onto a sunny stretch of scrub. Sunbeam saw the rock at the edge and padded toward it. Anxiety fluttered in her belly. It was even bigger than she'd imagined, almost the size of a badger. It was round, so it might easily roll if they unbalanced it too much. As she crouched beside it and peered underneath, checking to see how much of it jutted over the edge, Bayshine padded around the other side and rested his forepaw on it.

"Careful," Alderheart warned.

"It's not going to move that easily." Bayshine gave it a shove. The rock didn't budge.

Sunbeam felt a flash of panic. Had Ivypool set her an impossible task?

Cherryfall was hanging back, her head tipped to one side. "I think we should tell the Clan to leave the camp and just push it over the edge."

Sunbeam shook her head. "We don't know where it would land," she pointed out. "It might crush one of the dens."

Alderheart was frowning. "It's too smooth to grab hold of," he mewed. "So we can't pull it backward."

Sunbeam examined the rounded base of the rock. "We could roll it sideways," she suggested.

"What good will that do?" Cherryfall mewed. "We're supposed to be dragging it away from camp, not rolling it along the edge."

Bayshine was scanning the trees. "We could roll it *onto* something," he suggested.

"But it would still be at the edge," Cherryfall argued.

But Bayshine hadn't finished. "We could roll it onto to something we can grab hold of," he mewed.

Sunbeam understood at once. "Like a piece of bark," she mewed excitedly. "Something we can dig our claws into."

"Yes." Bayshine headed for the trees. "Let's look for a piece. It has to be big enough to hold the stone and get our claws into."

Alderheart hurried after him.

"That seems a bit complicated," Cherryfall mewed.

"But it's the only way of moving it," Sunbeam argued.

"I still think pushing it over the edge would be quickest," Cherryfall huffed.

Bayshine and Alderheart were already scouting the slope, searching among the trees for a piece of bark. Sunbeam headed toward a large chestnut tree. She could see that its bark was strong and thick. It might have shed a piece large enough to use.

Cherryfall was still at the top of the slope, circling a birch halfheartedly. "What about this?" she mewed.

"Birch bark isn't thick enough," Bayshine called to her.

"This is a waste of time," Cherryfall sniffed. "How are we going to find a piece strong enough to move a rock? Why don't I just go down to the camp and tell every cat to wait outside until we've pushed it over the edge?"

"Let's look for a bit longer." Sunbeam began to rummage through the fallen leaves around the chestnut, hoping to uncover the right piece of bark.

"Is this large enough?" Alderheart called.

Sunbeam's heart quickened as he hooked a wide piece of oak bark with his claws and held it up for the others to look at.

"It smells a bit musty," Bayshine mewed doubtfully.

"It's half-rotten," Cherryfall snorted. "The rock will crush it to pieces."

Sunbeam could see shards peeling away from the oak bark and reluctantly had to agree. "I don't think it's tough enough," she told Alderheart.

"What about this piece?" Bayshine was sniffing a long piece of elm bark a few tail-lengths away.

"It'll snap in two the moment you move it," Cherryfall mewed.

Sunbeam swallowed back irritation. Cherryfall hadn't even looked at it closely. She hurried to examine Bayshine's find, disappointed when she saw that the bark was thin, with a crack already opening at one end. Cherryfall was right.

"We could be here all day looking for the right piece," Cherryfall mewed.

Sunbeam turned on her. "Not if we stop talking and start looking!"

Cherryfall's eyes widened. "How dare you talk to a senior warrior like that?"

Sunbeam held her ground. "Ivypool asked you to help me," she snapped. "Stop finding problems and find a solution!"

"I've already given you one," Cherryfall told her. "Push the rock into the hollow."

"What if it crushes the nursery or the elders' den?" Sunbeam demanded. "Or *any* of the dens? How long would it take to rebuild them? The nights are only getting colder and the other dens are already crowded. Where will everyone sleep while we're building a new one?"

"If we push it right, it'll land in the clearing." Cherryfall refused to back down. "Then we can roll it out of the way."

Sunbeam felt fury swelling in her chest. "And if we push it wrong and it hits the Highledge or the side of the cliff and smashes, then what? Do we spend a moon searching the camp for every shard of stone?" She could hear her mew rise in anger. She mustn't yowl. But she wasn't going to let this rock harm a single ThunderClan cat. "Do you know how sharp a sliver of rock can be? What if we don't find them all and a kit treads on one? Or an elder? What kind of warrior would—" She forced herself to stop before she said something she'd regret.

Cherryfall's hackles were twitching. "You're just inventing problems now."

"I'm not inventing anything," Sunbeam snapped. "Your solution is like knocking down a tree to catch a bird. We need to move this rock carefully. We need to use our brains as well as our paws."

Cherryfall's ears flattened. "When I was a young warrior, I respected my elders," she growled. "But I suppose it's different in

ShadowClan. They've always had trouble with their young cats. Who was it who pushed Rowanstar out and brought in Darktail? Not the *senior* warriors."

"That had nothing to do with me! I wasn't even born then!" Sunbeam's claws itched. She wanted to rake this old she-cat across the muzzle. "ShadowClan cats are just like any other cats." *Except they're not arrogant and bossy and convinced they're better than everyone else.* She swallowed back the words and tried to steady her breath.

"Don't be difficult, Cherryfall." Bayshine padded to the ginger warrior's side. "Sunbeam's leading this patrol, remember? It's *her* trial, not yours."

"If she wants us to help, she needs to learn to be a bit more polite." Cherryfall looked away, her pelt ruffling.

"I'm sorry." Sunbeam forced herself to sound contrite. "I really need your help, and I know pushing the rock over the edge would be quick, but I don't want to damage the camp."

"She's right." Alderheart blinked calmly at Cherryfall. "I agree that it might take a while to find the right piece of bark. But it's the best idea."

Cherryfall grunted. "I guess I'm outnumbered."

"I guess you are." Bayshine whisked his tail. "Let's keep looking," he told the others. "I'm sure we'll find one before too long."

Sunbeam headed back to the chestnut. Should she have challenged such a senior warrior? What if Cherryfall reported her to Ivypool and Squirrelstar? Would it harm her chances of joining ThunderClan? And yet she was glad she'd stood up for herself. She just wished she didn't feel she'd made an enemy in Nightheart's Clan. Especially while he was away for StarClan only knew how long. Her heart felt heavy as she began rifling through the chestnut leaves once more.

"What about this one?" Bayshine's mew made her turn. He was pacing excitedly beside a sycamore further down the slope. She hurried toward him and saw, lying on the ground next to him, a wide, smooth piece of bark that must have peeled from the trunk recently. There was no musty scent and no splits or cracks. And there were twigs poking out from underneath. She lifted one end and examined

it, delighted to see that the twigs were still firmly attached. "We can use these to pull it," she mewed.

"Come on." Bayshine hooked his claws into the bark and began dragging it up the slope.

Alderheart began to nudge it from behind. Sunbeam joined him, and together they guided it between the trees.

At the top, Sunbeam cleared away the grit and dirt from one side of the rock. "Put it here." She helped them guide the bark into place beside the stone, tucking it beneath one of its rounded corners.

Cherryfall hung back as Sunbeam, Alderheart, and Bayshine lined up along the rock and pressed their forepaws against it.

"Come on," Bayshine called to her. "We need your help."

Scowling, Cherryfall joined them.

Sunbeam glanced down the cliff, her pelt twitching nervously as she saw the long drop into the camp below. ThunderClan was still eating. Occasionally, one of them would glance up before returning to their meal. *We can do this*. She took a breath and focused on the rock. "Ready?"

"Ready." Bayshine's flank was brushing hers. She felt his muscles tense as he began to push. Gritting her teeth, she heaved. The rock shifted a little, and she pushed harder, straining until she felt it begin to move. Grit showered down into the camp.

"Sorry!" she called, her mew echoing around the hollow. From the corner of her eye, she saw the ThunderClan cats edging away from the clearing. The stone was starting to roll. She could feel it slide from her paws as it began to tip onto its side. "Slowly," she puffed, sliding her paws higher to steady its roll. She didn't want it tumbling out of control. Her hind claws scraped on the ground as she tried to control the wobble, and then suddenly the stone rolled over and thumped onto the bark. It rocked for a moment, then fell still.

Sunbeam felt a rush of relief. Cherryfall padded away and looked at their work. Alderheart and Bayshine were purring with delight. Sunbeam ducked around the rock, relieved that the most dangerous part of the trial was over. But now they needed to drag it away from the edge. It would be harder than rolling it, but if they worked together, they could do it. She crouched and grabbed one of the twigs between her teeth. Bayshine pressed in beside her and

grabbed another. Alderheart clamped his jaws around a third twig, and Cherryfall curled her claws into the bark.

"Pull!" Sunbeam ordered through gritted teeth. She heaved with all her strength, feeling her body tremble with the effort. Bayshine pulled. Alderheart tugged. Even Cherryfall strained so hard Sunbeam could see her tail quivering. Slowly, the rock began to move. They kept pulling, dragging it farther and farther until at last they had shifted it three tail-lengths from the edge of the cliff.

Sunbeam's jaws ached. She let go with a grunt of satisfaction and collapsed onto her belly.

"Good work!" Ivypool's mew took her by surprise. As Alderheart, Bayshine, and Cherryfall caught their breath, she saw the ThunderClan deputy padding from the trees. "Congratulations," Ivypool mewed. "You've passed your second trial."

"And made the camp a bit safer," Alderheart added, shaking out his fur.

"It was Bayshine's idea to roll it onto something," Sunbeam told Ivypool.

"But you thought of the bark," Bayshine mewed.

"It sounds like it was a team effort." Ivypool looked pleased.

Cherryfall flicked her tail. "*Some* of the team weren't listened to," she mewed sourly. She turned away and stomped down the slope.

Ivypool watched her go. "I'm guessing you didn't like Cherryfall's idea," she mewed.

"I just thought Bayshine's was safer." Sunbeam shifted her paws. "I think I might have upset her."

"You'll never be able to please every cat," Ivypool mewed. "The most important thing was finishing the task, and you did that. You chose the idea that worked even if it meant ruffling a little fur."

Sunbeam felt a flash of pride. Ivypool was pleased with her. Then she remembered the dirt showering into the camp. "Sorry about the grit."

"No one minds a bit of grit as long as we're safe." Ivypool padded around the rock looking impressed. "It's even bigger than I remember."

Bayshine glanced toward the camp. "Can I go and finish my squirrel now?"

"Go ahead." Ivypool waved him away with her tail.

Alderheart was already heading down the slope. "Nice job, Sunbeam," he called over his shoulder. "And congratulations on passing the trial."

"You did really well." Ivypool blinked at Sunbeam warmly.

"Thanks." She looked around at the ThunderClan cats. Alderheart was padding away, his tail swishing. Bayshine was heading after him, his head high. Ivypool was purring, her silver-and-white pelt fluffed out happily. They were pleased she had passed the trial. But there was one cat missing. A cat Sunbeam wished more than anything were here. *Nightheart*. She'd taken a step closer to becoming a ThunderClan warrior, but once again she'd done it without him. She kept telling every cat he was coming home and that she'd wait for him. But what if he didn't? Did she really want to be a ThunderClan warrior if Nightheart never came back?

Bayshine paused at the edge of the trees. "Are you coming?" he called to Sunbeam. "You can help me eat my squirrel."

Sunbeam blinked away her anxiety, grateful to have such a good friend. "I'm coming." These cats were kind and supportive, and they liked her. *I guess, even without Nightheart, life in ThunderClan isn't bad.*



Chapter 16



Frostpaw felt as though a star were sparkling in her heart. The salmon tree seemed to shine with a light of its own. She stopped, breathless, and stared at it, caught up in its beauty. Beneath it, bathed in the same rosy light, she could see Riverstar. He was gazing at her, his eyes filled with warmth. *He's proud of me.* She purred. With his help, she'd come to the end of her journey.

"Frostpaw?" Nightheart shifted beside her, and Riverstar disappeared.

But happiness still fizzed in Frostpaw's heart. "This is it!" She turned to Nightheart. "This is the place we've been looking for." Why was he looking so worried? *Can't he see the salmon tree?* It was right in front of him. But his gaze wasn't on the tree. He was looking nervously below it. Frostpaw suddenly realized there were cats staring at them, their eyes sharp with curiosity.

"We should back off," Nightheart whispered. "This is their territory."

"But Riverstar said there would be cats here who would help us," she reminded him.

"He didn't say *which* cats." He was edging slowly away, his tail down. "And *these* cats don't look like they want us here."

"But they must—" As Frostpaw spoke one of the cats gave a warning hiss.

"Let's back off for now," Nightheart mewed quietly. "We'll just watch them for a while, until they get used to us." He edged away slowly and she followed, frustrated. She hoped the cats would accept them soon. She ducked after him behind a bush.

Her belly growled with hunger. "Should we hunt?" she whispered.

"No." Nightheart didn't take his eyes from the cats. "The prey here belongs to them."

"But they're not hunting," she pointed out.

"*She* is." Nightheart nodded to a small black she-cat who was stalking along a line of bushes. Her ears were flat, and Frostpaw could see her nose twitching. Her tail skimmed the earth as skillfully as a warrior's. Suddenly she lunged, disappearing under the

branches. There was a high-pitched shriek, and a moment later the she-cat emerged, her eyes shining, a large rat dangling from her jaws.

She carried it back to the others, who had settled now and seemed to have forgotten that Frostpaw and Nightheart were there. A long-haired tabby was washing his belly. A young marbled gray-and-brown tabby tom was playing with a sprig of moss, tossing it between his forepaws and scampering after it when it flitted away. A ginger queen was sprawled on the grass beside the pink tree. By the look of her bulging belly, she was close to kitting. A handsome white tom was crouching near, his eyes closed, dozing, while nearby two toms shared tongues and a gray-and-white queen washed her two kits.

The black she-cat dropped her rat as she reached them, but the other cats didn't even look at it, and she began to eat alone. Perhaps they knew she wouldn't share it. Perhaps they'd already hunted and eaten.

"Who do you think the leader is?" she asked Nightheart, who'd settled onto his belly to watch.

"I can't tell."

The cats were talking—too far away for her to hear. They seemed to be at once indifferent to each other and yet attentive, hearing each other out and responding politely with a nod of the head or a blink.

Frostpaw noticed that the ginger queen was wearing a ragged collar, its color faded. So was the white tom. Did they use to be kittypets? The rest looked more like loners, a little skinny but with neat, well-groomed pelts. One or two of them had ragged ears and a hawkish look that made her wonder if they might once have been rogues.

Seeing them so relaxed in each other's company made Frostpaw feel a sudden longing for home. It seemed like moons since she'd felt happy and safe in the RiverClan camp, and with a pang of sorrow she wondered whether RiverClan would ever feel like home again.

She settled onto her belly, suddenly weary after the long day's walking.

"Sleep, if you're tired," Nightheart mewed softly. "I'll keep watch."

"Thanks." She blinked at him gratefully. For now, he was her Clan. "Wake me at moonhigh. I'll take the watch and you can get some rest." She closed her eyes, and what seemed like a moment later, Nightheart was nudging her awake.

She struggled into consciousness, befuddled by sleep. She'd been dreaming—a jumbled nightmare where ShadowClan and RiverClan were hunting her down, their eyes gleaming like hungry foxes, united in chasing her along the riverbank as she fought her way through reed beds, dragging her paws through sucking mud.

She shuddered and sat up. The salmon tree was still bathed in rosy light. The moon hung high in the star-specked sky. "I'm awake." She looked blearily at Nightheart. "I'll take the next watch."

But he was sitting stiffly, staring out across the grass. "Something's happening." He nodded toward the open stretch of stone near the tree. A monster was standing there, its eyes lighting up the grass and bushes, its hindquarters pulled open, a Twoleg reaching inside.

Frostpaw's ears twitched in alarm as the Twoleg continued to rummage inside the monster. "What's it doing?"

"I don't know," Nightheart answered. "But they're not scared of it."

The cats hadn't run away. Instead they seemed excited, greeting the Twoleg, meowing eagerly as though it was an old friend. The ginger she-cat was winding around its legs and let it lean down and run its paw along her spine. Then the Twoleg straightened, turned, and reached into the van and dragged out a large, square shape.

It dropped the shape on the ground and the cats instantly swarmed around it, meowing excitedly. Frostpaw's nose twitched. *Fish!* Her mouth began to water as she watched the cats begin to jostle the Twoleg, almost tripping it as they wound more eagerly around its legs.

The Twoleg was scooping out pieces of fish and dropping them on the ground. Frostpaw could see heads and tail and guts scattered among the lumps of flesh, smelling so tasty her belly growled hungrily.

She wanted to run out and grab a piece of fish for herself. She blinked at Nightheart. "Do you think they'd share?"

“Wait until they’ve finished eating,” he mewed. “Once their bellies are full, they’ll be easier to approach.”

Her tail drooped. “But there might not be any left.”

“If these *are* the cats Riverstar meant, we need to speak to them. And they’re more likely to listen if we don’t try to steal their food.”

Frostpaw knew he was right. She remembered what had happened when she’d tried to steal fish from the otters. She tucked her paws tightly under her and watched as the cats gobbled down the fish pieces. Only the black she-cat didn’t join in. She’d finished her rat and was watching from a safe distance as the Twoleg closed the back of the monster with a slam and climbed inside its head. The monster began to growl, then slowly rumbled away, leaving the cats to finish their meal.

The black she-cat watched it go, not moving from her spot in the shadows, not even flinching when the light from the monster’s eyes swept over her as it rolled past. Frostpaw couldn’t understand why she wasn’t scared, or why she’d turned her nose up at fish, especially fish she didn’t have to catch herself. “I wonder why the black cat doesn’t eat with them.”

Nightheart grunted. “I guess she has some pride.”

Frostpaw blinked at him. She wasn’t convinced pride was worth going hungry for. “Would you eat Twoleg food if you had no choice?” she asked.

His eyes suddenly shone wistfully. “I ate Twoleg food with Sunbeam once,” he confessed. “We were in a strange Twolegplace, crowded with Twolegs and monsters covered in lights, where the air seemed to thump with noise.”

Her eyes widened. “That sounds terrifying.”

“I guess it was.” But he didn’t look terrified. He looked happy. “Sunbeam and I stole some of their food.” He licked his lips, “It was delicious, and I knew then how brave and smart Sunbeam was.”

Frostpaw nudged him. “You fell in love over Twoleg food?” she teased.

“It wasn’t quite that simple, but . . .” His gaze suddenly darkened. “I miss her so much,” he mewed. “I can’t believe I left her to face the trials alone.”

"She'll be okay," Frostpaw comforted him. "She's brave and smart, remember?"

"What if she changes her mind because I'm not there?" Nightheart was staring blindly now at the cats around the salmon tree. His thoughts were clearly back at the lake. "What if she goes back to ShadowClan? What if ThunderClan *sends* her back? After all, they only let her join to be with me. But if I'm not there . . ." His mew trailed into silence.

Frostpaw felt a flash of guilt for taking him away from Sunbeam. But it wasn't her fault. It was StarClan's. They'd sent Nightheart to help her. She lifted her chin. She was going to make this journey count. She was going to learn whatever it was Riverstar wanted her to learn. "Even if she does go back to ShadowClan, she won't stay there once you're home."

"Do you think so?" Nightheart's eyes glittered doubtfully. "She might never trust me again."

"Of course she will."

Nightheart loved Sunbeam so much. Frostpaw felt a twinge of sadness. She'd once loved Splashtail like that. *And now?* Did she *still* love him? She pushed the thought away. She had to focus on finding out why Riverstar had sent her here. The cats had finished eating and were sitting up, licking their lips happily. Their bellies must be full now. "Should we try to talk to them?"

"Okay." Nightheart shook out his pelt. "But if they turn hostile, run. I'll deal with them." He led the way across the stone, his tail high, his hackles smooth. "Look friendly," he told her.

The long-haired tabby got to his paws as they neared, his eyes sparkling with curiosity, and faced them. Frostpaw could see now the white hairs around his muzzle. He was an elder. She dipped her head respectfully. "Sorry to disturb you," she mewed.

"Can we talk?" Nightheart asked.

The tabby narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

Nightheart looked at Frostpaw expectantly. Did he want her to explain?

Her mouth grew dry. The gray-and-white queen had nosed her kits behind her. The white tom had padded closer to the ginger she-cat, his gaze flitting warily over Frostpaw and Nightheart. The black

hunter hadn't moved but watched from the shadows while a young gray tom circled them, his tail flicking. Frostpaw suddenly realized she hadn't planned what to say. Would they understand that her ancestors had sent her and that there was something she needed to learn here? Surely visions of dead cats wouldn't make sense to a bunch of rogues.

"We were sent here," she mewed. "We . . . I . . . I had . . ." She stared at the cats, searching for the right words.

Nightheart cut in. "We've come a long way," he mewed. "From our home beside the lake. We're warriors, and I think we need to talk to you."

"You *think* you need to talk to us?" The tabby looked puzzled.

The young gray tom narrowed his eyes. "How did you know about us?"

"What do you want from us?" The black she-cat's eyes glittered suspiciously.

"Take it easy, Rook." The long-haired tabby shot a quelling glance at her. "Let's hear what they have to say."

"Where's the lake?" The gray-and-brown tom padded closer. His ears were pricked and his eyes sparkled with interest. "And what are 'warriors'? Why do you want to talk to *us*? We're just park cats. No one's ever *wanted* to talk to us before."

Frostpaw shifted nervously, overwhelmed by so many questions. "The lake's where we live," she began. "And warriors are . . ." She didn't know how to explain. "We came to find you because Riverstar told us to."

"Who's Riverstar?" The gray-and-brown tom looked puzzled, but the long-haired tabby was staring at Frostpaw, his eyes wide.

"Did you hear that?" He glanced at Rook. "They know about Riverstar."

Rook padded toward Frostpaw, her pelt ruffling. "How do you know of him?"

Frostpaw found herself backing away. Rook's eyes were glittering. *Did I say something wrong?*

The black she-cat thrust her muzzle close. "Is he alive?" she asked. "According to the stories I've heard, he has special powers. In

the battle he helped the park cats win, he died and came back to life!"

Hmm, Frostpaw mused as Nightheart pushed between them. So *Riverstar came here. Is that why he led us here?* And if this cat was to be believed, he'd lost a life in some kind of battle? Still, Nightheart looked like he didn't like this stranger getting so close. "Back off," he told Rook sharply.

"You're scaring them." The young gray tom nudged her away.

Rook stared at him. "But they know Riverstar!" Frostpaw was touched by the excitement in the black she-cat's voice. "Where is he? Has he come with you?"

"I—he isn't here," Frostpaw stammered. She wondered how she would break the news that Riverstar wasn't immortal, and had died long ago. Did they know about StarClan too?

The tabby elder dipped his head. "It seems we have something in common," he mewed. "But, before we talk, let me introduce everyone." He nodded to Rook. "This is Rook." His gaze flicked toward the young gray tom. "And this is Bee."

"I'm Waffle," the gray-and-brown tom told them. "And that's Firefly." He nodded toward the ginger she-cat and then the white tom. "And that's Chalk."

Chalk dipped his head politely.

"I'm Marlow." A scrawny ginger tom padded forward. "This is Wasp." He beckoned a brown tom closer, then nodded to a sleek tortoiseshell Frostpaw hadn't noticed before. "That's Molly." Then he looked at the gray-and-white queen. "And that's Lark and her kits, Weevil and Peg."

Frostpaw nodded to them all, one by one, trying to focus on remembering their names, but all she could think was, *They've heard of Riverstar*. Her heart was pounding.

Nightheart dipped his head to the elder. "What's *your* name?"

The elder purred and whisked his tail. "I'm Scruff."

"I'm Nightheart," he told him. "And she's Frostpaw."

"Enough with names!" Rook shifted impatiently. "How do you know *Riverstar*?"

"How do *you* know Riverstar?" Frostpaw stared back at her. It was the last thing she'd expected. "I gather that he was here

once . . . for a battle? But please, explain to me how it happened.”

Scruff answered. “Riverstar was a park cat long before us,” he mewed. “In another park near here, before Twolegs demolished it.” The old tom sat down, and his parkmates padded closer. “He had to leave and traveled a long way downriver. While he was gone, the other cats whose home had been destroyed had to live wild in the forest. Then rogues came and terrorized them until they were half-starved and nearly frightened and bullied to death. Then one of them made the journey downriver to find Riverstar, to ask him for help.”

Frostpaw listened, amazed. She’d never heard this story. There were nursery tales about Riverstar founding RiverClan, but she didn’t realize he’d once lived in a place like this. She looked around the park, wondering how cats could survive in such a strange, unnatural place.

Scruff went on. “Riverstar came back and chased the rogues away. He told the park cats that he was a leader now, in something called the Clans, and that he couldn’t be killed. The park cats thought he’d come back for good. But he went home, and the cats he left behind eventually found a new park, bigger and safer than the old one.” He looked at his parkmates. “And we’re still here.”

Couldn’t be killed . . . I’m guessing the idea of a leader’s nine lives wouldn’t quite make sense to this crew, Frostpaw mused. “How long ago did this happen?” she asked. *And how are you still talking about it?* she added silently.

Scruff’s whiskers twitched with amusement. “Oh, long before I was born.”

“Our mothers told us the story,” Rook told her.

“And they heard it from their mothers,” Firefly added.

“Who heard it from their mothers,” Chalk mewed.

Lark curled her tail around Weevil and Peg. “We thought it was a myth.”

“You said it was true.” Peg looked accusingly at her mother.

“I *hoped* it was true,” Lark told her. “But . . . come on! A cat who can’t be killed?”

“We all hoped it was true,” Scruff mewed.

“Is it?” Rook searched Frostpaw’s gaze.

Frostpaw looked back at her. "That Riverstar came here? I don't know," she mewed. "It's not a story I've ever heard. But Riverstar is real. He was the first leader of my Clan, RiverClan. All leaders are given nine lives from StarClan . . . it doesn't exactly mean they can't be killed, but that explains what he was seen to do in battle. I can imagine him going back to save his old friends from rogues. Before he settled down in RiverClan."

"RiverClan?" Bee asked eagerly. "So that's the one he left the park for. And you come from there?"

"Yes." Frostpaw felt a glow of pride.

Waffle's eyes had widened excitedly. "So, earlier, you called yourselves warriors." He didn't give Frostpaw chance to answer. "Is that what cats in RiverClan are called? It sounds exciting. Could we become warriors?"

Nightheart purred. "You'd have to catch your own food."

"All the time?" Waffle looked shocked.

"Yes." Nightheart seemed amused. "And you'd have to train and learn hunting skills and fighting skills before you got your warrior name."

"Is Nightheart your warrior name?" Waffle asked.

"Yes."

Waffle looked eagerly at Frostpaw. "And is Frostpaw yours?"

"It's my apprentice name," she explained. "All apprentices have *paw* in their name until they become warriors. Except I probably won't become a warrior. I'll become a medicine cat."

Waffle looked baffled and amazed all at once. "What's a medicine cat?"

"Can we save the warrior questions until later?" Rook pushed past him and stopped in front of Frostpaw. "Is Riverstar still alive?"

Frostpaw hesitated. She didn't want to disappoint these cats. "No," she mewed softly. "He had nine lives, as I said. But that doesn't mean he could live forever."

Rook frowned. "Then how did you speak to him?"

"He's a StarClan warrior."

"What does *that* mean?" Rook looked exasperated. "StarClan? Is that a Clan like RiverClan?"

“Well, sort of. When Clan cats die, they join StarClan,” Frostpaw explained. “Medicine cats can still share with them.”

“You can talk to dead cats?” Marlow looked doubtful.

“In visions,” she told him.

Bee tipped his head to one side. “Is that like meditation?” he asked.

Frostpaw glanced at him. “Meditation?” She’d never heard of it.

“All park cats meditate,” Scruff told her. “We look inside ourselves. It’s how we learn and grow. It helps us uncover our deepest thoughts.”

Frostpaw pricked her ears. Was this why Riverstar had sent her here? “Did park cats meditate in Riverstar’s time?”

Scruff nodded. “As far as I know,” he told her.

“And it helps you learn?” Excitement was swelling in Frostpaw’s chest. Was meditating how she would learn what she needed to know to fix RiverClan?

“It helps us find peace,” Scruff told her. “And if that means learning, then that’s what we do.”

Frostpaw looked at Nightheart. “I need to learn how to meditate,” she mewed. “I think that’s why we’re here.”

He blinked at her. “It might be something only park cats can do.”

Bee whisked his tail. “Any cat can meditate.”

“We can show you,” Waffle mewed.

“Now?” Frostpaw looked at her. The moon was still high. “Don’t you need to sleep?”

“We’ll sleep tomorrow,” Waffle told her.

“When the park’s full of Twolegs,” Bee chimed in.

“Come on.” Waffle had already ducked under the salmon tree and was heading across the grass.

Bee blinked at Frostpaw expectantly. “Do you really want to learn?”

“Yes, please.”

Bee looked delighted. “Follow us.” He headed away, and Frostpaw hurried after him. “We usually meditate beside the river,” he told her, leaping after Waffle onto a low wall.

“There’s a river here?” Frostpaw jumped up after him, her tail quivering with excitement. She might finally get a fish, and not a

Twoleg one.

Ahead, a river was sparkling in the moonlight. Her heart leaped. She'd come all this way only to find a piece of home.

"I'm coming with you." Nightheart was bounding across the grass. His pelt was prickling uneasily. Was he worried about leaving her alone with these cats?

As Frostpaw dropped onto the grass sprouting on the far side of the wall, Nightheart landed beside her. "Do you really think this is what Riverstar wants you to do?"

"Yes." She fluffed out her fur, leaped down onto the riverbank, and followed Bee and Waffle to the water's edge. Waffle had already sat down, his tail curled neatly over his paws.

"Make yourself comfortable," Bee told Frostpaw. "You'll be here a while."

"Does meditating take long?" Nightheart asked.

"It depends." Bee sat down beside Waffle. "Scruff says real meditation takes a lifetime."

"We don't have a lifetime." Nightheart's eyes gleamed anxiously.

Frostpaw looked into the water swishing past her paws. It was clear and shallow, the pebbly riverbed showing beneath the surface. She hoped to see fish—she was still hungry. But Bee beckoned her closer, and she sat down obediently beside Waffle.

"Close your eyes," he told her. "Focus on your breathing. Slow it down and feel it flowing into your body."

Frostpaw followed his instructions, surprised to feel herself relax.

"Now let your thoughts flow with the river," Bee mewed. "Don't try to hold on to them. Let them come and go like passing fish."

Frostpaw listened to the river, aware of her breath moving slowly in and out, and let her thoughts tumble away downstream. She could hear Nightheart moving through the grass farther along the shore, then padding back to join her. Finally, he grew still. Was he watching? Was he meditating? She wanted to open her eyes and look, but she forced herself to let go of the thoughts as Bee had told her and listen once more to the river.

She lost track of time and wondered for a moment if she'd fallen asleep. Weariness was pulling at her, and she felt her head nod once, then twice, before she refocused on the river. Her thoughts

chattered past, and as she tried not to hold on to them, she felt herself slipping into a deeper relaxation. She had no idea how long she'd been sitting there when she opened her eyes into the dark chilly night.

She stiffened, her breath catching. Riverstar was standing on the far shore, his silver pelt gleaming in the moonlight as he gazed at her.

"We found the tree and the cats," she told him eagerly.

"I can see," he mewed.

"Am I in the right place?" she asked. "Am I meant to learn to meditate? Is that why I'm here?"

"Yes." He nodded. "More importantly," he mewed, "you must let Nightheart and these cats support you."

"They're already supporting me." Nightheart had traveled with her all this way, and the park cats were teaching her to meditate.

"I mean *really* support you," Riverstar mewed. "You must trust them to take care of you when you can't take care of yourself." His gaze grew solemn. "Meditation can show us things that are difficult to know," he told her. "It can stir up powerful emotions. You mustn't let them consume you. RiverClan needs you to stay strong. And that means you must accept help when you need it."

"Are you awake?" Nightheart's mew cut into Frostpaw's dream.

She blinked open her eyes. Dawn was lighting the river. She scanned the other bank. It was deserted. Bee and Waffle were gone too. She glanced at the flattened grass where they'd been sitting. "When did they leave?"

"A while ago," Nightheart mewed.

"You must be tired." If he'd been keeping watch over her, he hadn't slept all night.

"I can sleep later," he told her. He was looking at her curiously. "What was the meditation like?"

She hesitated, thinking for moment. "I think it might be useful," she mewed. "But it's going to take a while to explore."

Nightheart shifted uneasily. "How long?"

Frostpaw suspected she'd only stirred the surface of her thoughts. She would need to dive deeper to reach the knowledge Riverstar wanted her to find. "Half a moon, maybe?"

Nightheart's face fell. "Are you sure?"

She knew at once what he was thinking. He wanted to go home. He needed to get back to Sunbeam and find out if she was still with ThunderClan and explain where he'd been. "I'm sorry," she mewed softly. "I'll be as quick as I can."

"No." He shook his head. "We came all this way. You need to do it properly."

She blinked at him gratefully. She could see how staying here pained him. But he'd do it without complaining. She understood him well enough now to know that. "Thank you," she mewed, and closed her eyes again. She'd thought the park had been the end of her journey, but now she knew it was just the beginning. She needed to reach further into her thoughts. She had to start to think about something that had been lurking at the back of her mind since she'd been attacked. Until now, she'd never dared face it. But with meditation she felt she could begin to uncover a thought that could hurt her more deeply than anything ever had.

She needed to think about the cat who'd tried to murder her.

In the quarter moon since they'd arrived, the weather had grown colder. As Frostpaw rose from a deep meditation and opened her eyes, the shock of the cold took her by surprise. She fluffed out her fur, shivering.

"Here." Bee's mew made her turn. "I saved this for you." The young tom was pushing a fish head toward her. "It might help you warm up," he mewed. "You've been meditating since moonhigh."

"Thanks." Frostpaw looked up and saw dawn lighting a pale blue sky. It seemed only a few moments since she had closed her eyes. But she felt unsettled.

Bee seemed to read the restlessness in her eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Frostpaw took a nibble of the fish head, then shook her head. "I'll be fine."

The ends of Bee's whiskers quirked in amusement. "You don't *seem* fine," he said warmly. "You seem frustrated, perhaps. Which is a perfectly normal way to feel after meditation, by the way."

Frostpaw looked up at him. "Really?" she asked curiously. "I thought meditation was supposed to relax you, to help you see the deepest truths."

"It can," Bee replied, sitting up straight and flicking the end of his tail. "Sometimes. And sometimes it can feel like trying to find a pebble at the bottom of the river. You get closer and closer, but you just can't get to it, and you keep running out of air."

Yes! Frostpaw thought, relief flooding through her pelt. *Exactly!* "That *is* how I feel! So I'm not doing it wrong?" she asked hopefully.

"Certainly not. Is there something you're trying to learn?" Bee asked.

Frostpaw sighed. "Yes. And I feel like I'm getting *close*, but . . . " She shook her head.

Bee cocked his head. "Is it something important?"

"Very important," Frostpaw replied. "It's . . . well. My whole future—the whole future of my Clan—rests on it."

Bee stared at her, but his gaze didn't make her uncomfortable. His large green eyes were clear and warm, taking her in in a matter-of-fact way. "Perhaps you're trying too hard," he said finally.

"Too hard?" Frostpaw blurted, stunned. "I thought if I stayed alone with my own thoughts, if I meditated most of every day, I had to get closer to the truth."

"Maybe you're not ready," Bee mewed kindly. "If you aren't ready for the truth, no amount of meditation can reveal it to you."

Frostpaw felt her face get hot, and she looked away, out toward the river. *Not ready?* Of course finding out who'd tried to kill her would be upsetting, but she didn't know what else to do to ready herself. Nightheart wanted to get back to ThunderClan. Anything could be happening to RiverClan in the time they'd been gone. She pushed the fish head away with her paw. Suddenly she felt sick to her stomach.

Bee drew closer, and she felt his tail touch her spine. "It isn't you," he said softly. "There isn't anything wrong with you. You just have to be easier on yourself. For a quarter moon, you've eaten and slept and meditated here, barely allowing yourself any time to talk to the park cats or experience this new place. What if you took breaks now and then, and came and ate and played with us?"

"Played?" Frostpaw repeated. "In the Clans, only kits play."

"In the park, we play our whole lives," Bee mewed. "The Twolegs feed us, so there's little need to hunt. And we have no enemies but predators," he added.

Frostpaw wasn't sure what to say. "I barely remember *how* to play," she admitted.

"Perhaps if you found the kit inside you," Bee suggested, "she could help you face this terrible truth you are searching for."

"Frostpaw?"

Nightheart had been frolicking with a group of the park cats near the salmon-colored tree when Frostpaw approached, her joints stiff from days of disuse. He looked up at her with pleasant surprise. The park cats gathered around—Waffle, Wasp, and Molly—were more hesitant. Wasp eyed her curiously, then dipped his head. Waffle suddenly busied himself scratching his ear. Only Molly looked Frostpaw in the eye, then quickly down at her paws.

"Are you finished meditating?" Nightheart asked.

Frostpaw stopped and sat down a few tail-lengths away. "For now," she said.

Nightheart flicked an ear. "Are you . . . have you learned what you needed?" he asked, his voice tense. Frostpaw felt her pelt warm with sympathy. *There's no easy way to ask, "Have you figured out who tried to kill you?" He's still desperate to get back to ThunderClan . . . to Sunbeam.*

Frostpaw swished her tail. "I'm taking a break," she said. "I . . . well, I've barely gotten to talk to anybody. Bee has been very kind bringing me food and anything I need, but it seems like *you've* been having all the fun."

At those words, Wasp, Waffle, and Molly seemed to become more comfortable. Molly met her gaze and swished her own tail, her amber eyes warm. "Well," she said. "Join us, why don't you!"

"We're playing a game called find the shell," Waffle explained, parting his front paws to reveal a small mussel shell.

"It's not hard," Wasp went on, glancing at Frostpaw bashfully. "We just, well, chase whoever has the shell. When you catch them, you

can wrestle the shell away from them. And then everyone starts chasing you!”

Frostpaw twitched her whiskers, amused. “So, um, what’s *good* about having the shell?”

Nightheart suddenly reached out and batted the shell in her direction. “Why don’t you try it and find out!”

Frostpaw let out a startled mew and grabbed the shell in her jaws, then hared across the clearing to a scrubby collection of bushes. She could feel the others following right on her back paws. *What do I do?* It had been ages since she’d outrun Graykit and Mistkit when they played in the nursery. But her warrior training with Harelight had included how to outrun an enemy, and she used one of the tricks he’d taught her now, running around the bush, pausing briefly, and then, when her pursuers charged toward her, startling them by turning back in the direction they’d all come from.

“Hey!” Nightheart cried, sounding equally irritated and impressed. “Who taught a medicine cat those moves?”

You forget I was a warrior apprentice too! Frostpaw mused, but she couldn’t reply and hold on to the shell. She charged toward a tree, thinking that she might try to climb it. Nightheart, a ThunderClan cat, could surely follow her, but she was less sure about the park cats. But as Frostpaw drew closer, a familiar shape darted out from behind the tree—*Wasp!*

Frostpaw let out a cry of alarm. “How on earth did you get—”

But she’d dropped the shell. Suddenly a dark shadow spread over her from behind, and within seconds she was knocked to the ground, smothered in dark fur.

“*Aha!*” Nightheart yowled. “That’s called teamwork, Frostpaw! ThunderClan style!”

Frostpaw moaned, kicking Nightheart free as he scooped the shell into his own jaws. “Oh, are you ThunderClan this week?” she joked, getting back to her feet. “Weren’t you ShadowClan last week? I keep losing track.”

“Hey!” Nightheart cried. The shell dropped from his mouth, and Waffle suddenly dusted by in a flurry of fur and paws, scooping the shell into his own mouth and darting back toward the salmon-colored tree.

Frostpaw looked at Nightheart, expecting him to complain about her making him drop the shell. But instead he shook his head, watching her admiringly.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked. "We're Clan cats! If we team up, we can catch him and get that shell back. . . ."

Nightheart ran off in the direction of the salmon tree, and Frostpaw watched for only a moment before bolting after him.

She still didn't understand what the point of having the shell was. But she was feeling more like herself than she had in a long time. All at once she could remember what it felt like to be the Frostpaw she'd been before Mistystar's death, before the tragedy of her mother. Before she'd been tasked with finding a new leader, before RiverClan's destiny weighed on her shoulders.

She had been clever. Quick. Friendly. She had been able to let her guard down when she felt safe. She had been able to *feel* safe.

It felt good to remember that.

She knew this was only a brief respite, and that soon she would have to try meditating again. But still.

It felt good to remember that there had been a Frostpaw before RiverClan's problems had begun. And hopefully, she would find that cat again to guide RiverClan into its future.

A quarter moon later, Frostpaw blinked as she came out of meditation, her heart racing. *What is it?*

She realized she was holding a thought she'd reached during her meditation, hooking it up like a fish from the bottom of the river. The thought was a frightening one.

Bee was there, staring at her. There was a fish head at his paws. "Did something happen?" he asked. "Is it what you've been waiting for?"

"Yes," she mewed. "I think I finally know who it is."

"Who *what* is?"

Frostpaw looked at him squarely. "The cat who tried to kill me."

Bee startled and took a step back. "Is that . . . what you've been trying to learn?"

Frostpaw nodded.

Bee's eyes rounded in sympathy. "Is that what caused your wound?" He gestured to her neck with his tail.

"It was," Frostpaw admitted. As plainly as she could, she told Bee about the turmoil in RiverClan and why she'd come here. "I can see now that he's trying to take control of RiverClan," she told him. "And he's prepared to kill any cat to do it. Even me." The words were hard to say. "I loved him," she explained to Bee. "I thought he loved me." Her heart began to ache. "But he was willing to murder me to stop me giving him away." Bee was watching her closely. "It was—" She couldn't say it. *How could he have done something so awful?* She tried again. "It was Spla—" Her mouth grew dry. She didn't *want* to say it. She didn't want to make it true outside her own thoughts. But she had to. It was the only way she could move on.

She took a breath and forced herself to speak. "It was Splashtail." Saying his name out loud opened an ache in her heart that took her breath away.

She closed her eyes and saw again the vision her meditation had uncovered. It was a vision she'd been running from. A vision she'd never wanted to see—Splashtail prowling through the heather, tracking her across the moor as she hurried to find Whistlepaw. She saw him quickening his pace, moving silently over the earth, breaking into a run, gaining on her, unsheathing his claws and lunging from the bushes as she turned. She saw him slice open her throat and watch her fall. And then she saw satisfaction glitter in his eyes as he watched her lying in her own blood as it drained into the cold, black earth.

She opened her eyes.

Bee was staring at her, alarmed. "Did you suspect him?"

"I think I've always known," she confessed. "But I didn't dare admit it, even to myself."

Bee touched his tail-tip to her shoulders. "You've been very brave."

Her throat tightened. "You've helped me be brave," she told him. "I don't think I could have faced it alone. In RiverClan, there was no cat I dared trust. I was alone. But here, with you and the other park cats, I've remembered what it feels like to be safe. I've been able to talk freely and share what I've been going through."

“Don’t forget Nightheart,” Bee mewed gently.

“And Nightheart.” Frostpaw felt a rush of affection for her friend. He’d stuck with her every paw step of the way. “I couldn’t have done it without him. Without any of you.” After the game of find the shell, she’d spent more time with Wasp, Waffle, and Molly. Molly had a clever sense of humor and could take Frostpaw’s mind off her troubles with silly stories and unexpected jokes. Waffle had introduced Frostpaw to Lark’s kits, Peg and Weevil, who had an endless appetite for stories about the Clans—RiverClan in particular.

Being around them had reminded Frostpaw what it felt like to be part of a group who cared about her. And that had made it easier to face the truth about what had happened in her own Clan.

“Will you be going home now?” Bee asked.

“We should,” Frostpaw told him. “Nightheart’s missing his mate a lot.”

“I know,” Bee told her. “His eyes shine whenever he talks about her.”

“He loves Sunbeam.” Frostpaw purred fondly. Then her heart sank. “But we can’t leave yet,” she told Bee. “There’s still something else I need to find out.” A flash of black fur caught her eye. Nightheart had jumped from the wall and was crossing the riverbank toward them.

“What do you have to find out?” Nightheart asked.

She blinked at him. The ThunderClan tom had kept himself busy while they’d been here, learning how to scavenge with the park cats, teaching them how warriors hunted, showing Weevil and Peg battle moves. If he hadn’t been missing Sunbeam and his Clanmates so much, she was sure he’d have been happy here. She felt guilty asking him to stay longer. But she couldn’t go home yet. “I need to know how to choose the next leader of RiverClan,” she told him. “I’m still not sure which cat would be right.”

She waited for Nightheart to complain. She expected to see disappointment in his gaze. She glimpsed a flash of it, but he blinked it away and whisked his tail. “If you’re going to choose a leader,” he mewed, “you need to know what qualities to look for. And to do that”—he glanced toward the park—“you need to spend more time with cats you trust.”



Chapter 17



Nightheart followed Rook past one of the small stone Twoleg dens that dotted the park. The den was deserted, as it always was at night, along with the whole park, and the cats had freedom to roam where they pleased. He'd grown used to sleeping through the day when the park was overrun with Twolegs, then hunting and eating with the park cats at night.

He could feel Waffle's breath on his tail. The young gray-and-brown tom had tripped over it twice. He'd been so excited that Rook had agreed to let him come that his tail had been quivering when they left the others and crossed the narrow wooden bridge to the small forest on the other side of the river.

The black she-cat preferred to hunt alone. But Nightheart wanted to see where Rook roamed when she was away from the group. He admired the way she refused to eat the fish brought by the Twoleg every night, preferring to catch her own prey.

Frostpaw trailed behind, her eyes gleaming in the darkness. She had the same faraway look she often had after coming out of a meditation. But he knew she would shake it off and join them soon. She had a lot on her mind, but she had begun to care for these cats just like he had.

Waffle was finding it hard to keep quiet. "I can't believe I'm hunting with Rook and a *warrior*," he whispered as they padded into the shadows beneath the trees.

"Hush," Rook told her. "Don't scare the prey."

Twoleg trash was snagged on tree roots and piled beneath bushes. Nightheart glanced at a sour-smelling piece as they passed. "Why do they leave it here?"

"I think they want to feed the rats," Rook told him. "It's fine with me. The more prey they attract, the better." She stiffened, her gaze flashing toward the shadows ahead.

Nightheart saw two tiny eyes glittering there. A rat was nibbling at a piece of trash.

Rook pressed her belly to the earth, and Nightheart dropped into a crouch.

Waffle stalked past him, his tail flicking excitedly. "Have you seen something?"

"A rat," he whispered. "Get down, before it sees you."

Waffle froze. He didn't seem to know what to do.

"Drop onto your belly," Nightheart told him under his breath, "and flatten your ears. You need to look like a shadow."

Waffle ducked low and pressed his ears against his head, but his tail was still swishing.

"Keep still," Nightheart hissed.

"I am!"

"Your *tail*!"

Waffle looked back at it, his eyes widening as though he was surprised to see it moving. He held it still. "Now what?"

Rook began to creep slowly forward. "Nightheart, try to get behind it without it seeing you. Waffle, stay close to Nightheart. Stay upwind of the rat."

"Which way is upwind?" Waffle asked.

"Lick your nose and turn your head," Nightheart told him. "It'll feel coldest toward the wind."

Waffle started purring.

"Quiet!" Rook hissed.

"Sorry," Waffle whispered. "I couldn't help it. This is so exciting."

Rook grunted irritably. "Hurry up," she mewed. "The rat won't stay there forever." She glanced back at Frostpaw, who'd been hanging back, her gaze drifting. "You stay with me."

Frostpaw snapped to attention and ducked down beside the black she-cat. Nightheart was surprised to see her drop into a perfect hunting crouch. He kept forgetting she'd trained as a warrior.

He began to head away. "Stay close," he told Waffle, following the darkest shadows. Waffle's paws were scuffing the earth. "Try to pad more quietly," he told him, "and keep your tail from dragging along the ground." He could see that Rook and Frostpaw were already closing in on the rat, near enough now to reach it in a single leap. Frostpaw was staring at it, but Rook was watching him and Waffle, clearly waiting for them to take up position.

"This way." He led Waffle in a wide circle around the rat, which was still gnawing the trash, unaware of the danger. He just hoped

Waffle didn't scare it away with a sudden question or quick movement. Rook would be annoyed if they lost their chance. But an enthusiastic cat like Waffle needed room to make mistakes. The young gray-and-brown tom was frowning with concentration, his tail skimming the ground as he put one paw very quietly down after another. Nightheart felt a glow of pride. He was doing well. "Nearly there," he whispered. "Just a few mo—"

A bird flitted onto a branch overhead. Waffle's gaze shot upward. His tail swept through the leaves as he sat up, an excited mew bursting from his lips.

The rat jerked its gaze toward him, panic glittering in its eyes, then pelted away.

"Mouse dung!" Rook swooped after it like a bird of prey, crashing over the Twoleg trash, sending it fluttering between the tree roots, while Frostpaw followed on her tail.

Nightheart sat up.

Waffle blinked at him. "Was that because of me?"

"Yes." Nightheart rolled his eyes. He couldn't be angry, though. He remembered Lilyheart chiding him for mistakes he'd never meant to make. Instead he tried to reason with him. "Try to imagine you're hunting for your Clan," he told Waffle. "Imagine it's the middle of leaf-bare, and prey is scarce, and if you go home empty-pawed, kits and elders will go hungry."

"But we've got Twoleg fish at the park," Waffle told him. "And the bins are always full. Nobody's going to go hungry."

Nightheart frowned. How could he make him see that for many cats, hunting wasn't a choice; it was a matter of life and death? "Why do you think Rook hunts?" he asked.

Waffle shrugged. "Because she's bored?"

"It's because she doesn't want to rely on Twolegs," Nightheart told him.

Paws crunched over the leaves behind them. "It's because I *can't* rely on Twolegs." Rook padded from between the trees. Frostpaw was following, the rat dangling from between her jaws. Rook went on. "No cat should rely on Twolegs." She stopped in front of Waffle. "You should know that better than any cat. What if the Twoleg stops bringing fish, or the bins stop filling up? What will you do then?"

"I could scavenge," Waffle told her.

"Dogs scavenge," Rook grunted. "And rats. You're a cat. Cats hunt."

Waffle looked thoughtful for a moment. "I guess hunting would be more fun than scavenging."

"Way more fun," Nightheart mewed.

"And fresh prey tastes better." Rook glanced at the rat they'd caught as Frostpaw laid it on the ground. "Nice catch, Frostpaw. I didn't think you'd be so fast."

Waffle looked apologetic. "Sorry I made it harder by scaring it away."

"Hunting isn't a game," Rook mewed.

"It's the most important thing a warrior learns," Nightheart added.

"In that case, I'm going to practice hunting every day," Waffle declared.

Frostpaw was looking at him curiously. "Have you really never hunted before?"

"Never."

Rook shot Waffle a look of pity. "He was born a kittypet."

"That wasn't my choice," Waffle shot back. For the first time since Nightheart had met him, the gray-and-brown tom looked ruffled.

"His Twolegs threw him in the river when he was a kit," Rook explained. "We heard him mewling and found him washed up on the shore. He was trapped in a bag. Scruff and I had to tear it open with our teeth." She suddenly padded to Waffle's side and licked his cheek. "But he's safe here."

Waffle blinked fondly at the black she-cat, and Nightheart suddenly realized that the bonds between these easygoing park cats were deeper than they first appeared.

Frostpaw seemed to know it already. Her gaze was warm as she looked at Rook. "I'm glad Waffle was found by a group of such kind cats."

Waffle began to sniff the rat. "Are we going to catch another one?"

"I hope so." Nightheart fluffed his fur against the cold night air. He wanted to get moving so he could warm up. But Rook was still gazing at Frostpaw.

"Why aren't you meditating tonight?" she mewed.

"I needed a break," Frostpaw told her. "I realized something pretty big recently."

"Bee said you're trying to find something." Rook looked curious. "Is that what you saw?"

Frostpaw nodded. "It was something I think I didn't want to admit to myself."

Nightheart narrowed his eyes. Frostpaw had told him that she had realized that it was Splashtail who had tried to kill her. His heart ached for her, but he couldn't help thinking of his own love. He wondered how much longer they would stay with the park cats, how long it would take her to choose a leader. He didn't want to pressure her, but he thought about Sunbeam every single day.

"It can be hard to look deep inside ourselves," Rook commented, still watching Frostpaw.

"Really hard." Frostpaw's mew grew thick. "I've faced a lot of stuff I wasn't sure I was ready to face."

"Like what?" Rook looked curious.

"Like betrayal," Frostpaw told her. Her eyes shone with pain. "I realized that the cat I loved—" She broke off. "The cat I thought I could trust more than anyone else . . ." She was finding this hard. "I've realized now that he was the one who betrayed me." Her gaze drifted into the forest. "I'm not sure he ever cared for me. I think he was only ever using me to take over the Clan."

"That must be very painful." Rook padded to Frostpaw's side and began washing her cheek. Waffle joined her, lapping Frostpaw's head and neck with long, fierce licks.

Nightheart watched in surprise. What were they doing? Frostpaw stood like stone, her gaze darting awkwardly from one cat to the other. She began to back away, but they carried on licking her until she seemed to give in and stood still while they washed her face and her shoulders and her throat. Eventually, she began purring, and as they stepped away, she blinked at them. "What was that?"

"It's what we do when a cat is suffering or unhappy," Waffle told her. "We share tongues to let them know they are safe and welcome."

Nightheart understood the comforting effect of sharing tongues, but *really*? That had looked pretty intense!

Rook was still gazing at Frostpaw. "You know you didn't deserve to be treated so badly by this cat, don't you?"

"I know," Frostpaw told her. "At least, I *did* know. But I've begun to wonder whether I might have encouraged him to take advantage of me. I was so clueless and naive. I must have been an easy target."

"Don't say that." Nightheart felt a surge of indignation. "Warriors should never prey on Clanmates," he mewed. "Especially vulnerable ones. It goes against everything the Clans stand for. You may have been naive, but you've never been clueless. I've traveled with you, remember? You're one of the bravest, strongest cats I know. Splashtail took advantage of you because he's a rogue. There's no way you made it happen."

Frostpaw's eyes clouded. "Really?"

Rook met her gaze fiercely. "Really," she mewed. "You're a member of Riverstar's Clan, and he sent you here to learn how to save them. He must know how strong you are. And you're going back to your Clan to defeat this treacherous fox-heart, right?"

Frostpaw lifted her chin. "Yes."

Waffle purred. "You're a really special cat, Frostpaw. Don't ever let anyone make you feel like you're not."

Nightheart felt a fresh surge of affection for the park cats, and for Frostpaw. He could see why Riverstar had sent her to this place. She needed to be here, among these cats, to be supported and nurtured just as much as she'd needed to learn how to save RiverClan. He must have understood that knowing *what* to do wouldn't be enough to give her the strength to go back and do it.

Frostpaw lifted her tail, as though suddenly self-conscious at being given so much attention. "Let's catch some more rats," she mewed.

"Yes!" Waffle pricked his ears excitedly. "And this time I'm not going to get distracted."

They caught three more, and Nightheart was impressed with how quickly Waffle learned. He stayed close to him, adjusting his stance, pointing out where to look for signs of prey and what the signs were.

He still had trouble focusing, but Nightheart found that even when Waffle was gazing off into the shadows, he was still listening and taking in everything he was told. And he was quick on his paws. He could take off faster than Nightheart could, and although he would catch up after a few tail-lengths, Waffle's speed made him deadly. He'd caught the last rat before it even had a chance to run.

They took the rats back to the others, dropping them below the salmon tree where the park cats had gathered to share tongues.

"I caught this one," Waffle announced as Scruff came to examine their haul. He pushed the plump, black rat toward him.

"Well done." Scruff winked at Nightheart. "I thought he'd get under your paws," he teased.

"He did," Rook grunted.

"He's a natural hunter," Nightheart told Scruff. "A little more practice and he'll be able to feed the Cla—" He broke off. "The group." Hunting in a patrol had made him miss ThunderClan more than ever. He glanced at Frostpaw, wondering when she'd be ready to head home.

But Frostpaw was looking toward the river. She had that distant look again. "I think I need to meditate before dawn."

Scruff pushed a rat toward her. "Take this with you," he told her. "You need to eat."

"Thanks." She dipped her head and picked it up, then padded toward the low wall and the river beyond.

Nightheart frowned. How much longer was this going to go on? It couldn't be good for Frostpaw to push herself so hard. And he wanted to go home. This was important, but Sunbeam was important too.

Chalk had carried a rat back to Firefly and was sharing it with her. Marlow was sniffing the remaining one. Rook had already eaten half of hers. The other cats hung back, their noses wrinkling.

"I'll wait for the Twoleg fish," Wasp mewed.

Lark tugged Weevil back as the tom-kit began to pad toward a rat. "Fish is better for you," she told him, glancing at it and shuddering.

Bee didn't seem interested in the rats either. He sat in the shadows a short distance from the tree. Nightheart narrowed his

eyes. Bee had spent more time with Frostpaw than any cat over the past half-moon, and often meditated with her. He might know how much longer she'd have to stay here.

He crossed the grass and dipped his head politely to the young gray tom. "How's Frostpaw doing?" he asked tentatively.

"What do you mean?" Bee looked puzzled.

"How's her meditation going? Has she nearly finished?"

"Meditation isn't something a cat ever finishes," Bee told him. "It takes a life—"

"I know. A lifetime." Nightheart's ears twitched irritably. He didn't have a lifetime to spare. "Does that mean she'll never be ready to go home?"

Bee looked back at him calmly. "She doesn't need to be *here* to meditate," he mewed.

Nightheart blinked eagerly. "So we can leave now?"

"Not quite yet," Bee told him. "She's come a long way and uncovered a lot of difficult things. Her spirit is strong and she's persistent. But there's something she's still not facing."

"Right," Nightheart agreed. "I know she wants to find RiverClan's next leader. But do you think that's something meditation can even help with?"

Bee shook his head. "That's not what I'm referring to. The truth Frostpaw needs to face is buried, and she's frightened to uncover it."

Nightheart shuddered. *Learning that the cat she loved tried to kill her wasn't enough? There's more?* "Will she be able to?"

"Yes." Bee gazed back at Nightheart steadily. "She hasn't had the courage in the past, but she has us to support her now. And you. With time, she'll be ready to take the final step."

Nightheart wondered how much longer it would take. He'd tried to meditate but had only ended up thinking about Sunbeam. It had seemed like a waste of time. He could easily think about Sunbeam *without* meditating. He didn't really understand what Frostpaw could be getting out of sitting beside the river night after night, thinking. Clearly, she was experiencing something deep and spiritual. Perhaps it was a medicine-cat thing. But Bee seemed to understand. Nightheart suddenly wondered if this tom would have been a

medicine cat if he'd been Clan-born. "Do you ever have visions?" he asked.

Bee narrowed his eyes. "Visions?"

"They're like weird dreams," he mewed. "Frostpaw gets them even without meditating. I was wondering if you maybe had a connection with your ancestors like she does?"

"Not that I know of." Bee looked thoughtful. "Surely every cat has weird dreams."

"I guess, but medicine cats seemed to know when they're special."

Bee's gaze wandered past Nightheart. "I've had a dream lately that might be special. I keep dreaming it, over and over."

Nightheart leaned closer. "What is it?"

"The river has frozen and I'm walking along it," Bee told him. "The ice is thick and stings my paws. And along the riverbank there are cats. I don't recognize them, but they don't seem hostile. They're watching me as I pass, as though they're curious."

"Do any of them speak?"

"No."

"Nightheart!" Waffle's mew sounded across the grass.

He turned and saw him hurrying toward him with Wasp.

"Can you teach us the fighting skills you taught Weevil and Peg?" Waffle asked.

Nightheart was puzzled. "I just showed them moves they could use when they were play fighting," he explained. Why did park cats need to learn fighting skills? They were peaceful, and, based on how they'd reacted to some stories he'd told them about the life of a warrior, they hated the thought of battles.

But Waffle's eyes were glowing. "Show us the same moves."

"But you never fight," Nightheart argued.

"What if rogues try to take over our group?" Wasp mewed. "Like they did back in Riverstar's day?"

"Weevil and Peg won't be strong enough to fight them off," Waffle chimed. "We need to be able to defend our parkmates. Besides . . ." He glanced shyly at Nightheart. "You looked so cool when you were showing the kits. I want to look like that too."

Nightheart purred. It would be fun teaching these cats. Especially if Waffle picked up fighting as fast as he'd picked up hunting. And Wasp was smart. It would be a challenge because they weren't as disciplined or knowledgeable as warrior apprentices. But after spending more than a half-moon waiting around for Frostpaw, he relished the idea of stretching his own skills by mentoring two young cats. A thought struck him. Spotfur's kits would need mentors soon. Would Squirrelstar allow him to train one of them?

"Can we do it now?" Waffle asked.

"Please." Wasp blinked at him hopefully.

Nightheart hardly heard them. He was thinking. One day he'd be teaching his own kits about being a warrior. His paws pricked excitedly. He'd never thought about having kits of his own before. He and Sunbeam had never talked about it. With everything that had been happening around them, they'd barely had time to talk about anything, let alone their future together. Was having kits something she even wanted? He longed to head home more than ever. There was a whole life waiting for him there. He blinked at Waffle. "I'll teach you some moves after I've spoken to Frostpaw."

He had to find out how soon they could leave. Was there a way to ask her without making her feel she was being rushed?

"I'll be back," he called to Waffle, before sharing a look with Bee, seeing in the gray tom's eyes a kind of understanding. "Keep paying attention to your dreams," Nightheart told them. "They might be . . . useful." Then he turned and headed for the river, hopping over the low wall onto the grassy bank.

Frostpaw was sitting at the water's edge. The rat Scruff had given her was lying untouched on the ground beside her, and she was staring across the water. Was she deep in meditation already? Should he leave her in peace? He padded closer. The sky was growing lighter beyond the trees, pushing back the darkness. Birds were beginning to chatter in the forest on the other side of the river. This couldn't wait. "Frostpaw," he mewed quietly. "Can I talk to you?"

His heart lurched as her gaze jerked toward him. Her eyes were wide and round with fear. She was trembling. She must have seen something dreadful. He blinked at her, hardly breathing. "What's happened?"

“I’m beginning to understand. . . .” Her pelt was bristling. “I know what happened to RiverClan.” Her mew sounded desperate. She took a breath as though trying to steady herself. “It’s worse than I ever imagined!”



Chapter 18



Fine weather had blessed the lake for the past half-moon. Sunbeam padded over the dry, frosty leaves lying thick on the forest floor as sunshine filtered through the trees. It was doing little to warm her pelt, and she fluffed out her fur against the brisk wind. A huge oak stood at the top of the slope ahead. It was so tall—its trunk wide and gnarled—that she figured it must have been here even before the Clans. She padded toward it and looked up.

Sunlight sparkled between the bare branches, and she looked away, dazzled. Turning her head toward the lake, she saw water glittering in the distance. If she kept going straight ahead, following the track, she'd reach the SkyClan border. If she retraced her steps, cut through the beeches, and climbed the rise beyond, she'd come to the moor. She felt pleased with herself. She knew ThunderClan's territory nearly as well as she'd known ShadowClan's. She hoped it would be enough to pass her final trial.

It felt strange to be alone this deep in ThunderClan's forest. She'd always been part of a patrol. But today Ivypool had sent her to familiarize herself with ThunderClan's land in preparation for her trial. To pass it, she'd need to be able to navigate her way around the entire territory without getting lost.

Sunbeam felt another wave of gratitude to the ThunderClan deputy, and to Squirrelstar. They'd made her trials fair, and far less challenging than the trials Berryheart had set for Nightheart. She breathed deep, relishing her freedom and the chance for a few moments of solitude. She liked ThunderClan, but when she was with them, she still felt as though she needed to be on her best behavior. Especially with Nightheart gone and, with him, her reason for being there.

He'll be home soon, she told herself. She'd been telling herself the same thing for a most of a moon, but he was still missing, and she still had no idea where he was. Should she go and look for him? Maybe, if she passed this trial. She felt the usual pang of sadness that he wouldn't be here to watch, but she no longer felt hurt that

he'd left her. Instead her heart only ached at the thought he might be in trouble. *I hope he's safe.*

A rustle in the bushes made her jerk her muzzle around. Had a fox tracked her here? Had she stumbled onto a badger set? She tasted the air, relaxing as she smelled Finchlight's scent.

"*There* you are." Finchlight sounded relieved as she pushed her way from among the branches. "I've got good news!"

Sunbeam's heart quickened. "Is Nightheart back?"

"No." Finchlight's eyes rounded apologetically. "I didn't mean to get your hopes up."

"Never mind." Sunbeam lifted her chin bravely. "What's your news?"

"I've just come from the meeting on the island," Finchlight told her. Squirrelstar had met with Tree and the other leaders to try again to work out a peaceful solution to RiverClan's troubles. "The mediation is going really well."

"Has Tigerstar agreed to leave?" Sunbeam blinked at her.

"Not right away," Finchlight told her. "But he'd already agreed not to increase his patrols, and now he's agreed to send fewer warriors in each patrol." She sat down. "Tree's a strange cat, but he really knows how to see things from a different perspective. It's like he knows what objections each Clan will make and is ready to counter them all."

"What did Tigerstar say exactly?" Was he finally willing to back down rather than go to war with the other Clans?

"I don't know," Finchlight admitted. "I was only escorting Squirrelstar." She glanced guiltily at her paws. "I was supposed to wait on the shore, but Spireclaw and I sneaked over the tree-bridge and hid in the long grass to listen. I knew you'd want to know how the talks were going."

Sunbeam blinked gratefully at the ThunderClan she-cat. Finchlight felt almost like kin to her now, and Sunbeam was touched she'd taken such a risk. But *Spireclaw*? She was surprised that her brother had gone along with it. He didn't usually break rules. But she guessed he'd be as eager as she was to know if the Clans were going to fight. She suddenly pictured facing him in battle, and a cold

chill swept her pelt. *That can't happen.* She padded closer to Finchlight and lowered her mew. "What did you hear?"

Finchlight scanned the forest before she spoke. "Tigerstar's agreed to take most of his cats out of RiverClan," she whispered. "But he'll do it slowly, one cat at a time, until there are only one or two left to keep an eye on them."

Sunbeam shifted her paws nervously. It sounded more like Tigerstar was playing for time than truly agreeing to withdraw. "Why is he saying he will leave now when he was so determined to stay before?"

"The leaders are appointing someone to head RiverClan," Finchlight told her eagerly.

Sunbeam's eyes widened. "They've found a leader?"

"Not a leader," Finchlight mewed. "Just some cat to organize things."

"You mean Icewing?" The white-furred warrior had been Tigerstar's choice to head RiverClan while ShadowClan had been in charge of the camp.

"No." Sunbeam leaned closer. "Duskfur."

"But she's an elder now, isn't she?"

"That's why every cat agreed she'd be a good choice," Finchlight told her. "They figure an older cat will be less hotheaded."

"And Tigerstar agreed, too?" Hope was fluttering in Sunbeam's chest.

"He likes Duskfur," Finchlight mewed. "And RiverClan approves."

Sunbeam remembered how RiverClan's youngest warriors had bristled with resentment at the Gathering. "Even the young warriors?"

"Splashtail's going to be acting deputy." Finchlight's eyes were bright. "He can speak for them."

Sunbeam felt suddenly uneasy. Only a moon ago, Splashtail had plotted with Berryheart to get ShadowClan out of RiverClan. Nothing had come of it, but Sunbeam had been shocked that he and Berryheart had been willing to conspire behind their Clanmates' backs. Tigerstar knew nothing about the plot, but he had to know that Splashtail was one of the fiercest opponents of ShadowClan's

involvement in RiverClan. "Why did Tigerstar agree to let Splashtail be deputy?"

"He's not going to be a *real* deputy," Finchlight told her. "But I guess Tigerstar realizes how much influence Splashtail has among his Clanmates. Giving him a voice will defuse a lot of tension."

Sunbeam was still uneasy. "I'm surprised Splashtail has agreed to be part of any compromise."

"I guess being deputy—even an acting deputy—is an offer he can't refuse," Finchlight mewed.

Sunbeam frowned. "I don't trust any cat who changes his mind so easily."

"Tree has turned out to be a very skillful negotiator," Finchlight mewed. "He seems to have satisfied every cat. All the leaders have given their word that no blood will be shed over this before the next Gathering. There'll be peace."

"For now." Sunbeam just hoped the peace would hold.

"But you're happy, right?" Finchlight pressed. "It really sounds like everything's going to be okay."

"I guess." Sunbeam tried to look pleased. "Thanks for bringing me this news," she mewed. "Hopefully, we can relax until the next Gathering."

Finchlight lifted her tail. "You'll be a ThunderClan warrior by then."

"I have to pass this trial first." Butterflies began fluttering in Sunbeam's belly.

"Do you know what it is yet?" Finchlight asked.

"Ivypool said I'd need to prove I know ThunderClan territory," Sunbeam told her. "I've been wandering around all morning, trying to fix all the different places in my mind."

"Did you find the frog stream?" Finchlight asked.

"Yes."

"And the alder grove?"

"Yes."

Finchlight glanced at the huge oak beside them. "And I guess you've found the Ancient Oak."

Sunbeam followed her gaze. "I didn't know it had a special name."

"It's supposed to be the oldest tree in the forest," Finchlight told her. "There are squirrels here even in the middle of leaf-bare. We always say no ThunderClan cat will starve as long as the Ancient Oak still stands." She blinked at Sunbeam. "Do you feel ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Sunbeam felt as though she'd explored every muzzle-length of ThunderClan's territory. She wanted to start her final trial. "I'd better get back to camp," she mewed. "Ivypool is probably waiting for me."

"Did you have a good look around the territory?" Ivypool asked as Sunbeam hurried into camp.

"Yes." Sunbeam saw Sparkpelt and Myrtlebloom looking at her encouragingly from the edge of the clearing. Their Clanmates were busy around the camp: mending dens, clearing out nests, pushing back the brambles that were encroaching around the medicine-den entrance. Sunbeam's tail twitched. She didn't want every gaze in the Clan on her, but she'd feel happier if the rest of ThunderClan were showing more interest in her final trial.

Ivypool seemed to notice her disappointment. "I told them to stay busy," she mewed, following Sunbeam's gaze. "I didn't want them making you nervous. But they'll all be happy when you're back."

Sunbeam was touched by her thoughtfulness. "What do you want me to do for this trial?"

"It begins with a clue." Ivypool winked at her. "Find the place that has an apprentice between two elders."

Sunbeam stared back at her, mystified. *An apprentice between two elders?* Cloudtail and Brightheart were sitting outside the elders' den. But ThunderClan didn't have any apprentices. She frowned. Ivypool must want her to find a specific location in the forest.

"When you get there," Ivypool mewed, "you'll find out what to do next." The ThunderClan deputy turned away and headed for the fresh-kill pile. She clearly wasn't going to give any more clues.

An apprentice between two elders? What in StarClan did she mean?

Suddenly, Sunbeam recalled something she'd seen earlier that morning. Two large oaks, just beyond the beeches. They were flanking a small sapling. She remembered wondering if the sapling

would ever be able to grow in the shadow of two such imposing trees. Was that where Ivypool wanted her to go?

She headed out of camp, taking the trail along the rise and past the clearing where she'd begun her first trial, hurrying until she reached the beeches standing tall and straight among the crooked oaks. She bounded between them, excitement surging beneath her pelt as she saw Lionblaze waiting beside the sapling. She'd done it! She'd figured out the first clue.

He lifted her tail as he saw her. "Well done, Sunbeam," he purred.

"Thanks." She felt nervous again. "Do you have another clue for me?"

"Find a place where there are no Twolegs." Dipping his head, he padded away and left her standing between the oaks.

No Twolegs. Surely there were no Twolegs *anywhere* on ThunderClan territory. What could he mean? Sunbeam scanned the forest, hoping for inspiration. Then she remembered—*the abandoned Twoleg den*. She hadn't been there since Sparkpelt and Finchlight had first shown her around the territory. But she remembered where it was and began to charge through the forest toward it.

She'd forgotten how eerie the crumbling stone den was. As she ducked from the trees and padded toward it, her fur lifted along her spine. Moss grew on the dark stone walls. The roof had long since caved in, and rotten pieces of wood leaned against the old den. It looked like the sort of place foxes would hide. Or worse, Dark Forest warriors. She shuddered.

A shadow moved inside. She could see it through the opening at the front. She froze, forcing her pelt not to spike. Lionblaze wouldn't have sent her anywhere dangerous. Besides, bright sunshine was flooding through the canopy. The shadow moved again. She heard paws brushing stone. "Hello?" she mewed nervously.

"I guess we can stop worrying about you getting lost on the way back from hunting."

Relief swamped her as Jayfeather padded from the den.

His blind blue gaze seemed to fix on her. "Now that you've proved you can follow clues, let's see if you can follow your nose."

Sunbeam leaned forward. "Is that the next clue?"

“Follow the scent of thyme until there are no more plant scents at all.” Jayfeather headed away, padding between the trees, almost as though he could see exactly where he was going. But it seemed mean to leave a blind cat to find his own way home. “Do you want me to escort you home?” Sunbeam called after him.

“I know these woods better than you do,” he yowled back.

She watched him disappear behind a swath of bracken. *How am I supposed to know what thyme smells like?* Her ears twitched nervously. *I’m not a medicine cat.* She closed her eyes and sniffed the air. The trail must start here, surely, so there had to be thyme nearby. She opened her mouth, drawing air over her tongue, and tasted the fusty scent of decaying leaves along with moss and bark and rich dark earth. Then she picked up a more fragrant smell. Her heart quickened. She opened her eyes and followed the scent to a small bush with tiny leaves. Its smell made her nose wrinkle. She was sure she’d smelled something similar in Puddleshine’s medicine den. *This must be it.* She tracked a little way forward, looking for another. When she didn’t find it, she tried tracking the other way, her heart soaring as she found another bush, then another. They were leading her downslope toward the lake. *No more plant scents at all.* The lake! Sunbeam knew that some plants grew in the water, but there were no plant scents in the lake. She hurried downhill, following one thyme bush to the next until she ducked out from beneath the trees and padded onto the shore.

Happiness fizzed in her paws. *This trial is easy!* Then she spotted Cherryfall waiting for her at the water’s edge. Her heart sank. Cherryfall had hardly spoken to her since her last trial. The ginger warrior always seemed to have her muzzle in the air and a look of disdain whenever she passed Sunbeam in camp. Sunbeam wished Ivypool had chosen a friendlier cat to help with her trials.

She lifted her chin. “Do you have a clue for me?”

Cherryfall looked her over. “Your third trial should have been harder, not easier than the others,” she sniffed. “You’re meant to be proving you’re good enough to be a ThunderClan *warrior*, not an apprentice.”

“That’s for Ivypool to decide.” Sunbeam was glad Cherryfall hadn’t been the one setting these challenges. They might have been

worse than the ones Berryheart had set Nightheart. "What's your clue?"

Cherryfall glanced toward the forest. "You have to go back to where you moved the rock."

Sunbeam felt an uneasy twinge in her belly. Cherryfall's clue didn't sound like the first three. It wasn't a clue at all. It was an order. And her eyes were glittering with satisfaction.

"Thanks." Sunbeam dipped her head and padded along the shore, heading into the forest as though she were making for the camp hollow. She could feel Cherryfall's gaze following her and ducked behind a bush as soon as she was far enough away. Cherryfall had sent her the wrong way. She was sure of it. But if she wasn't meant to go to the cliff above the camp, where was she meant to go?

She frowned. Where else in ThunderClan territory seemed important? Would Ivypool want her to reach one of the borders? The one with SkyClan, perhaps? Or the badger set? No, it would be risky asking a warrior to wait there alone for her. The frog stream? The alder grove? Where else had Finchlight mentioned? She suddenly remembered what the tortoiseshell warrior had told her. *No ThunderClan cat will starve as long as the Ancient Oak still stands.* It was an important tree. *I'll try there first,* she decided. *If I'm wrong, I'll check the hollow cliff, just in case Cherryfall was telling the truth.*

She cut through a ditch, hopped over the fallen trees beyond, and followed the forest as it sloped up, breaking into a run at the top. She was nervous, and as she neared the Ancient Oak, her tail began to quiver. She climbed the rise, glimpsing the wide, gnarled trunk at the top. There was no sign of a warrior waiting beneath it. Disappointment dropped like a stone in her chest. She'd guessed wrong. Her heart began to pound. Should she head for the hollow cliff? She still felt that Cherryfall was trying to send her the wrong way. Perhaps she should try the badger set after all, or follow one of the borders, or look along the frog stream. Panic started to prick in her paws. How long would Ivypool give her? What if she didn't find the next clue? She would fail the final trial. She'd have to go back to ShadowClan. Berryheart would be pleased. *And she'd never let me*

forget that I tried to join another Clan and failed. She wished more than ever that Nightheart were here.

She heard paw steps and jerked her head around.

"You made it!" Sparkpelt was breathless, hurrying toward her. "Sorry I'm late. Plumstone kept me talking."

Relief flooded beneath Sunbeam's pelt. "Did I come to the right place?"

"Yes." Sparkpelt wound around her purring. "This is the last place you had to find. You've passed your last trial!"

Sunbeam felt a rush of joy.

"Come on." Sparkpelt was heading downslope. "Let's go back to camp and tell Ivypool."

Sunbeam hurried after her. "I was worried the Ancient Oak was the wrong place."

Sparkpelt glanced at her. "Was Cherryfall's clue hard?"

Sunbeam hesitated. *Cherryfall gave me the wrong clue.* But Sparkpelt would be angry if she knew, and Sunbeam didn't want to turn Clanmates against each other. She swallowed back the words. "It was a bit tricky," she mewed instead.

"Nightheart will be delighted when he gets back and finds you're already a ThunderClan warrior," Sparkpelt mewed.

Sunbeam tried a purr, but it dried in her throat as she thought about Nightheart. Where was he? Why hadn't he come home yet? "Do you think he's okay?"

Sparkpelt kept her gaze on the path ahead. "We have to believe he is. Thinking anything else would be . . ." Her mew died away.

Would be unbearable. Sunbeam silently finished her sentence. Claws tightened around her heart. She wished Nightheart were here to celebrate this moment with her. But more than that, she wished that, wherever he was, he was safe and well. She whisked her tail. Sparkpelt was right. They had to believe he was okay. "I'm sure he's fine."

"Yes." Sparkpelt looked at her brightly, and Sunbeam tried to ignore the darkness lurking in her gaze.

"Should we go and look for him?" The thought was still nagging at her.

"I've been wondering the same," Sparkpelt replied. "I'll have a word with Squirrelstar. She might want to organize a search patrol."

Would the ThunderClan leader agree to send one? She might think there was no need. StarClan had told her why Nightheart had left. But that was a nearly a moon ago, and Sunbeam had never told Sparkpelt. Her spine pricked with guilt now, looking into her mate's mother's eyes. *Should I tell her? It might make her feel better, but I told Squirrelstar I would keep this between us.* And either way, Nightheart had been gone for a long time now, presumably alone and away from his Clan. The fact that he'd been sent on a mission for StarClan didn't mean he was safe. Anything could have happened to him.

Ivypool was waiting outside the thorn tunnel as they neared the hollow, her eyes lighting up when she saw Sunbeam and Sparkpelt trotting down the slope. She hurried to meet them. "Congratulations!"

"I figured it out," Sunbeam told her proudly.

"I know." Ivypool led her into camp. "Lionblaze, Jayfeather, and Cherryfall are already back. We're all waiting for you."

Cherryfall. Sunbeam felt a jab of irritation as she padded across the clearing. She wanted to let Ivypool know that the spiteful warrior had tried to sabotage her last trial. But she wasn't going to tattle. Instead she relished a spark of satisfaction as she saw Cherryfall's fur ruffle with annoyance. Sunbeam shot her a knowing look. But she wasn't going to cause a scene. Not in the middle of camp, anyway.

Lionblaze padded forward, his eyes bright. "Well done, Sunbeam."

"Good work." Jayfeather was sitting at the edge of the clearing. "I didn't think a warrior would recognize thyme."

"I just found the stinkiest plant nearby and followed it," Sunbeam told him.

Around the camp, ThunderClan was clustering together, their eyes shining as they looked at Sunbeam.

Finchlight was purring. "I knew you could do it."

Myrtlebloom crossed the clearing and ran her muzzle happily along Sunbeam's jaw. "Welcome back, *Clanmate*."

Stone clattered from the rock tumble as Squirrelstar bounded down from the Highledge. "Well done, Sunbeam. You've earned the

right to be a ThunderClan warrior.”

Brambleclaw scrambled after her. “You’re going to make a fine ThunderClan warrior at that!”

A ThunderClan warrior. All at once, the reality of what she was about to become hit Sunbeam like a cold breeze. This was what she wanted, wasn’t it? It certainly had been, when she’d left ShadowClan for Nightheart. But Nightheart wasn’t here. And once she accepted her place in ThunderClan, she knew there was no going back.

Narrowing her eyes, Squirrelstar stopped in front of her. “You have truly earned your place here, Sunbeam. But I realize this isn’t how you pictured becoming a ThunderClan warrior. Can you honestly say that this is what you want? That you will see your acceptance into ThunderClan as the privilege that it is . . . no matter who stands beside you?”

Or who doesn’t, Sunbeam finished in her head. Squirrelstar must know she was missing Nightheart. And it *was* hard to picture her future in ThunderClan without him. But still, as she replied, she felt the peace that comes with certainty.

“I know that ThunderClan is the place for me,” she told Squirrelstar. “And that isn’t about any one cat. After living among you for nearly a moon, I know I belong here.”

Squirrelstar purred. “Then I’m pleased to tell you, you’ve passed all your trials, and I would like to officially welcome you into ThunderClan.”

“Sunbeam!” Finchlight was the first to call her name, but her Clanmates quickly joined in.

“Sunbeam!”

“Sunbeam!”

The hollow rang with their yowls, and Sunbeam felt a rush of pride. For a moment it didn’t matter that Nightheart wasn’t here. She realized she was happy, not because it was *his* Clan, but because she liked ThunderClan and she knew she would feel at home among them. She’d found her own place in the forest, away from her kin. She felt free. She’d chosen this. No cat had chosen it for her.

Her new Clanmates wound around her. The ThunderClan cats seemed as pleased with themselves as they were with Sunbeam.

“I knew she could do it,” Sparkpelt mewed.

"She'll make ThunderClan even stronger," Lionblaze purred.

Sunbeam ducked her head in appreciation. "You are so kind to me. I appreciate it more than you can know." As her new Clanmates purred in approval, Sunbeam excused herself and moved away from the crowd, leaving them to celebrate without her for a moment. Cherryfall was stalking angrily toward the warriors' den.

Does she have to make it so obvious she hates me? Sunbeam huffed to herself, but she forced her pelt not to bristle. She wasn't going to let Cherryfall spoil her moment. And yet she couldn't let this slide. Cherryfall had nearly spoiled her chance of joining ThunderClan. *What if she tries to get me kicked out?* Sunbeam lifted her tail and padded after the ginger warrior.

Cherryfall turned as Sunbeam squeezed into the warriors' den and glared through the gloom. "*What?*" she growled.

Sunbeam narrowed her eyes. "It's a shame your plan didn't work."

"What plan?" Cherryfall lifted her muzzle.

Of course she'd deny it. But Sunbeam hadn't followed her here to make accusations. "You can be my enemy if you want," she mewed. "But we're Clanmates now, and I'm going to be here all the time." She padded closer. "Don't you think it would be easier if we get along?"

"Easier for you," Cherryfall grunted.

"Easier for both of us." Sunbeam held Cherryfall's gaze. "I've had some experience with difficult cats," she mewed. "They don't scare me. *You* don't scare me. And you're not going to push me out of ThunderClan, not when I've worked so hard to get here."

Cherryfall looked back at her, her expression suddenly uncertain.

She didn't expect me to stand up for myself. "You can waste your time and energy trying to make my life difficult," Sunbeam hissed. "But it'll be harder on you than me, because I don't get pushed around easily." She thrust her muzzle closer. "Squirrelstar wants me here. *And* Ivypool. And a lot of other warriors. So be careful how hard you push, because I might just push back."

Cherryfall took a step backward. Her ears were twitching nervously.

Sunbeam blinked at her slowly, then turned and padded out of the den. She didn't need Nightheart to be here. And she hadn't had to run mewling to Ivypool. She'd dealt with Cherryfall on her own. Pleasure warmed her pelt as she stepped out into the clearing, where her new Clanmates were still exchanging happy meows. Cloudtail dipped his head to Sunbeam from outside the elders' den. Brackenfur blinked at her warmly. For a change, he didn't look surprised to see her.

"Come on, Sunbeam." Finchlight hurried over and began to nudge Sunbeam toward the fresh-kill pile. "Let's celebrate with a tasty mouse."

"Yes, please." Sunbeam was hungry. She licked her lips, but as she followed Finchlight through the crowd, she felt uneasy. She'd been accepted into ThunderClan and proved to herself she could stand on her own four paws without Nightheart, but she was worried about him. She'd never believed he'd be gone this long. She'd felt certain he'd be here to watch her become a ThunderClan warrior. She'd even imagined what he'd say when she passed her final trial, how happy and proud he'd be. The thought had thrilled her. But there was no sign of him. Her heart began to pound. Where in StarClan was he?

"Here." Cherryfall dropped a mouse at Sunbeam's paws.

Sunbeam was resting below the Highledge after a morning spent hunting with Myrtleblow, Finchlight, and Cherryfall. She glanced coolly up at the ginger warrior. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Cherryfall sniffed. "You deserve it. You hunted well today." She nodded curtly and padded away to join Spotfur beside the nursery as Graykit, Stemkit, and Bristlekit played moss-ball in the clearing.

Sunbeam watched her settle beside the queen. She felt pleased. Cherryfall had been treating her like a Clanmate all morning. She'd even stepped aside to let Sunbeam make the kill when they'd cornered a rabbit during the hunt. Standing up to the ginger warrior had been the right choice.

She took a bite of the mouse. It was fresh and juicy, still quite warm from the hunt. As Sunbeam swallowed and leaned down to

take another, she saw Squirrelstar heading toward her.

"Hi, Squirrelstar." She straightened.

Squirrelstar gazed across the camp where her Clanmates were eating. "I didn't get a chance to talk to you after your trial yesterday."

Sunbeam stiffened. "Is something wrong?"

"I know it must have been strange, becoming a ThunderClan warrior without Nightheart being here." Squirrelstar sat beside her. "I'm glad you still decided to join."

"I like ThunderClan," Sunbeam told her. She watched Squirrelstar closely. Was this the only reason Squirrelstar had come to talk to her? "I'm glad to be here even without Nightheart."

Squirrelstar met her gaze solemnly. "But you must be worried about him."

Sunbeam's heart lurched. Was the ThunderClan leader preparing to tell her bad news? "Have you heard something?"

"No," Squirrelstar told her quickly. "StarClan hasn't told me anything apart from what they shared with me at my nine lives ceremony."

"Why hasn't he come back?" Sunbeam fought back panic. "It's been nearly a moon!" She searched Squirrelstar's gaze, desperate for an answer, but the ThunderClan leader only stared uneasily back at her.

"You haven't heard *anything*?" Sunbeam pleaded.

Squirrelstar's eyes glistened with sympathy and Sunbeam's heart felt as though it would burst. *Please say something!*

"I'm sorry," Squirrelstar mewed at last. "But I don't know where Nightheart is or why he hasn't come home yet. I asked Jayfeather and Alderheart if StarClan had mentioned Nightheart at their half-moon meeting, but they said StarClan had barely spoken and didn't mention Nightheart at all."

"Doesn't StarClan care that we're worried about him?" Sunbeam felt a quiver of frustration. "Maybe something terrible happened and they don't want to tell us. Frostpaw was killed by a buzzard." The dark thought had been haunting her since the last Gathering. "What if the same happened to Nightheart?"

"We have no evidence of that," Squirrelstar reassured her. "I know it's hard, but let's not fear the worst."

Sunbeam noticed Alderheart and Bayshine waiting at the entrance. They were looking expectantly at Squirrelstar.

The ThunderClan leader got to her paws. "I'd better go," she mewed. "I have a meeting with Tree and the other leaders to discuss ShadowClan's withdrawal." She hesitated. "Come with us," she mewed.

"Really?" Sunbeam blinked at her.

"It'll take your mind off Nightheart."

Sunbeam scrambled to her paws. She followed Squirrelstar out of camp, grateful for the ThunderClan leader's kindness, and trekked around the lake beside Bayshine while Squirrelstar and Alderheart padded ahead. As they neared the tree-bridge, she saw warriors from the other Clans already waiting on the shore. Oatclaw, the pale tabby WindClan warrior, was chatting to Violetshine and Bellaleaf of SkyClan. Lizardtail and Owlnose were sitting a little apart, staring into the water as though hoping to see a fish. Sunbeam's pelt prickled uncomfortably when she saw Berryheart sitting beside Scorchfur.

Her mother looked up as she arrived. Sunbeam tried to read her gaze. Was she going to cause another scene?

Squirrelstar had seen her too. "You can go back to camp if you like," she told Sunbeam quietly. "Bayshine can escort us home."

"I'm not going to hide from her," Sunbeam told her.

Squirrelstar dipped her head. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

As the ThunderClan leader hopped onto the tree-bridge and followed Alderheart along it, Sunbeam turned her back on her mother and spoke to Bayshine. "I hope this Gathering will be less tense than the last one."

But Bayshine was looking past her. His eyes flashed a warning. "She's heading toward us," he mewed.

"Who?" Sunbeam pretended she didn't know, even though she could feel her mother's gaze boring into the back of her head.

"Berryheart," Bayshine hissed.

Sunbeam felt a flash of irritation. Why couldn't her mother leave her in peace? As the pebbles crunched behind her, she whirled around. "What do you *want*?" She was surprised by her own

fierceness, but after being scolded in front of ThunderClan and ignored at the Gathering, Sunbeam didn't want to be humiliated again.

Berryheart blinked at her calmly. "I just wanted to talk to my daughter," she mewed.

Bayshine nudged Sunbeam. "You don't have to if you don't want to," he told her.

If only that were true. "It's okay." Sunbeam braced herself. "I can deal with it."

"Let's talk somewhere we can't be overheard," Berryheart mewed.

Sunbeam felt relieved. At least the other warriors wouldn't have to hear whatever it was Berryheart wanted to say.

Bayshine blinked sympathetically at Sunbeam as she followed her mother across the shore into a small clearing among the reeds and stopped, waiting for her mother to speak.

"You can still come home," Berryheart mewed. Her eyes glistened with hope. "I'm not saying it'll be easy. You did betray your Clan, after all. Our Clanmates are bound to resent you for a while, but I'm sure they'll forgive you eventually. We all will."

Sunbeam stared at her. Did Berryheart really think *this* was going to persuade her to go home? She wondered for a moment if her mother was just trying to hurt her, but Berryheart went on.

"You look skinny. Are you eating enough? Is ThunderClan being kind to you? They're not bullying you, are they? Perhaps it's the food. ThunderClan prey can't agree with you." Her mother looked genuinely concerned. But she didn't wait for an answer to any of her questions. "Isn't Nightheart feeling better yet? I haven't seen him since—"

Sunbeam couldn't take anymore. "Stop!" she hissed. Berryheart's eyes widened with surprise. "Stop talking and listen for a change!"

"I always lis—"

"No, you don't." Sunbeam was pulsing with anger. "You ask questions, but you don't wait for the answer. You tell me things, but you don't listen to what I have to say. You say it's not too late to come home, but it *is*. ThunderClan is my home now! I'm a

ThunderClan warrior! I passed my last trial yesterday. I'm happy. It's what I want, and I'm not coming back to ShadowClan!"

Berryheart's pelt bristled. "I *knew* this would happen. I warned you about making friends in other Clans. Nightheart has turned you against me. He's turned you against your whole Clan! He worms his way into our camp, lies to every cat about wanting to become a ShadowClan warrior, and then *steals* you!"

"He didn't steal me!" Sunbeam snarled back. "I wanted to leave. And it wasn't just because I love him. I couldn't stay with a Clan I disagreed with. I couldn't stay with *cats* I disagreed with." Would Berryheart realize she wasn't just talking about Tigerstar's involvement with RiverClan? That she meant her own mother? "I didn't want to go and live in the RiverClan camp. I didn't want to interfere in their lives. RiverClan's business is RiverClan's business, and ShadowClan has no right to interfere."

Berryheart narrowed her eyes, her mew suddenly softening. "Well, at least we agree on *one* thing."

"What?" Sunbeam felt as though the prey she'd been chasing had suddenly stopped running.

"We agree that ShadowClan has no business in the RiverClan camp," Berryheart mewed.

Sunbeam stared at her mother, her anger burning away like mist in the sunshine. Suddenly there was nothing to argue with. Was it possible they could have a civil conversation? Her fur began to smooth. "I guess the mediation is helping," she ventured. "Maybe things can start to get back to normal soon." *Maybe things can get back to normal with us too.*

"I don't think things can ever go back to normal," Berryheart grunted. "As long as Tigerstar's in charge, we'll always be dragged into some fight or other."

"I don't see why," Sunbeam argued. "Tigerstar wants peace as much as any cat. That's why he's agreed to meet Tree and the other leaders." Why was *she* defending Tigerstar? He wasn't even her leader anymore. Shouldn't Berryheart be the one standing up for him?

"We should have kept our whiskers out of it in the first place," Berryheart snapped. "Tigerstar needs to put ShadowClan first." Her

tail was lashing. "Instead of worrying about whether RiverClan's getting enough fish, he should be worrying about how *our* prey's running. He seems to have forgotten who his real Clanmates are."

"I'm sure he hasn't—"

Berryheart cut her off. "It's about time some cat reminded him where his loyalties should lie. And if I have to do it, I will!"

Sunbeam felt a chill run through her fur. What did Berryheart mean? Then she remembered Sparrowtail's words. *If Berryheart's plan works.* "What exactly are you planning, Berryheart?"

Her mother stiffened. "ShadowClan is none of your business," she snapped. "You're a ThunderClan warrior now, remember?"

Sunbeam leaned closer. "I know you, Berryheart. No matter what Clan I belong to. And you're up to something. Aren't you?" What trouble was her mother going to cause now?

Berryheart looked away. "I wouldn't have spoken to you at all if I'd known you were going to be like this." She began to stalk back toward the others.

Sunbeam hurried after her. "Just make sure no cat gets hurt," she hissed under her breath.

Berryheart shot her an indignant look. "I'd never harm my Clanmates."

"That's because—" Sunbeam quickly swallowed back the words, but they ran bitterly through her mind. *That's because you're too busy harming your kin!*

Berryheart didn't turn back, and Sunbeam followed her along the shore, relieved when she saw Bayshine coming to meet her.

"How did it go?" he whispered as her mother padded away to join Scorchfur.

"Fine." Sunbeam didn't want to talk about it. What could she say? That her mother was plotting something? Like Berryheart had said, it was ShadowClan's business, not hers.

Bayshine seemed to understand. "Hey, Violetshine!" He called to the SkyClan she-cat. "Come and tell Sunbeam the story about Macgyver and the squirrel." As Violetshine crossed the shore toward them, Bayshine winked at Sunbeam. "It's hilarious."

Violetshine was purring as she reached them, but Sunbeam's thoughts had drifted away. Her mother's words were ringing in her

mind. *I'd never harm my Clanmates.* Of course she wouldn't. She was too loyal. But she might hurt cats in another Clan—cats Sunbeam had grown to care about. She pressed back a shiver. What in StarClan was Berryheart planning to do?

The sun was sinking behind the forest when the leaders began heading back over the tree-bridge. Sunbeam was relieved. Ignoring Berryheart was uncomfortable.

Tigerstar was the first to cross. He avoided the gazes of the waiting warriors as he jumped down onto the pebbles and led Berryheart and Scorchfur away. Splashtail followed, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction as he headed for the reeds. Squirrelstar was the last to cross. She dropped down beside Sunbeam and nodded at her and Bayshine to follow as she headed toward the ThunderClan forest.

Sunbeam trailed behind as Bayshine fell in beside the ThunderClan leader.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Not bad," Squirrelstar told him. "We're making progress. Tigerstar's withdrawing one extra warrior."

"Did you hear that?" Bayshine looked back at Sunbeam, but she was hardly listening. She was too caught up in her own thoughts. Berryheart was up to something. What if it rippled through all the Clans? What if it threatened the peace?

"Hey, Sunbeam!" Bayshine called to her again, jerking her attention from her thoughts this time. "Do you want to hunt on the way home?"

"No, thanks." Sunbeam wanted to think things through.

"I'll hunt alone, then." Bayshine headed for the forest. "I'll catch you a vole."

As he disappeared behind the brambles, Squirrelstar glanced at Sunbeam. "You're quiet," she mewed. "Did Berryheart give you a hard time?"

"No worse than usual." Sunbeam wondered if she should share her worries about her mother's plan with Squirrelstar. Would that be disloyal? She frowned. To whom? To *Berryheart*? Surely her loyalty should lie with her Clan rather than her kin? She lifted her muzzle. "It

was kind of awkward,” she confessed. “Berryheart doesn’t agree with Tigerstar’s involvement in RiverClan. I’m worried she has a plan to stop him.”

Squirrelstar slowed. “Do you know what it is?”

“No, she wouldn’t tell me.”

Squirrelstar’s gaze darkened. “Mediation is going well,” she mewed. “But nothing’s definite. If a ShadowClan warrior starts stirring up trouble, it could set us back.”

“Should we warn Tigerstar?” Sunbeam’s belly tightened. She felt like she was betraying her mother. But Berryheart shouldn’t have secrets that could threaten the peace.

Squirrelstar’s gaze rounded with sympathy. “This must be hard for you,” she mewed. “To be caught between your mother, your old Clan, and your new Clan.” She stopped and ran her tail-tip along Sunbeam’s spine. “It was brave of you to share it with me.”

Sunbeam blinked back at her gratefully.

Squirrelstar went on. “Tigerstar is already on the defensive. Finding out one of his Clanmates is plotting against him might push him into acting rashly. At the next meeting, I’ll suggest he keep an eye on his Clan, but I won’t mention Berryheart’s name.”

“Thank you.” Sunbeam felt relief wash her pelt.

Squirrelstar held her gaze. “You’ll tell me if you learn anything new, won’t you?”

Sunbeam nodded. “I promise.”

“Good.” Squirrelstar began heading along the shore once more. “Let’s get back to camp. I’m starving.”

As the ThunderClan leader padded away, Sunbeam hung back for a moment. She was pleased she’d been able to warn Squirrelstar, and that Squirrelstar had taken her seriously. But worry was still tugging at her belly. Berryheart had a way of defying expectations . . . and she shuddered to think what her mother’s big plan might be.



Chapter 19



Frostpaw sat alone on the low wall, gazing out across the river. The sun was setting, blazing as it sank behind the Twoleg dens beyond. A frost had already settled on the grass behind her, and the last of the Twolegs were leaving the park, heading for their nests. She shrank deeper beneath her fur, cold already, with night yet to come.

The visions Riverstar had shown her during her long meditations pierced her thoughts. She wished she could sweep them away, ignore them, them but they were part of her now, sticking out like jagged thorns, so sharp she could barely focus on anything else.

Fur brushed the wall as Nightheart leaped up beside her. "Are you okay?"

She didn't look at him, but he spoke so kindly, she wished she could reassure him and tell him she was fine. But it would be a lie. "I'm struggling," she confessed. She stared hard across the river, avoiding his gaze, hoping to shield him from the intensity of her pain. Or perhaps she was trying to pretend it wasn't there. Perhaps she wasn't ready to admit it even to herself. "I've learned some things that I never suspected. I thought everything was fine and that nothing would ever change. I thought I'd live my whole life there, safe among cats I loved and trusted. I don't know if I can . . ." She broke off, emotion swelling in her throat until she couldn't speak.

Nightheart pressed gently against her and wrapped his tail around her. "You can do anything you set your mind to," he told her. "You're strong and brave. It's why StarClan chose you to do this."

She looked at him, surprised to see his clear, bright gaze looking back at her. She'd almost forgotten that the cats outside her visions were the real ones. His brightness made her aware of how tired she felt. "I just want to go to sleep for a moon and forget about everything."

"You'll be able to sleep soon," he promised. "For as long as you like. Until then, it's going to be hard, but you can do it, and I'm going to help you any way I can." A small purr rumbled in his throat, and she returned it.

She was grateful that StarClan had sent Nightheart to help her. He'd become a true friend. She turned her gaze to the river once more, feeling a little better, then suddenly wondered why Nightheart had come to find her. "Is there something you need?" she asked him.

Nightheart looked down at his paws awkwardly. "Oh . . . no. You've just been sitting here a while, that's all," he told her. Frostpaw watched him fondly. Yes, she thought, answering her own question, *but I'm upset, so he's not going to ask me for anything. Like a real friend.*

"The park cats were worried you were hungry. Look." Nightheart glanced back at the frosty grass behind them.

She was surprised to see a small heap of prey below the wall. "Who put that—" She didn't have to finish. Wasp was creeping toward it, a lump of scavenged Twoleg food between his jaws. He dropped the nugget onto the pile, glanced up at Frostpaw, blinked a greeting, and hurried away. Frostpaw's heart ached with gratitude.

"They know you're having a tough time," Nightheart told her. "And that you need space to work through it, so they're keeping their distance. But they want to make sure you eat."

"They're so kind." Frostpaw swallowed back emotion. To find such gentleness and generosity after such cruelty seemed a blessing. *I guess it is—a blessing from StarClan.*

"They respect you," Nightheart mewed. "And you deserve kindness."

She looked away. "I'm not sure I do." The thorns left by her visions were jabbing again. "I've been so stupid. I really believed Splashtail liked me. I believed it with my whole heart. I'd probably still believe it if it weren't for Riverstar. Now I can see he was just pretending. Everything about him was a lie, and I fell for it." Her fur felt hot. "I'm so embarrassed. I was so sure he felt the same way as me. I even talked him into agreeing to become mates one day. I must have seemed so foolish."

"How could you have known?" Nightheart mewed. "You're not a liar, so how could you think any cat would lie to you?"

"I was a medicine cat," she told him. "I was meant to be wise."

"Hey." He nudged her. "We learn from experience. Even medicine cats." He leaned back and looked at her. "The most important thing

is—now that you know everything, what are you going to do about it?”

She looked away. She'd been wondering that herself. She had the beginnings of an answer, but right now she was hungry. “Let's eat first.”

He purred. “Good idea.”

She leaped down from the wall and tugged a large, tasty-smelling strip of meat from the pile. She didn't want to admit to Nightheart that she was going to miss this greasy, stinking Twoleg food. But Nightheart was already tearing apart a glistening nugget so hungrily that she suspected he might miss it too. She took a bite. “The first thing I need to do,” she mewed, “is choose a new leader for RiverClan.”

Nightheart looked at her. “Has StarClan said anything more?”

“They want me to do it.” She took another bite. “And I think you were right. After spending so much time with the cats here, I've got a better idea of the qualities a Clan leader should have.” She swallowed her mouthful and looked across the grass. She could see the park cats in the distance. They had no leader, but she'd noticed how they turned to Scruff if they had a problem or a dispute. He was the oldest, and they trusted his experience. They sat now in their usual spot beneath the salmon tree. The lights had come on, and the tree was glowing pink again as dusk gathered over the park. Scruff was sharing tongues with Rook. Bee and Wasp were dozing. Waffle sniffed around the edge of the deserted Twoleg hut in hope of finding more scraps. Lark was trying to eat a scavenged piece of meat while Weevil and Peg chased her swishing tail. “These cats are thoughtful,” Frostpaw mewed. “Bee is open-minded and wise for such a young cat. Waffle is honest and smart.”

“What about Rook?” Nightheart mewed. “She's not like the others.”

“She keeps her independence,” Frostpaw watched her tempt Weevil and Peg away from their mother by batting a moss ball past them. “But have you noticed that she helps out any cat who needs it? And Lark is raising her kits to think before they act, and to make choices that are best for every cat, not just themselves.”

"Isn't that what warriors do?" Nightheart pulled a large piece of food toward him as she went on.

"I used to think so," Frostpaw mewed, "but now I'm not so sure. Apprentices only learn how to hunt and fight. They are trained to protect their Clan, but they're not encouraged to look beyond their borders or think about cats born outside their territory. Park cats seem to know there are cats beyond the park walls whose lives are very different from theirs. They don't judge; they simply offer help if they're asked for it. Look at how they took us in. They've shared their home with us, and their wisdom and food. It makes me wonder whether the Clans spend too much time thinking about our borders and not enough thinking about the land beyond them." She looked back to Nightheart. "Isn't it more important for cats to be kind and support others than argue over which prey belongs to which Clan? Wouldn't the lake be a better place if we helped each other rather than competed with each other?"

Nightheart was gnawing the end of a bone. "It sounds great," he mewed. "But is it possible?"

"RiverClan used to live that way," Frostpaw told him. "In Riverstar's day, RiverClan cats used to meditate every day. It helped them understand that there was more to life than hunting and fighting. They only fought when there was no other option. And they welcomed outsiders. They'd take in any cat who wanted to join."

Nightheart looked up. "Wasn't that risky? What about cats like Darktail?"

"Cats like Darktail gain power by exploiting the conflicts of others," she mewed. "Their strength lies in dividing cats, pitting them against each other, then shoring up support for themselves. But a cruel cat wouldn't find followers in a Clan that lived by kindness. They'd have nothing to get their claws into. They'd be isolated." She thought about it as she tore off another strip of meat. "Cats can only thrive with the help and support of others. We should accept that. We must help each other and share what we have instead of competing over land and prey. It needs to be part of our way of life." Her heart began to flutter with excitement. "I want RiverClan to be like that. To be something new, something different, something better. That's why choosing the right leader is so important." She

noticed that Nightheart was staring at her. She hesitated. "Do you think I have bees in my brain?"

"No." He hooked another bone closer. "I've just never heard you sound so sure before, that's all."

They ate quietly for a while, Nightheart purring as he worked his way steadily through three nuggets and a strip of meat. Frostpaw barely tasted hers. She was imagining how RiverClan could be with the right leader—how the other Clans might even follow their example.

Nightheart sat up, licking his lips. "So you want a leader who believes in kindness rather than competition," he mewed. "Do you have a cat in mind?"

"I know who *shouldn't* be leader," she told him. "But there's something I haven't learned yet," she told him. "Something Riverstar's been holding back."

"When will he tell you?"

"He's waiting for me to be ready to hear it."

Nightheart's ears twitched uneasily. "How long before you'll be ready?"

"I think I'm ready to hear it now." She saw relief in his gaze.

Nightheart blinked at her. "Are you sure?"

"I'm certain." She hopped back onto the wall. "Tonight will be my last meditation in the park." As she crossed to the river, her heart seemed to shiver in her chest. She remembered Waffle's words. *You're a really special cat, Frostpaw. Don't ever let anyone make you feel like you're not.* She didn't know what Riverstar had been holding back, only that it was something he was frightened to tell her and she was frightened to hear.

Night had crept over the park while she'd been eating, and now that the moon was out, the sky was black. She closed her eyes and listened to the river swishing against the riverbank. Her thoughts chattered, tumbling over themselves, swirling away downstream until she felt the longing in her heart reach out for StarClan. *I'm ready, Riverstar. I know it's taken a long time, but I'm ready.*

Visions began to whirl around her, unfolding and folding in her mind like clouds. She'd seen these visions before—Reedwhisker at the cliff's edge, rearing, stumbling, falling backward. But now she

could see Splashtail attacking him, lashing out with vicious claws and then peering over the edge to watch Reedwhisker plummet to his death. She saw Splashtail padding beside her as they traveled to the Moonpool, the wind tugging at their fur, Splashtail being friendly, kind, thoughtful. All the things she'd thought he was. But now she could see him creeping through the shadows, eyes dark, planting a curled feather where she'd find it, looking over his shoulder, afraid of being seen. She'd believed that feather was a sign her mother should be the next leader of RiverClan. Then she saw Curlfeather urging her to trust no cat, her eyes filled with fear.

Frostpaw's heart seemed to recoil. She knew what was coming next, but she let the visions consume her, allowing them to fill every part of her mind. She trembled as she saw heather close around her and smelled the peaty scent of the moor. She felt fear like a fox rushing toward her. It seemed to grab her and shake her as once more she saw Splashtail burst out and rake his claws across her throat.

"I'm sorry." Riverstar was here. She felt him at the edge of her thoughts and heard his deep mew as he shimmered into view. He stood beside the river, the moonlight gleaming on his star-specked fur. "There's more to show you. Are you sure you're ready?"

She hesitated, fear welling inside her. "I'm ready enough," she mewed. "I know now that none of this was my fault, but I have to see it all if RiverClan is to survive." She swallowed. "If I'm ever going to feel whole again, I need to know everything."

"Be strong." Riverstar began to fade, and she saw the reed beds of RiverClan territory. They looked blue in the twilight as night rolled in, and Frostpaw's heart seemed to crack open as the familiar scents of home filled her nose.

"They're organizing a search party." She stiffened as she saw Splashtail. He was talking to another cat hidden in the shadow of the reeds. "If they find Reedwhisker's body, they might figure out who killed him."

Frostpaw leaned closer, straining to see into the shadows. Who was he talking *to*?

"Should I go and move it?" Splashtail sounded scared. "I might be able to hide it."

"Don't do anything."

I know that mew. Frostpaw's mouth grew dry as the other cat padded into the moonlight and stopped a muzzle-length from Splashtail. *It can't be.* She knew that pelt better than her own. That slender frame. Her heart seemed to stop as the cat turned its face toward her. Those amber eyes. Those feathery tufts on the ends of the ears. That narrow forehead. Those small, sharp ears. Frostpaw could hardly breathe. This couldn't be true. It was just a nightmare that had strayed into her visions and become tangled with them.

"It's all going to be fine." The cat spoke again. "Just trust me."

Stop talking! Frostpaw wanted to wail. *Please, just stop!*

This was more than she could bear. The other cat was Curlfeather.

"I'll come up with an explanation." Curlfeather's mew was so smooth she might have been telling nursery stories. "It'll sound reasonable. I'll just say his death was an accident, and Frostpaw will believe it. She always does."

Frostpaw tried to back away, but she was frozen in the vision. She wanted to squirm out of her pelt and flee. She didn't want to know this. She didn't want to know anything.

But her mother was still talking. "She believed it when I told her she was a medicine cat. She'll believe this too, and the others will believe *her*."

"What if they don't?" Splashtail mewed. "You know what she's like. She'll dither and panic and start asking mouse-brained questions. The whole plan could fall apart."

"You're the one who's panicking and asking mouse-brained questions," Curlfeather snapped. "It's *not* going to fall apart. I won't let it. I'm going to be leader and you'll be deputy, just as we planned."

Splashtail eyed her warily. "How do I know you won't turn on me?"

"You don't," Curlfeather narrowed her eyes. "You'll have to trust me." She turned, her pelt rippling along her spine. "Stop acting like a kit and just do whatever I tell you." With a growl she stalked away.

"I'm no kit," Splashtail snarled under his breath as Curlfeather disappeared. "Stop treating me like one, or it'll be me who turns on

you.”

As the vision faded, Frostpaw lurched, catching herself in time before she fell. Horror was pulsing at the back of her head, along her spine, down through her paws. *Not Curlfeather. Please, not Curlfeather.* Splashtail’s betrayal had rocked her faith in her Clanmates. She’d thought it had been more than she could bear. But this was worse. Her own mother. They had been working together. Everything had been a lie. *She believed it when I told her she was a medicine cat.* That was why her visions hadn’t been real. *I wasn’t supposed to be a medicine cat.* Back then she’d had no connection with StarClan, and yet Curlfeather had encouraged her to believe it was true simply to use her. *She wanted to be leader, and I was just a way of making it happen.*

Frostpaw felt sick. It must have been her mother’s idea to plant the curled feather too. She’d used her. *I thought she believed in me.* Frostpaw’s heart shriveled inside her chest. *But she was only manipulating me, just like Splashtail did.* Grief seemed to close over her like dark water. *Did she ever really love me?*

“Frostpaw.”

She hardly heard Riverstar’s mew.

“Frostpaw.” He spoke louder. Bright sunshine washed away the darkness. He was standing in front of her, a warm meadow stretching behind him. “Are you okay?”

Frostpaw dragged her gaze toward him. He swirled in front of her, misted by grief. “This is why I couldn’t see her in StarClan,” she rasped. “She’s not in StarClan, is she?” *I can’t even speak to her. I can’t even ask her why.*

Riverstar’s eyes shone with sympathy. “She’s in the Dark Forest.”

Please, no. Why did hearing this hurt so much after what Curlfeather had done? Her mother deserved it, didn’t she?

“She knew the consequences of her actions,” Riverstar went on. “It was a price she was willing to pay.”

“Even if it meant never seeing me again?” Frostpaw realized how much like a kit she must sound. And how selfish. “Did she ever care for me at all?”

Riverstar touched his nose to Frostpaw’s head. “I’m sorry you have to suffer like this, little one,” he mewed. “Just remember that

her last act in life was to save you.”

She’d led the dogs away and given Frostpaw time to escape. That was love, wasn’t it?

Frostpaw lifted her chin. Her whole body seemed to ring with horror. *Frostpaw will believe it. She always does.* But she couldn’t let this crush her. She had to move forward. She was no longer the cat her mother and Splashtail had deceived. She was the cat who was going to put things right. She was going to make amends for everything Curlfeather had done.

She looked into Riverstar’s emerald eyes. “Do I know everything I need to know now?”

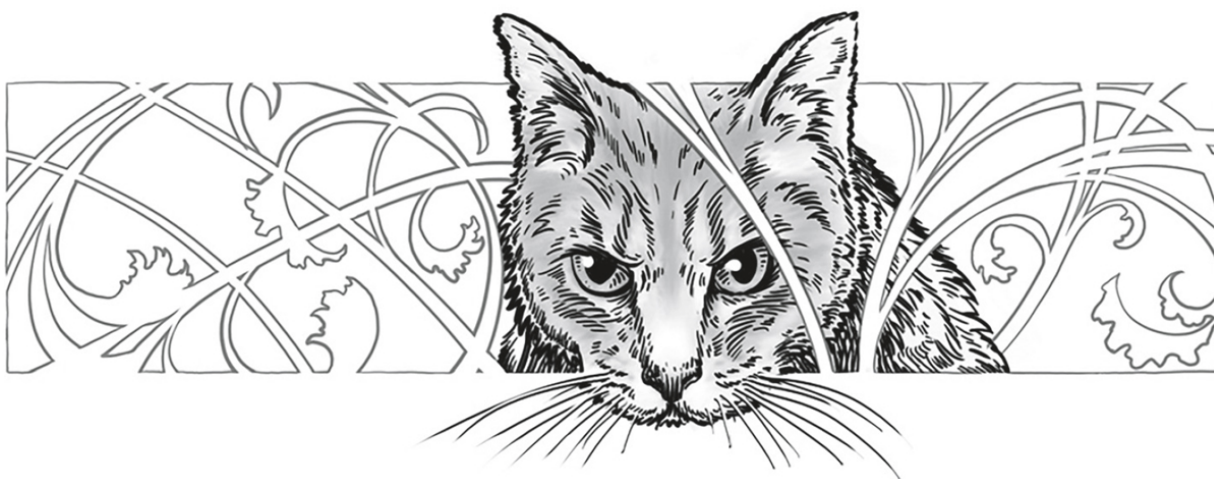
“Yes.” Riverstar gazed back at her anxiously. “If you need more time to—”

“No.” Frostpaw felt her body stiffen and her heart grow hard. Nothing more could hurt her. She would do what needed to be done. “I know what happened. I’m ready to fix it.”

“Very well.” Riverstar dipped his head. “We’ll be watching.” As he spoke, he grew pale. “You’ve done well, little one. We’re on your side.” He began to fade until he disappeared along with the meadow and the sunshine.

Frostpaw heard the river tumbling past, swishing against the bank like an old, familiar friend. She blinked open her eyes and looked at it. The surface was glittering in the moonlight. The frost along the riverbank had hardened, and it crunched beneath her paws as she headed back to the park.

Curlfeather had told her to trust no cat, but that wasn’t because no cat was trustworthy. It was because *Curlfeather* wasn’t trustworthy. The warning had been as close as her mother could get to admitting her betrayal. But Curlfeather was dead, and Splashtail was still alive. Frostpaw would have to face him. She leaped onto the wall. *I have to heal my Clan.* She knew everything she needed to choose a new leader. It was time to go home.



Chapter 20



Nightheart's thoughts were racing ahead of him as he waited to leave, already at the river, climbing the elm, leaping the gap. His paws itched to start the journey. He wanted to be home. He wanted to see Sunbeam. But still, as the park cats gathered around them to say goodbye, he felt a pang of sadness. They were gazing at him with round, gentle eyes.

He felt awkward. How could he tell these cats how much his time here had meant to him?

Frostpaw dipped her head. "Thank you for your kindness," she mewed.

"I'm glad we had a chance to meet a true RiverClan cat," Scruff mewed. "We're going to miss you."

Nightheart blinked at the old tabby. "We'll miss you too." He meant it. The long days in the park had seemed shorter once he'd come to know the park cats and adapt to their ways. He'd been surprised that their lives—though gentler and quieter than warrior life—had seemed rich and rewarding.

"Be careful on your journey," Lark told him.

Weevil pressed against his mother's flank, his eyes glistening. "We don't want you to go."

Peg padded forward, her tail high. "Are you coming back?"

"I'll visit if I can," Nightheart told her. He hoped he could, though he struggled to think of another time when he could take such a long journey. Still, he liked these cats and would enjoy seeing them again.

"Take care of Frostpaw." Firefly blinked anxiously at him. Her flanks were bulging more than ever. Her kits would come any day, and Nightheart felt sorry that he'd never meet them. He knew his promise to return was an empty one. He wasn't going to leave Sunbeam ever again.

Chalk entwined his tail with Firefly's. "Can you stay just a few days longer?"

"We have to get home," Nightheart told him. "Our Clans will be worried about us."

"Clan life sounds tougher than being a rogue," Marlow mewed. "Why don't you stay here, where it's peaceful and there's food?"

Frostpaw gazed at the ragged tom. "I hope that after we're home, the Clans will become peaceful."

Nightheart glanced at her. "You're going to have to fight for that peace," he warned her.

Firefly looked alarmed. "Please stay," she mewed. "You'll be safe here."

Bee padded forward. "You'd be very welcome if you wanted to stay." He was gazing at Frostpaw.

She looked back at him affectionately. "Riverstar has told me it's time to go home," she mewed. "There's a lot for me to sort out there. But I couldn't have faced it without your kindness." She looked around the park cats, her eyes shining. "You've helped me learn what I needed to learn, and whatever happens, I will always be grateful to you for your support."

It sounded so final. And the park cats knew it. Their gazes darkened. Bee dipped his head. Peg's tail drooped, and Weevil wriggled deeper into his mother's fur.

"If you ever want to visit ThunderClan," Nightheart told them quickly, "I'll make sure you get a warm welcome."

"Really?" Waffle was staring at him eagerly. "I hope that's true, because I want to come with you. I want to be a warrior just like you."

Nightheart opened his mouth, too surprised to speak. He hadn't mentioned this before.

"Me too." Wasp stepped forward. "I want to learn to hunt and fight for real! I want to live in the wild and catch my own prey and protect my Clanmates."

"Who will protect your parkmates if you leave?" Nightheart didn't want to steal away any cat this group might need.

Scruff's whiskers twitched. "We've managed to take care of ourselves so far," he mewed. "Besides, cats always come and go here in the park. Of course we'll miss Waffle and Wasp if they leave, but we'd never hold a cat back from following their heart." He padded to Waffle's side and ran his tail along his spine. "If you're sure, you should go," he told him.

"I'm sure." Waffle blinked at him gratefully.

"We'll miss you both." Lark told the two young cats. "But we'll be happy knowing *you're* happy."

Wasp hadn't taken his gaze from Nightheart. "Can we come?"

Nightheart looked at Frostpaw. "What do you think?"

"That would be great." Frostpaw sounded pleased, but her thoughts were clearly back in RiverClan already.

Wasp burst into a purr. "Really?"

Waffle's tail was quivering with excitement. "We're going to be warriors!"

Nightheart purred. Their excitement was infectious.

"Take this." Lark was nudging a fish head toward him, clearly saved from last night's visit from the Twoleg and its monster.

"There's no need," Nightheart mewed quickly. It was generous of the gray-and-white she-cat, but he'd prefer to eat freshly caught mouse rather than day-old fish. "We can hunt on the way. Give it to your kits."

Weevil nosed the fish head nearer. "We want *you* to have it," he mewed.

"*Please*," Peg insisted.

Frostpaw pulled the fish head toward her. "Thank you," she mewed. "That's very kind."

Rook looked at the sky. "You should go." The sun was lifting above the horizon. Twolegs would start coming soon. Nightheart nodded to the black she-cat, briefly wondering whether she would join the two younger toms in making the journey with them. Rook would be a useful cat to have around and, he thought, would make a fine warrior. But she simply returned Nightheart's nod.

Waffle headed toward the black, twisted fence. "I know the quickest way through the Twolegplace," he mewed. "And I know a safe way to cross the river."

Nightheart hurried after her. "Have you been to the river?"

"Of course," she told him. "I don't just *sleep* all day."

The park cats were following, clustering around Frostpaw. As they reached the fence, they wound around her, purring and lapping her ears and muzzle and neck. They began to do the same to Waffle, then Wasp, saying their goodbyes. Nightheart hung back. He didn't want to be licked, but Firefly caught his eye and began to pad

toward him. She lapped his cheek softly. "I'm going to name my kits Frost and Night."

Nightheart felt a rush of pride. "Thanks." He nudged her with his muzzle, then backed away before she could lick him again and hopped through one of the gaps in the fence.

Frostpaw slid after him, Wasp and Waffle at her heels.

Nightheart turned and saw the rest of the park cats watching sadly through the fence. "Thanks for everything," he called.

"Have a good journey," Scruff mewed back.

Bee's eyes glowed. "May StarClan protect you."

"Look." Nightheart nudged Waffle. "There's the moor."

They'd been trekking since dawn, and for half a moon before that. At last, Nightheart was beginning to pick up scents he recognized. Heather and the tang of pines, and he was sure he could detect a faint whiff of the oak forest. If they kept walking, they'd be at the lake by moonhigh. He glanced past Waffle and Wasp, back to Frostpaw, who was trailing a little. Had she picked up the scents too?

He dropped back, letting the park cats lead the way into the grassy meadow, and fell in beside Frostpaw. "Can you smell it?" he mewed softly.

"You mean home?" She didn't look at him. "Yes, I can."

"Are you sure about the plan?"

"Yes." Her gaze was still fixed ahead, bright but unreadable. Was she scared?

They'd discussed their plan over and over again as they'd traveled, trying to decide the best way to share with RiverClan what she'd learned during her long nights of meditation. Nightheart had suggested she wait, keeping out of sight until she could approach a Clanmate she could trust—Graypaw or Mistpaw or maybe Mothwing—and tell them that Reedwhisker had been murdered. Or she could seek sanctuary in ThunderClan and let Squirrelstar—if she was leader now—decide the best way to confront Splashtail. But Frostpaw refused to put any cat at risk. She knew all too well how dangerous it was to know the truth about Reedwhisker's death. "There's only one way to be sure Splashtail doesn't kill another

innocent cat,” she’d decided at last. “And that’s to tell the whole Clan at once.”

Nightheart wasn’t sure. It seemed dangerous to face them alone. His belly churned anxiously as he followed Waffle and Wasp across the meadow. “You can’t just walk into the RiverClan camp and announce that Splashtail killed Reedwhisker,” he warned Frostpaw. “You don’t know what’s been happening since we left. It’d be like cornering a fox with your eyes closed.”

“I have to take that risk.” Frostpaw kept walking. “They need to know what Splashtail’s capable of.”

“Will you tell them about Curlfeather too?”

She didn’t look at him. “They need to know everything if they’re going to start again.”

He knew how painful it had been for Frostpaw to admit to herself that her mother had conspired to murder the RiverClan deputy and take over the Clan, but admitting it to her Clanmates would take more courage than he could imagine. “It’ll be hard on you,” he mewed.

“It’s *all* been hard on me.” There was a tremor in her mew. “But the truth is the truth, and keeping it secret will eat away at me. RiverClan must understand everything that happened. Only then can they become the Clan that Riverstar wants them to be.” She looked at him now, her face determined. “I’m not just bringing news about Splashtail and Curlfeather. I’m carrying Riverstar’s message. RiverClan must rebuild itself, and kindness and peace must be at its heart.”

Nightheart was afraid that Frostpaw was so focused on the future that she couldn’t see the danger in the present. “Splashtail will deny everything,” he warned her. “And by now he’ll have other cats who support him. You, more than any cat, know how manipulative he is. You once fell for his lies. Other cats will too. Do you really think you can stand up to them all?”

Frostpaw kept her chin high. “I can’t let fear silence me.”

“Why don’t you just come to ThunderClan?” he pressed. “We can keep you safe. We can help you.”

“Do you think my Clanmates will trust me if I share their secrets with another Clan?”

"They might not trust you anyway," Nightheart pointed out. "You don't have any proof. Only what StarClan has told you."

"I know." She stared ahead bleakly. "And why should RiverClan believe me? I was wrong about my connection to StarClan before. But I have to tell RiverClan the truth. I can't force them to believe it, but they deserve to hear it."

Worry itched under Nightheart's pelt. If they didn't believe her, she'd be at the mercy of Splashtail. "He'll try to silence you any way he can."

She knew who he meant. "I'll face that if it happens," she told him.

He looked at her. Seeing how brave she was chased away his weariness from the long trek. He was suddenly more determined than ever to get her home. "I'll do whatever I can to help you."

"Thanks. But I'm not letting you risk your safety for another Clan." She glanced at him. "Sunbeam would be devastated if anything happened to you."

"She'd understand." *Would she?* "She'd protect you herself if she knew what was going on." He was sure of that much.

"She's been waiting over a moon for you to return," Frostpaw told him. "You can't let her down."

"I don't even know if she's still in ThunderClan." Nightheart looked aching toward the moor. "She might have given up waiting for me ages ago."

"You said Sunbeam was a true warrior," Frostpaw reminded him. "She won't give up on you."

She sounded so certain. Nightheart blinked at her gratefully. "I'm meant to be reassuring *you*, not the other way around."

"In that case, stop telling me all the ways I might fail and tell me I'm doing the right thing."

Nightheart wanted to, but he didn't know if it was true.

They walked through the afternoon, hunting and stopping to eat before night fell. As the stars appeared in the darkening sky, they pressed on, and as the bright, white moon rose high above the moor, they reached WindClan territory. Wasp stopped, and Waffle sniffed along the wide swath of heather that marked the edge.

"Which way now?" Wasp asked.

"We should skirt the moor and go by the horseplace," Frostpaw mewed.

"It'll take longer that way." Nightheart scanned the hillside. It would be quicker to cross the moor than go around. There was no sign of warriors. He tasted the air. "I can't smell WindClan."

"Is this where they live?" Waffle asked.

"Yes," Frostpaw mewed. "We shouldn't trespass on their territory."

"But it looks deserted." Nightheart slid between the heather bushes. The WindClan scents were stale. He pushed a little further in, listening for the sound of paw steps. There was no cat here. He headed back to the others. "There are no patrols out."

"We should still go around." Frostpaw began to head across the field.

"Shouldn't we check that everything's okay?" Nightheart called after her.

She looked back, worry sparking in her gaze. "Do you think something might have happened?"

"It's weird there's no sign of warriors." Nightheart's paws pricked uneasily. "The evening patrols should be out by now, but the border hasn't been marked."

Wasp's eyes rounded anxiously. "Are we going to take a look?"

Waffle's tail twitched. "We ought to have a look," he mewed. "It's what a *warrior* would do."

Frostpaw hesitated. Then she turned toward the heather. "Come on, then, but if we meet a WindClan patrol, let me do the talking."

Nightheart hurried after her. "What will you tell them?"

"That I'm on a mission from StarClan."

Waffle pushed through the heather beside them. "Will they believe you?"

"Will they attack us?" Wasp looked nervous.

Nightheart whisked his tail. "We're not going to meet any cat." He was glad Frostpaw had agreed to come this way. It felt eerie, knowing that the moor was deserted. Had something terrible happened to the Clans while they'd been away? Above them the moon shone, full and round, over the hillside. He pricked his ears, listening for sounds of movement as he led the way deeper into

WindClan territory. "We should head for their camp and see if anyone's there. Just in case something's happened."

His heart was pounding by the time they neared the thick gorse wall of the WindClan camp. "Stay low." Nightheart dropped into a crouch. "And don't make a noise." He began to creep through the heather. As he neared the wall, he froze. Cats were talking beyond.

Frostpaw stopped beside him and gave a warning glance to Wasp and Waffle. They stood still, barely breathing, as Nightheart strained to hear what the cats were saying.

"I just hope tonight's Gathering is less tense than last moon's." The WindClan she-cat sounded worried. "There was nearly a fight."

"Hopefully, Tigerstar will agree to pull all his cats from the RiverClan camp," her Clanmate mewed.

Tonight's Gathering. Nightheart looked at the sky. How had he been so stupid? It was full moon. No wonder the moor was deserted. Most of WindClan would be on the island. He looked at Frostpaw.

"The Gathering!" Her eyes were wide.

They both looked toward the lake.

The WindClan cats were still talking.

"If Tigerstar digs his claws in and refuses to move, Leafstar won't hold back."

"Especially now that she has ThunderClan on her side."

"It could mean war."

Nightheart's chest tightened. *War?* Had relations between the Clans deteriorated so much since they'd been gone? Even if Sunbeam *was* still waiting for him, a battle with ShadowClan would tug her back to the pine forest, just as ThunderClan's troubles had drawn him home.

Quickly, he crept away from the gorse wall. He could hear the others' following, their pelts swishing through the heather behind him. As soon as they were out of earshot, he stopped and blinked at Frostpaw. "We have to get to the island."

She nodded.

Waffle was staring at him, looking alarmed. "The island? Is it important?"

"Were those cats really talking about *war*?" Wasp mewed.

“There’s no time to explain.” Nightheart began to charge through the heather. He signaled them to follow with a flick of his tail. “We need get to the island, and we need to get there fast.”



Chapter 21



Sunbeam's tail quivered. It was hard to sit still. The moon seemed particularly bright, lighting the island with brilliant white light that seemed to make every pelt in the clearing shine as the Clans shifted below the Great Oak. Perhaps it wasn't the moon; perhaps everything only seemed to shine because she was excited. Squirrelstar was going to tell the other Clans that she'd passed her three trials. If only Nightheart were here to share the moment. But he'd be back soon. He had to be. She refused to believe anything else. And then she could tell him proudly that she was a ThunderClan warrior.

I've switched Clans. Sunbeam's heart fluttered nervously. *I actually did it.* She still felt a small twinge of guilt at leaving her kin and choosing ThunderClan over her former Clanmates. She couldn't suddenly stop caring about everything she'd left behind. But she didn't regret it. She'd wanted this and she'd worked for it; she was certain she'd made the right decision, and she wasn't going to apologize to any cat for joining ThunderClan.

She glanced at her Clanmates. Finchlight and Sparkpelt were beside her. Twigbranch and Finleap sat with Lionblaze, while Bayshine and Myrtlebloom gossiped nearby with Violetshine of SkyClan and Brindlewing of WindClan. Brindlewing was still breathless from the journey here. WindClan had only just arrived, bounding through the long grass because they were late.

Squirrelstar was already in the Great Oak with Leafstar and Tigerstar. Duskfur was with them, representing RiverClan. The old she-cat looked unsettled, her gaze flitting around the crowd as Harestar nosed his way through the gathered cats to join the other leaders.

Sunbeam glanced toward ShadowClan at the far side of the clearing. They stood a little apart from the other Clans. Berryheart was there, flanked by Whorlpelt and Yarrowleaf, but Sunbeam didn't even try to catch her eye. She looked at Spireclaw and Fringewhisker instead, and they dipped their heads in return. Hollowspring was there too, and Sunbeam realized, with a pang,

how long it had been since she'd spoken to her littermate. He had always been aloof, and now that he was in a different Clan, Sunbeam wondered if she'd ever share tongues with him again.

Sparrowtail caught her eye and blinked at her. She was happy he acknowledged her, but he looked anxious. Sunbeam suddenly realized that his Clanmates looked anxious too. There was a stiffness in the way they sat, watching the Great Oak, barely speaking even to each other. Only Lightleap looked relaxed. The dark brown tabby looked less exhausted than she had last time. She seemed glad to be back home among her Clanmates as she pressed gently against Blazefire.

Harestar had leaped up into the Great Oak. He stepped forward and began to address the crowd. "The prey is still running well on the moor. . . ."

"Look." Finchlight wasn't listening to the WindClan leader. She nudged Sunbeam and nodded toward the RiverClan cats. "There's only one ShadowClan warrior with them."

Sunbeam saw Scorchfur sitting beside RiverClan. The RiverClan warriors looked prouder than they had at the previous Gathering, their heads a little higher, meeting the gazes of the other cats without apology. Sunbeam felt a jab of pity for Scorchfur, alone in the RiverClan camp. Perhaps RiverClan had grown less hostile, now that the negotiations promised an end to ShadowClan's involvement soon—but from the way Scorchfur kept glancing at his Clanmates across the clearing, he still wished he were home.

Harestar began to report on an outbreak of whitecough.

"I hope this Gathering ends the arguing over RiverClan," Sparkpelt whispered.

"They still don't have a leader," Bayshine reminded her. "Or a medicine cat who can connect to StarClan."

Myrtlebloom frowned. "Let's hope they have a plan."

"We need to trust that they'll work it out," Sunbeam mewed.

"We need to trust that Tigerstar will stop interfering," Finchlight grunted.

Sunbeam glanced at her. She was getting used to ThunderClan's sulky attitude toward the ShadowClan leader. She could almost understand it now. From this side of the border, it did seem as

though Tigerstar was assuming more authority than he had a right to. But she still wished her new Clanmates would understand that Tigerstar's intentions were good, even if he was a little heavy-pawed in carrying them out.

In the Great Oak, Harestar had finished and Squirrelstar began to step into his place at the front of the branch.

Sunbeam's fur felt hot. Squirrelstar was going to make the announcement. But before she could speak, Duskfur nosed her way in front. "I'm sorry, Squirrelstar. Clan news can wait for a few moments." Her gaze darted around the gathered cats. "We held a vigil for Frostpaw last night," she told them.

Sunbeam felt a prick of grief. Without a body, there had still been a sliver of hope. But her Clanmates had clearly given up. She stiffened. How long before they held a vigil for Nightheart? She pushed the thought away. *He's coming home!*

"It's been more than a moon since she went missing," Duskfur went on. "Since we've already confirmed that it was her fur found on the moor, we must face the fact that she's gone. It does no cat any good to leave a wound open. We must accept that Frostpaw is dead and begin to heal."

Sorrowful murmurs rippled around the gathered cats.

"Losing a young Clanmate is always hard," Sparkpelt sighed.

Finchlight's shoulders drooped. "She didn't even get her warrior name."

"Curlfeather must be brokenhearted that her daughter followed her to StarClan so soon," Twigbranch mewed.

In the Great Oak, Tigerstar dipped his head respectfully to Duskfur. "I knew Frostpaw," he mewed. "She was brave and thoughtful beyond her years. She will be a great loss to her Clan."

"Thank you." Duskfur dipped her head in return and padded back to her place beside the others.

Squirrelstar took her place now at the front of the branch, pausing for a moment to let the Clans' grief settle. Then she lifted her muzzle. "ThunderClan has better news. . . ."

Sunbeam's ears twitched self-consciously as the ThunderClan leader's gaze flashed toward her. She felt the Clan cats turn to follow

it and sat up straighter, wishing she'd given her chest an extra wash before she left camp.

"Sunbeam has passed all three of her trials," Squirrelstar mewed. "She is now a ThunderClan warrior."

There seemed to be a pause, as though the Clan cats were uncertain whether they were meant to approve. Then, one mew at a time, they began to congratulate her.

"Well done, Sunbeam!" Rootspring called from among the SkyClan cats.

"Congratulations!" Fringewhisker yowled across the clearing.

Sparkpelt and Finchlight began to chant her name.

"Sunbeam!"

"Sunbeam!"

Suddenly the island clearing rang with enthusiastic meows.

Sunbeam didn't dare look at ShadowClan. She knew Berryheart would be staring ahead in stony silence. *Who cares?* she thought crossly. *Just so long as she keeps quiet.*

"So you're really going through with it!"

Sunbeam's heart sank as her mother's angry mew cut through the yowling of the other cats.

Sunbeam swallowed back anger. Why did Berryheart have to spoil her moment? *Once, just once, would you keep your opinions to yourself?* She pressed her paws against the earth, determined no one would see her anger.

But Berryheart hadn't finished. "You're betraying your Clan," she yowled. "ShadowClan will never trust you again. And don't expect your new Clanmates to accept you as we did. You'll always be an outsider to them."

"That's not true!" Sparkpelt yowled back.

"She's our Clanmate," Bayshine called.

Whorlpelt got to his paws. "You'll never be one of them, Sunbeam!"

"It's not too late to come home," called Yarrowleaf.

"If you come back now," Snowbird chimed, "it can be like nothing happened."

Sunbeam stared straight ahead. It had been bad enough with only her mother heckling her, but Berryheart had persuaded her

clique to join in. It was the same clique that had plotted with Splashtail. Did they have to agree with everything Berryheart said? Didn't they have thoughts of their own?

Sunbeam looked hopefully at Tigerstar. Perhaps he'd tell them to keep quiet. But the ShadowClan leader was watching them through narrowed eyes without speaking.

"They don't care about you," Berryheart called to Sunbeam. "They just want to steal our warriors."

"She's talking nonsense," Finchlight mewed loudly.

Sunbeam felt Sparkpelt nudge her. "Say something," she urged. "Tell them they're wrong."

But Sunbeam's mouth felt dry. She didn't want to get into a yowling match with her mother. Not here, in front of all the Clans.

"Tell them to shove it," Bayshine growled.

"You can do it," Finchlight encouraged.

The other Clans were beginning to shift uneasily, unsure where to look, as Berryheart kept going. "Is the love of one cat really worth turning your back on your Clan and your kin?"

Sunbeam took a breath. Berryheart was going to keep taunting her until she got a response. She got to her paws, but she didn't look at her mother. What she had to say wasn't for Berryheart. It was for every cat here—every cat who might doubt her decision. "I haven't joined ThunderClan just for Nightheart," she mewed loudly. "I love him, and he was the reason I chose ThunderClan, but there's more to my decision than love. In the time I've spent living with ThunderClan, in hunting and patrolling with them, and in taking the trials, I've realized it's where I belong. They have been kind to me and welcoming and fair. ShadowClan was good to me, and I'm grateful for everything my Clanmates did for me. But I wanted to follow my own path, and it led to ThunderClan. I have friends here now, and cats who are more like kin than my own kin." She shot a look at her mother, whose eyes shone with hurt and surprise. *It serves her right.* Why should Berryheart be the only cat to speak her mind? Sunbeam lifted her chin. "I'm proud to be a ThunderClan warrior."

"Sunbeam!" Finchlight cheered her name again.

"Sunbeam!" Sparkpelt joined in, along with Lionblaze, Bayshine, Twigbranch, and nearly every ThunderClan warrior who'd come to the Gathering. Sunbeam realized she was trembling. Berryheart was glaring at her, of course, but Spireclaw and Fringewhisker blinked warmly across the clearing, and Sunbeam felt a glimmer of relief.

"That was a great speech," Twigbranch purred at Sunbeam.

"We're glad you've joined us," Finleap added.

"Well said, Sunbeam," Lionblaze mewed.

Suddenly, Berryheart's criticism seemed less hurtful. Sunbeam began to purr. "Thank you." She wanted to wind around them all and tell them how much she appreciated their kind words.

"Look out." Finchlight's mew made her turn her head. "Berryheart's not finished yet."

Berryheart was barging her way through the Clans. Yarrowleaf, Snowbird, and Whorlpelt crowded behind her and stopped as Berryheart reached the Great Oak and looked up at the leaders' branch.

Sparkpelt's eyes widened. "What in StarClan is she doing now?"

Sunbeam braced herself. Was Berryheart going to make even more of a scene?

"We have an announcement to make." Berryheart acknowledged Yarrowleaf, Snowbird, and Whorlpelt with a nod. "We've given it long consideration and talked it through at great length. And our Clanmates support us. They know we are doing what's best for ShadowClan."

Yarrowleaf squared her shoulders determinedly. Whorlpelt fluffed out his fur.

Tigerstar peered down at them, looking mystified. He was clearly unprepared for their interruption. "What are you doing?"

But Berryheart ignored him and appealed to the other leaders, her gaze glittering self-righteously. "We want Tigerstar to be removed from the position of leader of ShadowClan."

Gasps sounded around the clearing. Sunbeam could hardly believe her ears. Berryheart must have bees in her brain. Did she really think this was reasonable? Was *this* the plan Sparrowtail had mentioned? She looked across the clearing to her father. He was watching Berryheart, his pelt smooth, a glow of satisfaction in his

eyes. *He knew about this.* Shock pulsed beneath Sunbeam's pelt. His Clanmates were glancing nervously at each other, but none of them spoke out against Berryheart. Was it true? Was she speaking for the whole Clan?

"What in StarClan are you doing?" Only Shadowsight seemed shocked. The ShadowClan medicine cat had been sitting with Alderheart, Kestrelflight, and the other medicine cats on the roots at the bottom of the Great Oak. Now he stepped forward and stared in astonishment at Berryheart. "*You* don't get to decide whether Tigerstar remains leader. That's StarClan's decision. He has their blessing. They gave him nine lives."

Berryheart looked back at him calmly. "Didn't StarClan agree to the changes made to the warrior code?"

"Yes, but—" He stiffened.

"And didn't one of those changes give power to warriors to remove a leader who became a danger to their Clan?"

"Yes, but—"

Lightleap spoke up now, calling angrily from the back of the clearing, "Tigerstar is not a danger to ShadowClan!"

"He's always been loyal and fair!" Blazefire chimed in. "We couldn't wish for a better leader."

Berryheart rounded on them. "He hasn't behaved like ShadowClan's leader for moons!" she yowled. "He's been so busy worrying about RiverClan that he's forgotten ShadowClan! All he cares about is running RiverClan. He doesn't care about what his own cats are going through."

"That's not true," Tigerstar called down.

"Really?" Berryheart whirled around and glared at the ShadowClan leader. "Did you even know we were this unhappy? Of course not. You've been too busy worrying about RiverClan. You're out of touch, Tigerstar. Your greed for RiverClan's territory has made you forget your own Clan."

Tigerstar's eyes flashed with rage. "How dare you!" he snarled. "I'm not greedy for RiverClan's territory. I'm only making sure that the Clan on our border is secure so that *ShadowClan* is secure. I haven't forgotten ShadowClan for a moment. I'm doing this to protect us!"

Berryheart let out a low growl. "I didn't want to have to do this, Tigerstar. You found my family and brought us back to the lake. My kits would have grown up as rogues if it weren't for you. I wanted to believe you were the leader ShadowClan needed. But now I can see that your greed is stronger than your common sense."

Sunbeam could see Tigerstar's claws flexing. Was he going to attack Berryheart? Her heart began to pound with fear.

Tigerstar's pelt spiked but he didn't move. "I've had enough of your insolence, Berryheart. I've seen you whispering, trying to influence your Clanmates. Your poison has tainted ShadowClan. It's soured our relationships with the other Clans and made my task of keeping *our* Clan safe even harder. I'm sick of having to tell you again and again that I have no intention of taking over RiverClan. I shouldn't have to keep explaining my motives. Especially to you. You're an experienced warrior. You've known me since I was born! You're my *Clanmate*, for StarClan's sake!"

"That doesn't mean I have to let you destroy the Clan!"

"I'm not destroying—"

But Berryheart wasn't listening. She turned toward the crowd. "I'm not the only one who thinks you should go. My Clanmates support me." Her gaze swept toward ShadowClan. Spireclaw and Fringewhisker exchanged alarmed glances. Hopwhisker and Flaxfoot looked at their paws, and Stonewing and Snaketooth were eying Tigerstar warily. The whole Clan was clearly ruffled by their leader's furious response. Had they thought he'd agree to step down without a fight? Or maybe they hadn't expected Berryheart to go this far. Perhaps they'd never *wanted* to support her in the first place. Sunbeam wouldn't be surprised to hear that her mother had bullied the entire Clan into agreeing with her.

Only Whorlpelt, Snowbird, and Yarrowleaf were bristling in support of Berryheart now, and even they looked a little uneasy as Tigerstar glared down at them.

But Berryheart's gaze was still burning with self-importance. She turned back to Tigerstar. "I have the support of Puddleshine too."

Tigerstar's gaze flashed toward the brown-and-white tom sitting behind Shadowsight. "Really?"

Puddleshine shifted uncomfortably.

“Wait!” Blazefire called across the clearing. “You need the agreement of *both* medicine cats to remove Tigerstar.”

“Yes!” Pouncestep agreed. “That’s what the new code says.”

The other Clans, who’d been watching in stunned silence, began to nod and murmur in agreement.

But Berryheart was still glaring at Puddleshine. “That might be the case normally,” she hissed. “But our other medicine cat is Tigerstar’s kit. He’s bound to side with his father.” She shot an accusing look at Shadowsight. “His opinion shouldn’t count.”

Shadowsight stared back at her helplessly, and Sunbeam’s heart went out to him. He must be desperate to defend Tigerstar, but Berryheart had a point. There was no way Shadowsight could make an impartial decision.

Alderheart looked at Puddleshine seriously. “Did you really agree to support Berryheart?”

Puddleshine stared back at him, his tail twitching. “Yes.”

Berryheart pricked her ears. “I didn’t quite catch that,” she mewed. “Can you say it louder so every cat can hear?”

Anger pulsed in Sunbeam’s paws. Her mother was enjoying this.

“Yes,” Puddleshine mewed loudly. “I agreed to support her. I wanted to—”

“See!” Berryheart’s eyes shone with satisfaction. “I told you.” Her gaze swept over the other leaders. “Cloverfoot should travel to the Moonpool as soon as possible to get her nine lives.”

The ShadowClan deputy looked frozen with shock. She glanced apologetically at Tigerstar. “This is the first I’ve heard of—”

Berryheart cut her off. “As deputy you have a duty to—”

“You didn’t give me chance to finish, Berryheart.”

This time, it was Berryheart who was cut off.

Puddleshine stepped forward. His fur was fluffed out and his eyes shone. He looked up at Tigerstar. “I only agreed that you should be removed so that the Clans could see how easily this new part of the code could be used by a single cat with a grudge. And how easily it could destabilize a whole Clan.”

Sunbeam felt a rush of relief.

Puddleshine went on. “Every cat knows that Tigerstar is a loyal ShadowClan warrior and a just leader. And yet Berryheart is able to

question his position simply because she disagrees with *one* decision.”

Berryheart’s pelt had spiked. “You lied to me!” she hissed at Puddleshine.

“Yes,” he mewed, “I did. It was important to bring this into the open. I couldn’t leave it to fester in the shadows any longer. It was dividing the Clan.” He looked around the gathered Clans. “I would never agree to remove Tigerstar, not unless the whole Clan were suffering because of him and there were no other option.”

Berryheart’s eyes glittered with rage and hurt. Sunbeam knew that look well. Berryheart had turned it on Spireclaw when he’d brought Fringewhisker to ShadowClan, and on Sunbeam when Nightheart had joined. But now it was even more intense.

ShadowClan’s warriors were watching Berryheart, their eyes narrowed now in judgment, many clearly relieved that they needn’t go along with her plan any longer.

Sunbeam felt a pang of pity for her mother. She’d gone out on a limb, believing she had the support of her Clanmates, but they’d left her there, exposed and with no cat to defend her. She watched, her heart aching, as Dovewing pushed her way to the front of the assembled cats and stopped in front of Berryheart.

“If you’re so unhappy with Tigerstar and the way he’s leading the Clan,” Dovewing mewed, “perhaps you should find another Clan and a new leader.” Her green gaze was unflinching. Berryheart flattened her ears, but Dovewing didn’t hold back. “Sunbeam found a welcoming home in ThunderClan. Maybe you can follow her there.”

“No, thanks,” Finchlight muttered under her breath.

“You might find you’re as happy there as Sunbeam seems to be,” Dovewing mewed.

Berryheart shot an accusing look at Sunbeam, as though it had been Sunbeam’s idea. Sunbeam looked back at her mother in alarm. *It’s nothing to do with me*, she tried to tell her with her eyes. But Berryheart’s gaze was already flitting warily around the clearing, as though every cat there had betrayed her.

“I’m a ShadowClan warrior down to my bones,” she growled. “I would never join any other Clan. I’d live as a rogue first.”

"Then perhaps that's what you should do." Tigerstar looked at Whorlpelt, Yarrowleaf, and Snowbird, who were hanging back now, a little distance between them and Berryheart. "And you three?" he asked. "Do you want to live as rogues too? If you want to stand with Berryheart, you are free to leave with her."

Leave? Sunbeam's eyes widened. Was Tigerstar really going to force Berryheart to follow through on her threat? Was he exiling her?

Whorlpelt dropped his gaze. He turned and slunk away, weaving through the crowd to join his Clanmates. Snowbird and Yarrowleaf crept after him, keeping their heads down.

Berryheart was alone now, but her eyes still glittered with anger. "I wouldn't want cowards with me," she snarled. "Everything I've done has been for ShadowClan. If you don't see that or can't appreciate it, fine. I'll leave. I'll head out on my own with no regrets."

Sparrowtail began to push his way through the crowd. "You won't be on your own," he called to Berryheart. "I'll be with you."

Berryheart looked at him gratefully, then turned toward Spireclaw. "Will you join us?" Her gaze flitted to Hollowspring. "And you?"

Sunbeam realized she'd stopped breathing. Berryheart was asking them to choose between kin and Clan in front of every cat. Did she really expect them to give up being warriors for her? And yet Hollowspring dipped his head and began to nose his way through the crowd. *He's really going to leave?* Sunbeam could hardly believe her eyes. She looked anxiously at Spireclaw. Would he leave too?

But the black-and-white tom was staring back at Berryheart. "I have a mate here," he told her. "I'm not abandoning her after all you've put us through, and I'm not asking her to leave to be part of your group."

Berryheart sniffed. "I wouldn't want a *SkyClan* cat with us anyway."

Fringewhisker's eyes flashed. "I'm ShadowClan now."

"If you say so." Berryheart looked away scornfully.

Sunbeam realized with a jolt that her mother had turned to look at her. The other Clans had followed her gaze, and suddenly every cat in the clearing seemed to be staring straight at her. She dug her claws into the ground to keep herself from trembling.

"Will you come with your kin?" Berryheart asked her. There was no warmth in her mew, and Sunbeam realized with a sick feeling in her belly that Berryheart didn't really care if she came or not. *She just wants every cat to see me "betray" her again.*

As she hesitated, Berryheart's eyes narrowed. "I can't see why you'd want to stay," she growled. "The tom you trailed after to ThunderClan seems to have disappeared. It looks like he's left you a second time."

"He's sick, that's all!" Finchlight snapped.

"Hush." Sparkpelt quieted Finchlight with a look, then blinked at Sunbeam. "You can go with her, if you think that's the right thing to do."

Finchlight refused to stay silent. "Please stay," she mewed. "You're like kin to us now."

Sunbeam gazed at them gratefully then lifted her chin and stared at her mother. "Nightheart hasn't left me," she mewed firmly. "He never would. He loves me as much as I love him." She felt suddenly calm. "I wish you well, Berryheart." Despite everything, she didn't want Berryheart to suffer. Her gaze flitted to Sparrowtail and Hollowspring. It would be strange that the cats she'd known best and longest were no longer in the forest. Sadness pressed like a stone on her heart. But she mustn't be swayed. Berryheart's decision to leave was reckless. The Clans had been her life. "My place is with ThunderClan. Not because of Nightheart, but because it's where I belong. I'm going to be a ThunderClan warrior for the rest of my life, with or without him."

"Do as you please." Berryheart whisked her tail crossly and turned away. She shot a look at Tigerstar. "ShadowClan's on its own from now on." Eyes blazing with hurt and anger, Berryheart pushed through the crowd and nosed her way into the long grass.

As Sunbeam watched her disappear with Sparrowtail and Hollowspring, she felt cold. Would she ever see them again?

As though a storm had passed, the Clans began to break apart like clouds and turn toward the tree-bridge. Harestar crouched on the low branch of the Great Oak, preparing to jump down. Tigerstar and Leafstar pressed behind him.

"Wait!" Duskfur was staring across the crowd as it began to part.

Paws stopped. Heads turned as the RiverClan warrior went on.

“There’s something else you must know,” she yowled.
“Something important you need to hear.”

Sunbeam stiffened. What could it be? Surely the Clans had seen enough drama for one night!



Chapter 22



Frostpaw was out of breath as she followed Nightheart over the tree-bridge, Wasp and Waffle crowding at her tail. They'd run here from the moor, slowing only as they'd clattered onto the pebbled shore, crossing it quietly to hide their approach.

"Keep your heads down," Nightheart whispered as he reached the island.

Frostpaw dropped down from the tree-bridge beside him. "Are we going to tell them we're back?"

"We need to find out what's happening first."

Frostpaw understood. She had news that would shock the Clans to the core. Telling RiverClan alone would be challenge enough; she couldn't imagine barging into a Gathering and blurting it out in front of every cat. No, it made sense to first see which way the prey was running. The conversation they'd overheard outside the WindClan camp suggested that relations between the Clans were still tense. It would be better for her to watch and choose her moment carefully.

She followed Nightheart as he veered away from the long grass, tracking the narrow shore instead. Trees and bushes hid them from view, and she noticed that Nightheart had chosen the leeward side so that their scents would be carried away from the Gathering, out over the lake.

Waffle was tasting the air, his eyes widening as he smelled the jumble of scents washing from the clearing. "Are all the Clans here?"

"Yes," Frostpaw whispered. "They meet every full moon."

Wasp's eyes were round with curiosity. "Why?"

Nightheart grunted. "Mostly to argue."

"Bringing our arguments here keeps the borders peaceful," Frostpaw explained. "Even though tempers can flare at the Gathering, if we let our complaints fester it would be far worse."

"Maybe," Nightheart conceded, turning from the shore and nosing his way through the beech hedge.

Frostpaw looked at Waffle and Wasp. "Don't make a sound," she told them. "We don't want the Clans to know we're back. And they

won't be pleased to find strange cats eavesdropping on their meeting."

Waffle's eyes were shining. "This is so exciting."

Wasp blinked. "It sounds dangerous."

"It *is*," Frostpaw whispered. "Be careful and follow me."

She dropped into a crouch and crept beneath the bushes, the copper leaves brushing against her pelt.

Nightheart had stopped behind a log, and she dropped down beside him.

"Wow!" Waffle pressed in beside her and peered over the top. "I've never seen so many cats."

"They look so strong," Wasp breathed.

"Hush!" Nightheart shot them a look.

Frostpaw was staring across the clearing. The Clans looked like a shoal of fish, their pelts gleaming in the moonlight as they encircled a single cat. Even the leaders were leaning forward on their branch, staring down into the crowd. Frostpaw narrowed her eyes. Who were they looking at?

Berryheart. The ShadowClan warrior was standing near the middle of the clearing, her angry gaze sweeping the Clans as they watched her.

"Everything I've done has been for ShadowClan," Berryheart yowled. "If you don't see that or can't appreciate it, fine. I'll leave. I'll head out on my own with no regrets."

Frostpaw's pelt ruffled with surprise. What had she done? Why was she leaving?

A tom began pushing his way through the crowd toward Berryheart. "You won't be on your own," he told her. "I'll be with you."

Frostpaw glanced at Nightheart. He'd spent time in ShadowClan. Did he understand what was happening? "What's going on?" Frostpaw whispered.

"I don't know." Nightheart's gaze was fixed on Berryheart.

The ShadowClan she-cat was staring at one of her Clanmates. "Will you join us?" Her gaze flicked to another. "And you?"

Nightheart stiffened. "She wants her kits to leave with her." His gaze flashed anxiously toward the ThunderClan cats. *He must be looking for Sunbeam.*

"There she is." Frostpaw could see the brown-and-white tabby she-cat sitting between Finchlight and Sparkpelt. "She hasn't gone back to ShadowClan."

Nightheart straightened. He looked as though he was going to scramble over the log.

Frostpaw grabbed him, sinking her claws into his pelt and dragging him down behind the log. "What in StarClan are you doing?"

"I have to talk to her."

"Not now!" Frostpaw glared at him and he gave in. She could feel him trembling as she let go. "Just wait."

One of Berryheart's kits began heading toward his mother.

"Hollowspring's going with them!" Nightheart's mew was taut with fear. "What if Sunbeam goes too?" His pelt spiked along his spine.

"She won't." Frostpaw had heard enough about Sunbeam over the past moon to guess she wouldn't walk away without knowing what had happened to Nightheart.

"You don't *know* that." Nightheart's eyes were filled with fear. "I abandoned her. I didn't even tell her I was going. She has every right to leave me."

"She loves you," Frostpaw told him as the Clans turned toward Sunbeam. "Why would she leave?"

"She might think I'm never coming back."

"Even if that's true," reasoned Frostpaw, "we can't show ourselves now. Like you said, we should be cautious. . . . We need to find out what's going on, remember?"

Nightheart was trembling. It seemed to be taking all his willpower not to leap over the log and push his way into the crowd.

Frostpaw rested her tail on his spine. "Just wait," she whispered.

Berryheart was staring at Sunbeam. "Will you come with your kin?" Sunbeam's eyes flashed with alarm and Nightheart stiffened as Berryheart went on. "I can't see why you'd want to stay," she mewed. "The tom you trailed after to ThunderClan seems to have disappeared. It looks like he's left you a second time."

"Please stay." Nightheart's whisper was desperate.

Sunbeam stared back at her mother. "Nightheart hasn't left me," she mewed. "He never would. He loves me as much as I love him."

She dipped her head. "I wish you well, Berryheart. My place is with ThunderClan. Not because of Nightheart, but because it's where I belong. I'm going to be a ThunderClan warrior for the rest of my life, with or without him."

Nightheart's eyes shone with joy.

Frostpaw heard him swallow back a purr and nudged him. "See?" she mewed. "I told you she wouldn't leave."

Berryheart was pushing through the crowd. Her mate and kit followed as she disappeared into the long grass, and Frostpaw tensed as the Gathering began to break up. "They're leaving," she mewed.

Wasp shifted nervously. "We should get out of here before they pick up our scent."

"Is there another way off the island?" Waffle asked.

The Clans were beginning to separate and look toward the tree-bridge.

"Maybe we should wade out into the water to hide our tracks," Wasp suggested.

"Let's just stay low until they're gone," Nightheart murmured.

"Wait!" A mew sounded from the Great Oak.

Frostpaw blinked in surprise as she saw Duskfur calling from the leaders' branch. What was a RiverClan warrior doing up there? Had RiverClan chosen a leader without her?

The gathered cats turned back to the oak, their pelts ruffling as Duskfur went on.

"There's something else you must know," the old she-cat yowled. "Something important you need to hear."

Heart racing, Frostpaw scanned the clearing for RiverClan. Spotting her Clanmates, she felt a sharp pang in her heart. They were clustered at the back, watching Duskfur anxiously. Splashtail was with them. She shuddered, suddenly very aware of the scar on her throat, like an echo of the pain she'd felt. The tabby tom's gaze was sharp and fixed on the Great Oak.

Duskfur looked around the gathered cats. "As you know, we have been without a true medicine cat for moons," she mewed. "While Frostpaw was alive there was still a hope she might find a way of connecting with StarClan, but since she died, we've been lost."

A shiver ran through Frostpaw's fur. *They think I'm dead.* It was what she had planned, even asking for Whistlepaw's help in convincing them, but hearing a Clanmate say it out loud frightened her. If she died now for real, RiverClan wouldn't search for her or even notice she was gone. She looked at Splashtail again, his eyes gleaming as he watched Duskfur, and felt more vulnerable than ever.

Duskfur sat up straight now. "But I'm glad to tell you that we now have a new medicine cat."

Murmurs of relief swept around the gathered cats.

Frostpaw's tail twitched with surprise. Why hadn't Riverstar told her he could reach another cat in RiverClan now?

Harestar looked hopefully at Duskfur.

Leafstar pricked her ears eagerly. "Will you be able to choose a leader now?"

But Duskfur didn't answer. Instead she looked toward the RiverClan cats. "Podlight will be RiverClan's medicine cat from now on."

The gray-and-white tom padded warily forward.

"Podlight!"

"Podlight!"

He glanced at his paws as his Clanmates cheered his name. Frostpaw searched for Mothwing in the crowd. *How does she feel about this?* But when she found her former mentor, the medicine cat's gaze was unreadable.

Squirrelstar looked at him doubtfully. "When did you realize you had a connection with StarClan?"

"Why didn't you realize it before?" Tigerstar added.

Podlight looked up at them. "I've always had strange dreams, but I didn't realize they were special."

Nightheart glanced at Frostpaw. "Has he ever mentioned his strange dreams before?"

"Not to me." Doubt was tugging in Frostpaw's belly.

"I had my first real vision when I was fishing." Podlight was growing in confidence as he spoke to the Clans. "It wasn't long ago. That's when I knew it was a real connection."

Frostpaw shifted uneasily. It sounded a little like her first vision. Perhaps StarClan had reached out to Podlight the same way they'd

reached out to her. But why hadn't Riverstar mentioned it?

"Riverstar, the founder of RiverClan, appeared," Podlight went on. "He told me that the time had come to make RiverClan strong again—as formidable as it had been when he was leader."

"That doesn't sound like the Riverstar you talked about," Waffle whispered.

"Yeah," Wasp agreed. "Even in the stories the park cats tell, Riverstar was a gentle cat."

Frostpaw stared at Mothwing again. It seemed notable that she wasn't speaking up to support Podlight. Instead her jaw was set, and her eyes seemed fixed on the distance. *She's unhappy.*

And Podlight was Curlfeather's littermate. *If my mother was working with Splashtail against the Clan, could Podlight be as well?* "I'm pretty sure Podlight is making it up," Frostpaw mewed.

Podlight hadn't finished. "He told me the Clan must be as powerful as the river it was named for."

Waffle blinked at Frostpaw. "Why would he make something like that up?"

Frostpaw wanted to know the same thing. "Let's just listen," she mewed.

Harestar was staring at Podlight. "Did Riverstar tell you who your leader should be?"

"Yes." Podlight stared back at the WindClan leader.

Frostpaw's heart began to pound. Suddenly, she knew why Podlight would fake a connection with StarClan. Some cat had put him up to it.

"Riverstar was very sure about who should be next leader of RiverClan," Podlight went on. "And I agree with him. In fact, I'm surprised no cat has thought of them before. Riverstar's choice is the obvious choice, as far as I'm concerned, and I think you will all agree."

Dread wrapped icy claws around Frostpaw's heart.

"Our next leader will be . . ." Podlight paused and looked around the Clans. Then his gaze flitted to the warrior Frostpaw feared most. "Splashtail."

She froze as Splashtail padded forward, his head high, his pelt rippling with pride.

The Clan cats looked bemused.

"He's too young," Twigbranch yowled.

"He's never even been a mentor," Oatclaw called.

"He's too young to be *deputy*, let alone leader," Blazefire growled.

Splashtail ignored them. He padded through the crowd, taking his time, letting it part in front of him, until he reached the bottom of the Great Oak. Then he leaped up beside Duskfur and stared out at the Clans.

"I know I'm not the cat you expected," he said, looking evenly over the crowd. "In fact, when Podlight first told me, I didn't believe it myself. But after some self-reflection, I've found the strength I need. This is my destiny. I can lead RiverClan. Not only can I repair the damage done by careless cats, but I can make my Clan stronger than it's been in moons."

Frostpaw's paws felt like stone. She turned to Nightheart. "We're too late!"

"No, we're not." Nightheart looked back at her. "We can still fix this."

"How?" Panic was shrilling through Frostpaw's pelt. "I thought I could do this, but not if he's already convinced them he's the leader. That's all RiverClan has wanted since Mistystar died! How can I persuade them that the cat they think will save RiverClan is a liar and a murderer? That he killed Reedwhisker, all part of a plot to take over the Clan? They'll never believe me."

"They will." Nightheart held her gaze.

"How *can* they?" She knew it wasn't true. He was just saying it to make her feel better. "I've messed up so many times. I was wrong about my visions from StarClan. I was wrong about Owlnose being the right leader! Why wouldn't I be wrong about this, too? If I tell them *now* that Splashtail murdered Reedwhisker to make himself leader, they'll think I'm inventing more nonsense. Or, worse, they'll think I'm lying. They'll think *I'm* the one trying to control RiverClan."

Nightheart stared back at her. He didn't argue. How could he? Instead he blinked at her calmly. "It's going to be hard," he mewed. "But we can't let Splashtail get away with this."

"It's not just hard! It's hopeless!" Frostpaw glanced toward the clearing. Splashtail was staring out from the Great Oak as though

he'd already been given his nine lives. Despair welled in her chest. She'd come back too late. She'd let her Clan down. She'd let *Riverstar* down. Splashtail had won.

He cast his eyes over the assembled cats, and Frostpaw felt a chill as his gaze swept over her. Splashtail couldn't have seen her, but she felt his hatred. She felt his determination to be leader. Even though her crush on him was long gone, she saw him in a way that only a cat who had cared for him deeply could, and what she saw terrified her. He'd nearly *killed* her to get what he wanted. What else would he be willing to do? Who else would he be willing to sacrifice?

"Frostpaw, look at me." Nightheart's mew was stern. She dragged her gaze back and saw his bright amber eyes glowing with determination. "You can do this, and I'm going to help you. Together, we're going to do whatever it takes to make things right."

About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. In addition to having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the **Seekers**, **Survivors**, **Bravelands**, and **Bamboo Kingdom** series. Erin lives in the UK. Enter the wild at warriorcats.com.

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Cover art © 2023 by Owen Richardson

Cover design by Chris Kwon

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023934447
Digital Edition OCTOBER 2023 ISBN: 978-0-06-305031-0
Print ISBN: 978-0-06-305027-3

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