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WARRIORS

CLOUDSTAR'S JOURNEY



**SHORT STORY
EBOOK
EXCLUSIVE!**

ERIN HUNTER

WARRIORS

CLOUDSTAR'S
JOURNEY

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HUNTER

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Special Thanks

Special thanks to Victoria Holmes

ALLEGIANCES

SKYCLAN

LEADER

CLOUDSTAR—small pale gray tom with white patches and very pale blue eyes

DEPUTY

BUZZARDTAIL—ginger tom with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT

FAWNSTEP—light brown tabby she-cat

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

NIGHTFAR—black tom
APPRENTICE, OAKPAW

QUAILHEART—
dappled gray tom

STOATFUR—orange-
and-white tom

APPRENTICE,
TANSYPAW

WEASELWHISKER—
brown-and-ginger tom

APPRENTICE,
ACORNPAW

FERNPELT—dark
brown tabby she-cat

MOUSEFANG—sandy-
colored she-cat

APPRENTICE, SNAILPAW

RAINLEAP—silver
tabby she-cat with blue
eyes

APPRENTICE, MINTPAW

APPRENTICES (more than six moons
old, in training to
become warriors)

OAKPAW—gray tabby
tom

ACORNPAW—light
brown tom

SNAILPAW—dark
brown tabby tom

TANSYPAW—cream-
colored she-cat

MINTPAW—pale gray

she-cat

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

BIRDFLIGHT—light brown tabby she-cat with long fur and amber eyes

HAZELWING—orange tabby she-cat with green eyes (mother to Webkit, a pale gray tom; Hatchkit, a dark gray tom; Emberkit, an orange she-cat; and Mistlekit, a silver tabby she-cat)

ELDERS

PETALFALL—rose-cream she-cat with green eyes

STARLINGFEATHER—dark brown tom with amber eyes

HAWKSNOW—brown tabby tom speckled with white

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

REDSTAR—dark ginger tom

DEPUTY

SEEDPELT—gray she-cat with darker flecks

MEDICINE

KESTRELWING—dark

CAT

brown tabby tom

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER

DAWNSTAR—creamy
brown she-cat

DEPUTY

SNAKETAIL—brown
tabby tom

MEDICINE
CAT

MOLEPELT—small
black tom

WINDCLAN

LEADER

SWIFTSTAR—dark gray
tom

DEPUTY

MILKFUR—creamy
white tom

MEDICINE
CAT

LARKWING—silver-
and-black tabby she-
cat

RIVERCLAN

LEADER

BIRCHSTAR—light
brown tabby she-cat

DEPUTY

SLOEFUR—black she-
cat

MEDICINE
CAT

ICEWHISKER—silver-
gray tom



CHAPTER 1



Stripes of sunlight dappled the forest floor and the air was thick with the scent of damp new leaves. Cloudstar jerked his head up as he caught sight of a flash of dark gray movement above him: a squirrel, darting between the branches with its tail streaming behind like a feather.

“Are you just going to watch it?” meowed Buzzardtail, twitching his nose. The sturdy ginger deputy went to the trunk of the tree and peered up. “Or are you hoping it will find its own way to the fresh-kill pile?”

Cloudstar snorted. “I’ll leave that

one for the apprentices to catch.” He lifted one paw and rubbed it behind his ear. “My old bones are enjoying this sun too much to go chasing about in the trees.”

“What’s that nonsense about old bones?” Buzzardtail demanded. “You’re barely older than I am, and I’ve certainly got a few more chases and battles in me.”

Cloudstar stepped around his deputy and headed for a patch of pale green ferns. “Ah, but I’ve been worn down by the burdens of leadership,” he teased.

There was a rapid thud of paw steps as Buzzardtail hurtled after Cloudstar and swiped him over his haunches, claws sheathed. “The only burden you’ll

have is those kits of yours keeping you awake once they arrive. I heard Birdflight tell Hazelwing that she's going to let them sleep in your den to give her some peace."

Cloudstar purred. "They'll be welcome," he mewed. "I can't wait to meet them."

Buzzardtail rolled his eyes. "You might not feel that way when they start pulling your tail and chewing your whiskers."

"I don't recall you putting up much of a fight with your three when they wanted to play!" Cloudstar reminded him. Snailpaw, Tansypaw, and Mintpaw were apprentices now, strong and good at climbing trees like all SkyClan

warriors, but Buzzardtail had been as soft as honey with them when they were born.

Buzzardtail grunted. “Just you wait. Chasing that squirrel will seem easy compared to looking after kits!”

The sound of a twig snapping distracted them, and both cats stared into the bracken. A blurry shape was just visible through the green stems. Cloudstar opened his mouth to taste the air. “Is that a ThunderClan patrol?” he called.

The ferns parted and a speckled gray face appeared. “Cloudstar? You wouldn’t be chasing squirrels into our territory, would you?”

Cloudstar snorted. “Of course not,

Seedpelt. SkyClan cats know how to respect borders.” He spoke lightly, but he wasn’t about to let the ThunderClan deputy challenge him for no reason.

Seedpelt nodded and stepped through the bracken until she was less than a fox-length from the SkyClan cats. She stretched out her neck and sniffed.

“Our border marks are in the right place,” Buzzardtail growled.

Seedpelt opened her blue eyes wide. “Of course they are,” she purred. “I wasn’t accusing you of anything, Buzzardtail.”

“For once,” muttered the SkyClan deputy.

“Is everything all right, Seedpelt?” called a voice from beyond the bracken.

“Fine, thanks, Nettleclaw,” Seedpelt replied without taking her eyes from Cloudstar. More quietly, she asked, “I trust all is well in SkyClan?”

“Yes. Is there a reason why it wouldn’t be?” Cloudstar felt his hackles rise.

Seedpelt’s eyes glinted. “It’s not often I find the leader and deputy forming their own patrol. Rich pickings for rival Clans wanting a fight, I’d have thought.”

“We’re not frightened of you,” Buzzardtail snarled. He took a step forward, but Cloudstar held him back with a twitch of his tail.

“Don’t let her get to you,” he warned his old friend. “Seedpelt, I’ll grant you

the respect of not watching where you set your border marks, but we will not tolerate a single ThunderClan paw on our territory.”

Seedpelt bowed her head. “We wouldn’t dream of it, Cloudstar.”

Cloudstar twitched his ears, indicating to Buzzardtail that he should follow, and the two cats headed into the trees. As soon as they were out of earshot of the ThunderClan patrol, Buzzardtail spat, “What was that furball going on about, telling us we’re an easy target for rival patrols?”

Cloudstar shrugged. “Seedpelt was just trying to distract us from the fact that her patrol was closer to our border than they should have been. That clump of

ferns has always been a barrier between the territories, and ThunderClan patrols are supposed to leave their marks on the far side.”

Buzzardtail stopped in his tracks, his fur bristling. “They were lucky we didn’t claw their ears!”

Cloudstar kept walking. “I’m sure Seedpelt was shocked to find us there, and she knows we’ll be checking for ThunderClan scent marks from now on.”

Buzzardtail stomped behind him, still muttering. “Those ThunderClan cats think they can hunt where they like. If Duskstar hadn’t given them that strip of SkyClan territory to start with, they wouldn’t walk all over us as if our scent marks meant nothing. I know he was our

leader, but really, it was a mouse-brained decision.”

Cloudstar gazed into the trees on the far side of the border. They grew more densely there than in the rest of the SkyClan, mostly oaks with thick trunks and gnarled, heavy branches that bent low to the ground. He hadn't been born when Duskstar made the startling announcement at a Gathering that he would surrender part of his territory to ThunderClan, but the decision still sat uneasily with his Clan. “Duskstar had his reasons,” he meowed to Buzzardtail.

“What, that he had bees in his brain?”

Cloudstar shook his head and tried to imagine himself in Duskstar's place,

worn down by constant battles over a line of trees with old, fragile branches, while the sheer volume of leaves made it too easy for squirrels and birds to hide. “This part of the forest offered better hunting for ThunderClan warriors than for us. And he knew that ThunderClan queens had recently had several litters of kits, and their need for food was greater than their territory could provide. We may be rivals, but there have always been five Clans in the forest. If one is in danger of starving to death, it is our duty to help them survive.”

“That’s not part of the warrior code,” growled Buzzardtail.

“No, but obeying your leader is,” Cloudstar pointed out, keeping his tone

light. “Thanks to Duskstar, in fact. You remember he was responsible for this part of the warrior code? And right now, your leader is ordering you to return to the camp to see what the hunting patrols have caught for us!”

“He’s back!”

As soon as Cloudstar and Buzzardtail wriggled under the brambles that surrounded the SkyClan camp, four tiny shapes hurtled across the hard-packed earth. “Cloudstar! Hazelwing said you’d teach us a battle move! Please?”

Cloudstar gently disentangled himself from the flurry of gray and orange pelts. “You seem to be quite good

at pouncing already,” he mewed.

An orange tabby she-cat hurried over. “Kits! Kits! Leave poor Cloudstar alone!” She turned to Cloudstar, her green eyes apologetic. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know where they get their energy from. The only way I could get them to give Birdflight any peace in the nursery was by promising you’d show them a battle move.”

Cloudstar looked down at the four eager faces by his front paws. “It’s no problem, Hazelwing. I’m sure I can keep them amused for a while.”

The biggest kit, a pale gray tom, bounced on his toes. “Does this mean we’re going to start our warrior training?” he squeaked.

“Not quite, Webkit,” Cloudstar meowed. “You’ll have to wait another five moons for that. Now, wait for me by the hazel bush and do some stretches to warm up.” The kits scrambled away, Webkit racing ahead with his brother Hatchkit, while their sisters, Emberkit and Mistlekit, followed a few paces behind.

“Do you think our kits will be so lively?” murmured a soft voice beside Cloudstar.

He turned to look into Birdflight’s amber eyes. She looked tired, her belly swollen under her long brown fur. “You should be resting,” he reminded her. “Come on, let me take you back to the nursery.”

Birdflight flicked her tail at him. "I've had enough of being stuck inside. Let me get some fresh air!"

Cloudstar pressed his face to her belly. Something rippled against his cheek. "I think that one's going to match Webkit for liveliness," he predicted.

Birdflight purred. "I can't wait to meet him," she purred.

"Or her," Cloudstar put in. "Two of each would be nice, like Hazelwing's litter. Or maybe three toms to look after their sisters."

"My daughters will be able to take care of themselves!" Birdflight retorted, her eyes warm. "Perhaps they'll look after their brothers?"

Cloudstar rested his muzzle on top of

Birdflight's head. He felt the tips of her ears brush against his chin like the wings of a moth. "I'll teach them everything I know so that no harm comes to them," he promised. "Even when they are warriors, I'll still watch over them. They will be the most precious parts of my life—alongside you, of course." He closed his eyes and breathed in Birdflight's sweet scent. *Thank you, StarClan, for giving me everything I could have dreamed of. My Clan is strong and happy, our borders are safe, and soon Birdflight and I will have kits of our own. You have been kind to me.*

"Cloudstar! Cloudstar!" Mistlekit was calling to him from beside the hazel bush. With a sigh, Cloudstar stepped

away from Birdflight and started toward the far side of the clearing. But a frantic crackle of twigs stopped him in his tracks, and he spun around to see Fernpelt leading her hunting patrol back into the camp. Her eyes were wide and worried, and she headed straight for Cloudstar once she was clear of the brambles.

He looked past her to see what the patrol was carrying. To his shock, only Snailpaw held any prey: a rather damp-looking squirrel, its gray tail dragging along the ground. "Is that all?" Cloudstar exclaimed.

Fernpelt stood in front of him, her pelt bristling. "There was nothing to find!" she told him. "We went to the

border beside the pine trees, but the woods were empty. Snailpaw did well to catch that squirrel.”

“And that was only because it was half-drowned in a puddle,” muttered Acornpaw. Like the other cats on the patrol, his fur was ruffled and smeared with mud.

“But it’s almost greenleaf,” Cloudstar meowed. “The prey should be jumping into our claws!”

Fernpelt shook her head. “Not in that part of the forest. The Twolegs are making so much noise just beyond the border that they’ve scared everything away. If there is any prey left, we can’t smell it over the stench from the monsters.”

Cloudstar narrowed his eyes. Gigantic yellow monsters had been shifting huge piles of earth just beyond their boundary for a while now. They hadn't crossed into SkyClan territory, so Cloudstar had paid little attention. Twolegs were always doing strange things, but they rarely strayed over the borders.

Stoatfur stepped quietly up to Cloudstar. He had been part of Fernpelt's patrol. "I don't think we should hunt along that border from now on," he meowed. "The yellow monsters seemed much closer today, and it could be dangerous."

Cloudstar shook his head. "I don't agree. We know that Twolegs take trees

from treecutplace, but they've never troubled us anywhere else. They don't even bring their dogs into that part of the territory. Once the prey gets used to the noise from the yellow monsters, it will come back. You had bad luck hunting today, that's all."



CHAPTER 2



Cloudstar lay in his nest beneath a densely leaved elderberry bush and dreamed. He was in a forest of wide-spaced trees—oak, birch, beech, and ash—all growing so tall that their tops were lost in the wispy clouds. Their branches were perfectly placed for swift, unhindered climbing, and the ground was clear of brambles or tangled ferns so a cat could leap safely down in pursuit of prey or enemies. But Cloudstar knew there would be no enemies here, not even from rival Clans, because this was StarClan, where his ancestors lived peacefully alongside one another as they

watched over the cats below.

A few blades of sunlight sliced through the trees, sending flashes of warmth across Cloudstar's gray-and-white pelt as he padded between the trunks. The air rippled with the scent of prey and new growth, and his claws tingled with the urge to spring up the nearest tree and soar skyward, seeing the forest from a completely different view as it unfurled beneath him. Soft paw steps behind him made him turn.

A dark ginger she-cat who Cloudstar recognized from his nine-lives ceremony was padding toward him. "Maplestar!" He bowed his head.

"Greetings, Cloudstar," Maplestar purred. "Welcome to StarClan."

Cloudstar looked up. “Is everything okay?” he asked, suddenly feeling a chill beneath his pelt. “Did you bring me here for a reason?”

The orange cat twitched her ears. “Everything’s fine. We just wanted to see you, to tell you how proud we are of you.”

Cloudstar arched his back and purred. “Thank you. It is an honor to lead my Clan.”

Maplestar brushed her tail along his flank. “Walk with me,” she invited. Side by side, the cats padded between the tree trunks, moving from sunlight to shadow and back to sunlight again. “SkyClan has been at the heart of the forest, the heart of the warrior code, since cats first

made this place their home. Did you know we were the first Clan to mark boundaries? Clear Sky, who led us then, saw how our territory could feed and shelter us, and he knew that he had to protect it from outsiders who were jealous of our prey and security.”

Cloudstar meowed, “We still mark the borders in his memory. No SkyClan cat will forget the debt we owe to him.”

There was a rustle in a clump of ferns at the side of the path. A black-and-brown tom stepped out and nodded to them. “Greetings, Maplestar, Cloudstar.”

Cloudstar tipped his head on one side. Beside him, Maplestar twitched her tail. “Cloudstar, this is Rowanstar.”

Cloudstar bowed. "I am honored to meet you," he mewed.

Rowanstar flared his nostrils, as if he was annoyed that Cloudstar failed to recognize him. "I was one of the leaders who decided that boundaries should be patrolled and marked daily, as part of the warrior code. Clear Sky may have traced the first outline of our territory, but I was the leader who made the borders as strong as stone."

There was a cough from Maplestar. "As I recall, Rowanstar, the issue was raised at a Gathering only after your patrols were caught once too many times in ThunderClan's territory."

The dark-colored tom bristled. "If ThunderClan had marked their boundary

clearly, my cats would never have accidentally strayed.”

“You both brought honor and strength to SkyClan. But the greatest contribution to the warrior code came from me,” rumbled a voice behind them.

The three cats whirled around to see a dark brown tom with yellow eyes standing on the path. His thick coat was underlaid with soft black fur, so that he looked as though he were outlined in shadow. Cloudstar pricked his ears. “Duskstar!” he meowed.

Duskstar dipped his head. “Greetings, Cloudstar. I trust you haven’t forgotten the life that I gave to you? To have faith in your instincts, and know that your word is law?”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Cloudstar promised.

The brown tom looked at the other two cats. “Maplestar, Rowanstar, it is rare that we three meet in this woods. We are all part of the noble history of SkyClan, but it is thanks to me that the leaders of all five Clans know that their judgment is final, that their word goes unchallenged. Cloudstar, you must use this power wisely, for the good of your Clan rather than personal gain. Learn to lead from our examples, and your path will be clear and straight.”

Cloudstar bowed. “I am honored to follow in your paw steps.” He looked down at his paws. *I have to ask!* “Duskstar, did you ever regret giving

ThunderClan that strip of forest?"

There was a heartbeat of silence, and Rowanstar looked aghast. Then Duskstar said quietly, "Wherever our heart lies, we have a duty to preserve the survival of all five Clans in the forest. I could not watch our neighbors starve when we had prey to spare." The brown tom went on. "Hold your head high, Cloudstar. SkyClan is the noblest of all the Clans, with the strongest borders, the bravest warriors, and the most skillful hunters. You have nothing to fear from Twolegs, or their monsters, or the animals they have bent to their will. SkyClan will endure forever!"

The clouds above the trees seemed to sink through the branches until

Cloudstar was surrounded by mist. The cats around him blurred and faded, their pelts vanishing against the background of leaves and trunks. Then Cloudstar felt soft feathers tickling his nose in time with his breathing, and heard the rustle of dry moss as he stirred.

“Cloudstar? Are you awake?” A small tabby she-cat, her striped fur the color of bracken in leaf-fall, was peering down at him. The scent of herbs hung on to her pelt, and there was a scrap of tansy clinging to her whiskers.

“Fawnstep?” Cloudstar scrambled to sit up. “Is Birdflight okay? Is there something wrong?”

The medicine cat took a step back, giving Cloudstar room to climb out of

his nest. “Birdflight is fine,” she purred. “I wanted to speak with you about something else.”

Cloudstar shook his pelt to dislodge a piece of moss, then led the way into the clearing. The dawn was clear and still, promising a warm day full of prey-scent and stable branches for climbing. “What is it?” Cloudstar asked, turning back to Fawnstep.

She ducked her head. “I’d rather speak outside the camp, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, okay.” Cloudstar twitched his tail, inviting her to go first. They squeezed under the brambles and emerged into a glade of silver birches, whose cobweb-colored leaves

whispered in the softest breath of wind. Fawnstep pushed her way through the long grass that grew between the slender gray trunks and headed deeper into the woods. Cloudstar trotted after her.

“Don’t go too far, or we’ll run into the dawn patrol,” he warned.

Fawnstep stopped beside a tree stump and sat down, curling her tail over her paws. “There have been omens,” she began.

Instantly Cloudstar tensed. “What kind of omens?”

Fawnstep looked serious. “I think these signs involve what the Twolegs are doing on the edge of our border. I think SkyClan is more threatened by them than we realize.”

Cloudstar thought of his dream, and knew he would be able to reassure Fawnstep, whatever she was worrying about, but he wanted to hear her speak first. “Tell me what you have seen.”

“Yesterday, in the fresh-kill pile, there was a blackbird with no head. The day before, I found a sparrow with no wings, and later a squirrel without a tail.” The medicine cat’s voice was high-pitched with alarm, and her blue eyes were huge.

Cloudstar shrugged. “The apprentices must be hunting clumsily. I’ll have a word with them later.”

Fawnstep shook her head. “I’ve already spoken to them. They told me the prey was in one piece when they caught

it.”

“So what do you think it means?” Cloudstar prompted. He still felt untroubled, boosted by the memory of his dream with three noble leaders assuring him that SkyClan would survive forever.

“Our prey is being diminished, made smaller,” Fawnstep meowed. She traced a circle in the leaf mulch with her front paw, then sliced across it, cutting it in half. “Our hunting is getting smaller—literally, from what we find in the fresh-kill pile to the places we can hunt.”

“You mean, because of what the Twolegs are doing?”

Fawnstep nodded. “The noise and stench have scared off the prey already.

And we don't know what the Twolegs are doing there. What if they cross our boundary and start to take over our territory? We know they don't respect scent marks."

Cloudstar rested the tip of his tail on Fawnstep's shoulder. "There's no reason to believe that will happen. Trust me. I walked with other SkyClan leaders in StarClan last night, and they promised that no harm will come to us. I appreciate you telling me this, but I'm sure it's just a sign that we need to take more care with our hunting."

He turned to go, and Fawnstep stood up behind him. As he walked away, she called out, "I'll keep looking, Cloudstar. Something is coming, I fear."

As Cloudstar entered the circle of birch trees, the long grass rippled and Birdflight sat up. Crushed grass showed where she had been sprawling on her side, basking in a beam of sunlight. Cloudstar trotted over and rubbed his muzzle against her shoulder. “How are those wriggly little ones today?” he murmured.

“Alive and kicking!” Birdflight replied, sounding breathless. “It helps to walk, sometimes. Will you come with me?”

“Of course,” mewed Cloudstar. “But we’re not going far. I don’t want to have to carry you back!”

“Cheeky fox!” Birdflight scolded, flicking him with her tail.

They padded out of the birches and walked through the trees toward the river. The undergrowth thinned as the ground sloped down to the water. Birdflight settled herself on a patch of soft grass and Cloudstar sat beside her. The water flowed swiftly past, too deep for wading—not that any SkyClan cat would willingly get their paws wet.

“Our kits will love playing here when they’re old enough to leave camp,” Birdflight commented, gazing around the flat, sandy shore.

Cloudstar nodded to a rock that stood at the edge of the beach. “I remember jumping off that for the first time when I was a new apprentice. I thought I was flying!”

“Until you bumped your head and went wailing back to the camp,” Birdflight put in. She was several moons older than him, and had been a warrior already when he was made an apprentice.

“It didn’t put me off for long, though,” Cloudstar retorted. “I came back the next day and landed on the far side of that tree stump!” He rested his front paw on Birdflight’s bulging flank. “I’ll teach our kits to keep trying, even if things go wrong at first. They’re going to be so brave.”

“Just like you,” purred Birdflight.

“And kind and smart like you,” Cloudstar murmured, burying his nose in her soft fur.

“Well, we can only hope so,” Birdflight teased. She rolled over and sat up, looking straight into Cloudstar’s eyes. “I am very proud to be having your kits,” she whispered. “No cat could wish for a better father than you.”

“Or a better mother than you,” Cloudstar replied. He closed his eyes to drink in her scent, and as he did he felt the stirrings of warrior ancestors around him, wishing him well and watching over him, his mate, and his kits forever.



CHAPTER 3



Cloudstar crouched down, balancing his weight on his haunches as his hind claws sank into the soft bark. Then he pushed hard and thrust upward, reaching out with his forepaws for the branch above. His claws slid for a heartbeat, then gripped the tree limb and held his weight just long enough for him to swing his hindquarters up and climb onto the branch.

“Whoa! Way to go, Cloudstar!” chirped a voice far below.

“Seriously? ‘Way to go, Cloudstar!’ He’s our *leader*, don’t you know?” snapped a different voice.

“Sorry, Cloudstar!” called the first cat. “I was just really impressed!”

Cloudstar suppressed an amused purr as he steadied himself in the tree and looked down at the apprentices below. He loved these sessions with his young Clanmates, when he got to indulge his love of climbing—sometimes so fast that it felt like *flying*—while teaching them a few of his favorite tricks. Cloudstar always sent the mentors off on a hunting patrol, leaving him alone with the apprentices so he could see for himself their excitement, the moment their nerves about being so high up gave way to delight in the power it gave them over their prey and their enemies.

“Okay, Tansypaw,” he meowed

down to the cream she-cat, who was standing on her hind legs with her front paws resting on the trunk of the tree. "Since you were watching so closely, why don't you join me?"

"Yeah, and give us all some peace down here," muttered her brother Snailpaw.

"Snailpaw and Mintpaw can follow whichever route you choose," Cloudstar added, making Tansypaw shoot a triumphant glance over her shoulder at her littermates. *There's plenty of time for you to learn to control your high spirits,* Cloudstar thought. *Let's make use of them now to give you courage that might be lacking in the others.*

Sure enough, Snailpaw and Mintpaw

moved more slowly toward the tree, their neck fur ruffled and their eyes huge and serious. Snailpaw's dark brown pelt merged with the bark as he found his first paw holds just above his head; Mintpaw's fur glowed pale gray in the shadows. The leaves just below Cloudstar shook frantically, and Tansypaw emerged, clinging to the trunk, her ears flat with the effort.

"Move onto that branch there," Cloudstar instructed, pointing with his tail. "Then you'll be able to jump up to me."

Tansypaw blinked, then reached out with one front paw and rested it on the branch.

"Unsheathe your claws again,"

meowed Cloudstar. “You’ll need them for gripping.” He ran his own smooth pad over the branch. He often climbed claws-sheathed now, for extra speed and to prove to himself that he could. *After all, squirrels don’t have claws like ours!*

Tansypaw was just gathering herself to jump when Snailpaw and Mintpaw scrabbled up the trunk. “Be careful,” Tansypaw yelped. “You’re shaking my branch!”

“Pretend it’s the wind,” Cloudstar suggested. “You have to learn to climb in all kinds of weather, otherwise we’d go hungry every time there was a breeze!”

Tansypaw gritted her teeth and leaped toward Cloudstar, legs flailing.

He stepped backward and grabbed the young cat's scruff as she scrabbled madly for the branch. He hauled her next to him, waiting until she had found her balance.

“Wow! That was easy!” Tansypaw puffed. Cloudstar disentangled his jaws from her neck fur and nodded.

By now, Snailpaw and Mintpaw had made it onto the lower branch. Cloudstar instructed them to jump one by one, then braced himself to catch them when they leaped close enough. Snailpaw jumped too high, and Tansypaw had to grab his tail to stop him from slithering straight over the branch and down into empty air. Mintpaw made a much neater leap and landed without Cloudstar's help. The

pale gray she-cat purred in delight.

“Right,” Cloudstar meowed. “Let’s head for the next tree.”

“But we’ve only just climbed this one,” Snailpaw protested. “I don’t want to go down again straight away.”

Cloudstar twitched his ears. “Who said anything about going down again? Our enemies would pounce on us! We’re going to practice branch-skipping!”

Snailpaw’s eyes bulged, but Tansypaw danced excitedly. “Yes! I’ve always wanted to learn how to do that!”

Snailpaw let out a yelp as the branch bounced. “Stop jiggling, Tansypaw!” he shrieked.

Cloudstar stepped forward and steadied the young cat against his

shoulder. “You’re okay, Snailpaw. Tansypaw, remember that the branch is more sensitive to your weight the farther you go from the trunk. You can bounce your enemies off, but not your Clanmates!”

Once Snailpaw had found his balance again, Cloudstar jumped onto the next branch up. “I’ll show you how to cross to the nearest tree, and you follow from where you are.” He felt three pairs of eyes scorching his gray-and-white pelt as he stepped carefully to the end of the branch. It was thinner than the one below, and for a moment Cloudstar felt his belly lurch as the limb dipped toward the ground. Then it steadied, and he took a deep breath,

fixing his eyes on the next tree.

“Look for a branch that is at least as thick as the one you’re on,” he told the apprentices. “And without too many twigs or leaves, because they could get in your way. Most of all, be realistic. You’re not going to be able to jump farther up here than you can on the ground. When you get it right, it will feel like flying, but as far as I know, cats have never had wings!”

He gently let out his breath, then sprang forward, stretching out his front legs toward the closest twigs. It was an easy jump—he didn’t want to scare the apprentices in their first lesson—and he landed lightly with all four paws on the new perch. He spun around and nodded

to the young cats staring anxiously from the other tree. “Come on!”

Tansypaw went first. She screwed up her face in concentration until her pink nose almost disappeared in cream-colored fur. Then she launched herself out of the tree, hung briefly in midair, and slammed into the neighboring branch. Cloudstar braced himself to leap down and help her, but Tansypaw managed to dig her claws into the bark and haul herself onto the tree.

“I did it!” she yowled triumphantly.

“Excellent!” meowed Cloudstar. “Snailpaw, now it’s your turn. Look at the place where you’re going to land, that’s right. Keep your eyes fixed there...and *jump!*”

The dark brown tabby flew out of the tree as if all the cats in ThunderClan were chasing him and made a desperate grab for the end of Tansypaw's branch. For a moment he dangled from his front paws, his hind legs swinging into space, but with a grunt of determination he swung his back feet underneath him and scrambled onto the branch.

“Great!” called Cloudstar. Even Tansypaw looked impressed.

Finally it was Mintpaw's turn. Cloudstar watched her closely; she was smaller than her littermates, so this was going to feel like a bigger jump. Staring at the end of the branch until her eyes almost crossed, Mintpaw sprang into the air with a tiny squeak. Tansypaw and

Snailpaw shuffled out of her way as she landed next to them, balanced almost perfectly on all four paws.

“Wow! That was awesome!” Tansypaw mewed. Mintpaw looked thrilled.

Cloudstar jumped down to join them. “Ready for some fun?” he challenged. “Watch where I go, give each other time to land, and if you don’t feel like you can do any of the jumps, there’s no shame in letting me know, and we can all go down to the ground again. It’s not a competition or an assessment.”

Three small heads nodded at him. Cloudstar wriggled around to the far side of the trunk and gazed into the trees, judging where to head next. There was a

pine tree close by, but the apprentices weren't ready to do battle with those spiky needles just yet, so Cloudstar aimed for a young oak tree with thick, well-spaced branches. He checked once to make sure the others were following, then thrust himself into the air. *I feel sorry for the other Clans. Who'd want to be trapped on the ground all the time, never knowing the rush of air through your fur or the sight of the forest spreading out around you?*

The three cats followed, one by one, this time looking more confident as they landed beside him. "Oak bark is particularly good for paw holds," Cloudstar explained as he trotted along the branch. "It has deeper grooves than

birch, for example, which can feel like ice, especially if it's wet."

In a series of joyous, soaring leaps, he led the apprentices around the edge of the pine forest, close to the boundary where the Twolegs were moving earth. The air was thick with noise and tremors from the yellow monsters, and Mintpaw squealed in alarm when one of them loomed out of the trees below them, churning along the ground with strange, elongated paws.

"Get back against the trunk!" Cloudstar ordered. There was nothing to suggest that the yellow monster was hunting cats, but he didn't want to take any chances. The cats were in a sycamore tree now, with broad green

leaves that offered good cover. Cloudstar waited until the apprentices were pressed against the trunk, then curled his body around them, facing out. He'd wait until the yellow monster had passed before taking them to the next tree.

Suddenly the roaring of the monster got even louder, and the tree began to tremble. "What's happening?" yelped Snailpaw.

"The monster must be stuck," Cloudstar meowed, trying to peer down through the leaves. He could see the yellow shape directly below, its paws flinging up mud and leaves as they churned on the spot. As Cloudstar leaned over, the tree shuddered so violently that

he lost his grip and started to plunge headfirst off the branch. There was a searing pain in his haunches as all three apprentices sank their teeth into his fur and dragged him back up.

“Cloudstar!” gasped Mintpaw. “You nearly fell!”

The tree was swaying now, and shaking so hard that leaves were starting to fall around them. “We need to get out of here!” Cloudstar panted. “Follow me!”

He began to pull himself along the branch, keeping three sets of claws dug into the bark while he moved one foot at a time. The closest tree to them was a fir; the apprentices would have to learn about the dangers of prickly needles

sooner than Cloudstar had hoped. Halfway to the end of the branch, the tree lurched sideways. Behind him, the apprentices shrieked in terror. Cloudstar looked down and saw the ground looming toward him. The tree was *falling*!

“Hold on to the trunk!” he yowled, slithering around and hurtling back to the others in a single stride. Whimpering, the young cats clung to the trunk with their front paws. Cloudstar hung on to the branch and tried to keep the apprentices in place with his body. The tree hovered in the air for a moment as if it was trying to resist, then plunged downward with a dreadful crashing of branches. Cloudstar’s branch hit the

ground and folded in on itself, swallowing him in leaves and twigs with a deafening roar. Cloudstar felt his claws being yanked out of the bark, and the world went black around him.

“Cloudstar? Are you there?” A trembling mew roused him, coming from somewhere in a tangle of leaves near his haunches. Cloudstar struggled to sit up, spitting out scraps of dirt. His spine stung and one of his paws felt strange and numb, but he could move all his legs, and his vision cleared when he shook his head.

He scrambled out and clambered over the debris to the heap of leaves. “Tansypaw? Snailpaw? Mintpaw?”

He started to dig down, carefully at

first then increasingly frantic. He could hear the yellow monster bellowing close by, as if it wanted to crush the fallen tree into shards. *We have to get out of here!* Then his paw struck against something furry and solid, and Tansypaw's head popped up.

"Cloudstar! The tree fell!" she squeaked.

"I know," he said grimly. He sank his teeth into Tansypaw's scruff and hauled her out. Snailpaw was underneath her, the breath knocked out of him, but at least he was awake and squirming. Cloudstar helped him out and told him to lie still while he got his breath back.

Tansypaw was peering down into the tangle of broken branches. "Where's

Mintpaw?" she yowled.

Cloudstar pushed Tansypaw out of the way and stared into the shadows. A tuft of pale fur was just visible under some shattered twigs. Cloudstar jumped down and carefully moved the twigs aside. Mintpaw was lying very still, her eyes closed, but her flank rose and fell steadily, and she murmured when Cloudstar touched her. *She's alive!*

He hoisted her onto his shoulders and clambered back up to the others. "Is she dead?" Snailpaw wailed, staring at his sister in horror.

"No, but we need to get her to Fawnstep as quickly as we can," Cloudstar meowed. "Are you two okay to run?" The apprentices nodded

bravely. Cloudstar straightened Mintpaw on his shoulders, then started to pick his way out of the crushed branches. He could hear Snailpaw and Tansypaw helping each other behind him.

They had almost reached the edge of the destroyed tree when there was a terrible creaking noise, and the earth beneath Cloudstar's paws shook so much that Mintpaw slithered to the ground.

"Watch out!" screeched Tansypaw.

Cloudstar looked up just as the fir tree plunged toward him. For a moment he was frozen, imagining what it would feel like to be crushed beneath branches laden with pine needles; then he sprang backward, dragging Mintpaw's limp

body with him, and the tip of the fir tree crashed to the ground less than a tail-length from his muzzle. Beyond the fallen tree, a yellow monster roared in triumph. A Twoleg sat astride it, raising his naked pink paw in the air as he gestured to his companions standing among the trees.

“StarClan, help us!” whispered Snailpaw. “The Twolegs are destroying the forest!”



CHAPTER 4



Cloudstar's spine was throbbing as he stumbled into the clearing and let Mintpaw slide to the ground. Tansypaw and Snailpaw collapsed beside her, their fur full of debris and their eyes round with horror.

“What in the name of StarClan has happened?” gasped Mousefang, running over to Snailpaw and sniffing at her apprentice's fur in disbelief.

“The forest is being crushed!” Snailpaw whimpered. “A monster knocked down the tree we were in!”

“Oh my whiskers, you could have been killed!” Mousefang yowled.

“Fawnstep! Come quickly!”

The medicine cat trotted out of her den, her nostrils flaring as she smelled the fear and scent of broken branches. She raced over to Mintpaw and gently rolled the apprentice onto her side. “Mintpaw, can you hear me?”

By now the clearing was filling with cats, wide-eyed and murmuring in hushed tones. Fernpelt hurtled out of the warriors’ den and stared in horror at the cats lying on the ground. “My kits! What have you done to them?” She glared accusingly at Cloudstar.

He shook a piece of twig from his fur and faced his Clanmate. “The Twolegs and their monsters have invaded our territory,” he reported,

feeling his heart wrench with each word. *I have to be strong. My Clan needs me more than it ever has before. I can't let them see how scared I am.* “The apprentices and I were in a tree when it was pushed over by one of the yellow monsters.”

Fernpelt let out a faint shriek. The brambles crackled and Buzzardtail emerged, followed by the rest of his hunting patrol. They were dragging a small squirrel, but nothing more. Buzzardtail took one look at the cats lying on the ground and ran to the side of his mate. “Fernpelt, what’s going on?”

“They were in a tree!” she whimpered. “They almost got killed!”

Buzzardtail looked at Cloudstar.

Cloudstar nodded. "I was with them," he mewed. "StarClan saved us, for sure."

The deputy turned to follow Fernpelt to the injured cats, but paused for a moment. "We've lost that border, haven't we?" he mewed quietly to Cloudstar.

"Yes. I'll take a patrol at nightfall to assess the damage. Will you come with me?"

Buzzardtail twitched his ears. "Of course." As he padded over to join Fernpelt, Quailheart brushed past him with a mouthful of herbs from Fawnstep's den.

"I've brought comfrey, marigold, and poppy seeds," she reported, placing the bundle at Fawnstep's paws.

The medicine cat looked up from

Mintpaw's unmoving body. "I can't find any broken bones or wounds. I think she's just stunned. Get someone to help you take her into my den, and sit with her until I've treated the others."

"I'll carry her," meowed Buzzardtail. He crouched down and Quailheart heaved the small gray cat onto his shoulders. The deputy straightened up and walked slowly to the medicine cat's den with Quailheart on his heels.

"Tansypaw is bleeding!" wailed Fernpelt, who was examining her daughter's cream pelt.

"Okay, I have cobweb and marigold for that," Fawnstep mewed calmly. "Snailpaw, what are your injuries?"

The apprentice sniffed at his pelt. “I feel like the tree fell right on top of me,” he complained. “But I don’t see any blood.”

Fawnstep began applying a mixture of marigold and comfrey to the cut on Tansypaw’s hind leg. “Can you move all your legs? Any numbness?” Fawnstep called across to Snailpaw.

The apprentice stretched each leg in turn with a slight wince, then shook his head. “Good,” mewed Fernpelt. “Eat half a poppy seed and get some rest. The poppy will help you sleep, but be prepared for the bruises to feel even worse tomorrow.”

“And what about you?” mewed a soft voice in Cloudstar’s ear. “Are you

hurt?”

He turned and looked into Birdflight’s troubled blue eyes. “I ache all over,” he admitted. “But I don’t need any herbs.”

Birdflight blinked. “Fernpelt’s right. You could have died.”

“There are always dangers in the forest,” Cloudstar pointed out.

“Not like this! Not inside our territory!” Birdflight gazed at him. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Cloudstar admitted. “It’s bad.”

“Should we prepare to leave?” asked Nightfur, padding over with his apprentice, Oakpaw, beside him.

“And go where?” Mousefang

demanded. “Twolegplace? Across the river? RiverClan might have something to say about that.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Cloudstar declared, drawing in a painful breath as he raised his voice. Around him, his Clanmates fell silent and stared at him. “We are safe here. Tomorrow we will assess how far the Twolegs have invaded, and set new border marks. This is our home.”

“But we don’t know how far the Twolegs will come!” blurted Hazelwing. “My kits are far too small to survive falling trees!”

“No, we’re not,” Hatchkit insisted. “I’ll chase those Twolegs off if they come anywhere near us! Grrrr!”

“We don’t stand a chance against the yellow monsters,” Rainleap put in. “SkyClan is going to be *destroyed*!”

“Never say that!” Cloudstar snarled. “As your leader, I will give my last breath to keep you safe. I promise the Twolegs will not harm a hair on our pelts or touch one branch of our homes. StarClan is watching over us—how else would we have escaped the falling tree today? They know that this is our home, and they will protect it.”

“Are you sure?” meowed Stoatfur. He was standing beside Tansypaw, keeping his apprentice still while the poultice on her wounds dried. “Did you see them fighting the Twolegs and their yellow monsters? Did they catch you as

the tree fell?”

“That’s not the way StarClan works, and you know it,” Cloudstar replied, forcing his fur to stay flat. “We must have faith.”

“And we must have faith in Cloudstar, too,” rasped a frail voice from the edge of the clearing. A rose-cream she-cat with dark green eyes stood trembling at the entrance to the elders’ den. “He has led us well until now, and we should listen to him.”

“Thank you, Petalfall,” Cloudstar meowed, dipping his head. “You need to get some rest. One of the apprentices will bring you something to eat.”

The elderly cat turned to go back into her den. “Ah, don’t trouble the

young ones with chasing after me,” she grunted. “Let them feed the rest of the Clan first. Toothless old badgers like me don’t deserve the pick of the fresh-kill pile.”

In three strides, Cloudstar had crossed the clearing and was standing close to Petalfall. “Never let me hear you talk like that!” he hissed quietly. “You served your Clan as well as any cat here—in fact, better than most.” *If you hadn’t started suffering with the falling sickness, you would be leader in my place. You know that as well as I do.* Before the previous leader, Flystar, had lost his ninth life, his deputy Petalfall had been forced to retire to the elders’ den after suffering a number of alarming

fits, when she lost consciousness for a while and trembled on the ground like a wind-tossed leaf. Fawnstep seemed to keep the fits at bay with tiny doses of poppy seed, but the she-cat was far frailer than she should have been, and rarely ventured out of the camp now.

“Petalfall, are you refusing to eat again?” called a voice from inside the elders’ den. It was Starlingfeather. There was a rustling sound and the dark brown tom stuck his head out of the branches. “I heard what happened by the border,” he meowed to Cloudstar. He turned to Petalfall. “Sounds like Cloudstar has enough to sort out without you making a fuss about food,” he snorted. “Now get in here and stop distracting him.” The

old tom's tone was curt, but Cloudstar noticed the way he gently laid his tail across Petalfall's shoulders to steer her back to her nest.

Slowly the clearing emptied, with Birdflight helping Hazelwing round up the thoroughly overexcited kits and herd them back to the nursery. Cloudstar and Buzzardtail were left alone. Shadows gathered beneath the trees, and above them the purple sky was starting to show claw-pricks of starlight.

"When do you want to go to the border?" Buzzardtail asked.

Cloudstar tilted his head and listened for a moment. The forest was quiet now, and the earth beneath his feet was still. The Twolegs and the yellow monsters

had stopped whatever they were doing. “Let’s round up a patrol right away,” Cloudstar suggested. “The sooner we’re back, the longer we’ll all have to rest before dawn.”

Accompanied by the gentle rustle of leaves and the occasional hoot of a lonely owl, Cloudstar led his warriors along one of their familiar hunting paths. His paws rang softly on the packed earth, and his breath clouded around his muzzle. *Oh my precious home. I grieve for the wounds that have been done to you. I promise I will never leave you, not until it is time for me to walk in StarClan.*

Cloudstar’s thoughts were jerked

back to the present by a stifled curse from behind him.

“Great StarClan, what is *that*?” Weaselwhisker had stopped dead and was staring at the heap of splintered branches and fast-wilting leaves that blocked the path in front of them.

“Is that the tree you were in?” gasped Mousefang.

Cloudstar looked at the leaves. This was an oak, not a sycamore. “No,” he mewed. “Our tree is closer to the border.”

“Then they’ve come even farther than you thought,” Buzzardtail meowed. “How can we possibly tell our Clanmates that the camp is safe?” His voice rose with thinly veiled panic.

Cloudstar sank his claws into the damp earth. “There is no reason for the Twolegs to destroy our forest! We have lived here unchallenged for countless moons. StarClan has given me no warning that anything will change, so we have no option but to set new border marks and carry on as we always have done.” To make his point, he walked up to the crumpled branches and left his scent mark defiantly on the withered leaves.

“And you think the Twolegs will take notice of that, do you?” muttered Weaselwhisker. His brown-and-ginger pelt looked gray in the half-light.

“What else can we do?” Cloudstar retorted, trying to sound strong rather

than bleak with despair. “The warrior code tells us to mark our borders daily. From now on, this is our border.”

“And if the Twolegs leave the fallen trees alone, we can still hunt as far as the old border,” Mousefang put in.

“Hunting what? Tasty morsels like this?” Stoatfur asked, flicking a squashed and shriveled worm toward his Clanmate. There were several littered on the path around them. “Even they’ve had the good sense to try to escape.”

“*This is our home,*” Cloudstar insisted through gritted teeth. “SkyClan will survive as it always has, by the skill of its hunting and the courage to adapt to a changed territory.” He lifted

his head and stared at each of his warriors in turn. "Anything else will be considered a direct challenge to my leadership, and to the warrior code."

One by one, the cats nodded.

"Stay strong," Cloudstar urged them. "Have faith in our ancestors, and in the home they chose for us. We have a right to be here, more than the Twolegs and their monsters."

Buzzardtail looked away, and Cloudstar heard him murmur, "I don't think the Twolegs live by our code."

"Go back to the camp and get some rest," Cloudstar ordered. "I'll stay here tonight to keep watch. From now on, one of us will be on guard at this border every night. We will not leave our

territory unprotected for a moment.” As he watched his warriors file away into the trees, Cloudstar felt a pain deep in his chest that had nothing to do with his fall in the tree. *May StarClan go with you, my precious Clanmates,* he prayed silently. *And may our ancestors keep you safe where I cannot.*



CHAPTER 5



Cloudstar was jolted awake by a terrible clattering noise. He was curled on the trunk of one of the fallen trees, enclosed by leaves that dangled limply as they died with the broken branches. He sprang up and peered over the top of his makeshift den. In the harsh dawn light, the remains of SkyClan's former border looked ravaged and horrifying. Shattered trees lay everywhere, with the brown earth churned up around them like an open wound. Cloudstar looked wildly at the line of trees still standing behind him. Were the Twolegs destroying even more of the territory?

But those trees were standing as tall as ever, though their branches trembled with the noise. Cloudstar looked back at the devastation and saw one of the fallen trees quivering as if it was trying to make its way back into the forest. With a jerk, it started to slide along the ground, in a din of scraping bark and snapping branches. Cloudstar realized it was being dragged on a long, silver tendril attached to a yellow monster, whose paws scrabbled at the mud as it tried to get a grip on the slippery leaf mulch. Slowly, slowly, the tree was hauled away from its stricken companions until it disappeared behind one of the huge mounds of earth. There was a volley of Twoleg shouts, and another yellow

monster crawled forward, trailing a silver tendril that was bound tightly around the trunk of the next tree.

But somehow this didn't seem as troubling as the devastation of the trees in the first place. *And the Twolegs are leaving the standing trees alone today. Perhaps they have destroyed as many as they want.* Cloudstar jumped down, set fresh border marks on the trunks of the trees still standing, and ran back into the woods.

When he entered the camp, Fawnstep met him. She looked as if she hadn't slept for a moon; her fur stood on end and was littered with scraps of dirt, and her eyes were huge and bulging. "Have they destroyed more trees?" she

demanded as soon as Cloudstar wriggled free from the brambles.

“Not today,” he reported. “The Twolegs seem to be moving the trees they pushed down yesterday.”

Fawnstep’s eyes narrowed. “Moving them? Where? Why?”

Cloudstar headed for his den, longing to wash the dust from his fur. “How am I supposed to know?” he snapped. “It’s bad enough having Twolegs troubling our borders. I’m not going to start knowing how their brains work!” He pushed his way into his den and flopped into his nest.

Fawnstep followed him and hovered at the edge of the quiet, shadowy space. “I’m sorry,” she mewed. “I know we’ll

never understand the ways of Twolegs. But if we could just figure out what they're doing, we might know how much danger we're in."

Cloudstar looked at her. "Have you received any more omens?" He was reluctantly starting to acknowledge the headless and wingless prey as a warning of what was happening now.

Fawnstep blinked. "No more omens, but my dreams are full of darkness and falling trees and the screams of kits." She shuddered as she spoke, and Cloudstar felt a stab of pity for his gentle, intuitive medicine cat.

"I think all our dreams will be like that for a while," he murmured. "Let me rest for a bit, and tell Buzzardtail to get

on with organizing the patrols. We'll hunt as normal, tell him." He tucked his nose beneath his tail and closed his eyes as he listened to Fawnstep pad softly out of the den.

Cloudstar had barely dozed off when Stoatfur woke him up, prodding him with one paw. "Sorry to disturb you, Cloudstar," he mewed. "Buzzardtail asked me to lead a border patrol, but with three of the apprentices out of action, I need you to make up the numbers."

Cloudstar hauled himself stiffly out of his nest and stretched each leg in turn. "Okay," he meowed. "Let's go."

He let Stoatfur take the lead, and walked beside Quailheart and Rainleap

as they headed into the dense trees that lay between the camp and the border with ThunderClan. The yellow monsters rumbled in the distance, and where the ground was bare of leaf mulch, Cloudstar could feel the earth trembling beneath his paws. *Where are they taking the trees? And why?* The cats were used to fir trees being harvested by Twolegs, but not the trees that shed their leaves in the coldest seasons.

Stoatfur directed Rainleap to refresh the first border mark they came to, on a tree stump covered with ivy. At the next, a twisted hazel tree, Stoatfur nodded to Cloudstar, offering him the task. Cloudstar stepped forward, enjoying the role of a warrior rather than leader. He

was about to rejoin the patrol when a hiss through the bracken stopped him.

“Patrolling the borders again, Cloudstar?” The bracken rustled and a dark ginger tom stepped through. “Seedpelt told me she’d seen you here recently. Is SkyClan lacking in warriors?”

Cloudstar forced his fur to stay flat. “There is no reason why a Clan leader shouldn’t patrol with his warriors,” he growled. “After all, isn’t that what you’re doing here, Redstar?”

The ThunderClan leader flicked his tail as if he was bored of the subject and padded forward until he was almost muzzle to muzzle with Cloudstar. “What’s all this noise we hear coming

from your territory?" he asked, leaning close to peer into Cloudstar's eyes. "Is there trouble in SkyClan?" His yellow eyes gleamed hungrily.

Behind him, Cloudstar heard Quailheart snarl. "No, no trouble at all," Cloudstar replied. "Just some Twolegs playing with monsters beyond the far boundary. My Clanmates know better than to fret about every little thing a Twoleg does. Is the noise making your warriors nervous, Redstar?"

The ThunderClan leader curled his lip, and Cloudstar felt a small stab of satisfaction that he had gotten under Redstar's fur. "Nothing scares ThunderClan warriors!" Redstar growled.

Cloudstar turned to leave. “If they have any sense, they should be more wary of SkyClan warriors!” he called over his shoulder. His Clanmates fell in behind him as he stalked away from the hazel tree, leaving Redstar glaring after them.

Once out of sight of the ThunderClan cat, Cloudstar stepped off the path to let Stoatfur take the lead again. The orange-and-white tom looked anxious. “Don’t you think you should have told Redstar the truth?” he meowed. “That our border has been destroyed, and we have lost territory?”

Cloudstar stared at him. “Have moths got into your brain? Why would I let ThunderClan know there is anything

wrong?”

Stoatfur scraped one paw over the ground. “Because if the Twolegs destroy much more of the forest, we might need ThunderClan’s help.”

“ThunderClan warriors can’t chase off Twolegs and monsters!” Rainleap snapped. “I’d rather die than ask them for help!”

Cloudstar twitched his ears. “That’s a little extreme, Rainleap. But you’re right: SkyClan will fight its own battles.”

“What about the territory that used to belong to us?” Stoatfur persisted, nodding toward the dense strip of oak trees just beyond the SkyClan scent marks. “If we lose much more from the

far side of our hunting grounds, we should ask ThunderClan to give it back.”

Cloudstar bristled. “SkyClan can survive without it. I will never go groveling to Redstar to get us out of trouble, and we can’t go back on Duskstar’s decision to let them have that territory. It would be like challenging all our ancestors, as well as the warrior code.” He gazed at each of his warriors in turn, wincing at their troubled eyes and ruffled pelts. *I have to stay strong for them.* “SkyClan will survive, without the help of ThunderClan. We are strong, skillful, and more honorable than any of the five Clans of the forest. Trust me, warriors. The Twolegs will not destroy our home.”

By the time they returned to the camp, the sun was high, blazing down through the trees. Cloudstar headed straight for the stream at the edge of the camp, just beyond the elders' den, and took a long drink. His pelt felt itchy and dusty, and his legs ached, but he had insisted on double-checking all the border marks. He didn't trust Redstar. Cloudstar was beginning to fear he had been too relaxed about letting ThunderClan warriors cross the border by a few paw steps, in the interest of keeping things peaceful with their closest neighbor. Now he wanted to maintain a much stricter border, with more frequent patrols and marks refreshed three times a day, not just

twice.

Padding back into the clearing, Cloudstar's belly rumbled. He trotted over to the fresh-kill pile and stopped short with a yelp of dismay. There was only a tough-looking starling and the remains of a vole under the elderflower tree. "Haven't the hunting patrols returned yet?" he called to Weaselwhisker, who was sunning himself on the tree stump in the center of the clearing.

Weaselwhisker lifted his head and peered over the edge of the stump. "Yes, and gone out again," he reported.

"And this is all they caught?" Cloudstar exclaimed.

Weaselwhisker nodded. "They said

the woods where the trees have fallen are empty, and the rest of the territory is so noisy that prey is being frightened away from there, as well.”

Cloudstar cursed under his breath. “I’ll go out myself,” he told Weaselwhisker. Perhaps one cat alone would have a better chance of stalking nervous prey. Ignoring the pangs in his belly, he turned away from the fresh-kill pile and headed back into the woods. The trees hummed with the noise of the yellow monsters. It drowned out the rustling of the leaves, the creaking of branches, and any sound of birds or squirrels that might offer good hunting. Cloudstar felt a worm of alarm squirm in his belly. *There must be something we*

can eat! Suddenly feeling impatient at being trapped on the ground, he leaped up the trunk of the closest tree and hauled himself into the branches.

He could still hear the monsters up here, but now the leaves whispered around his ears, and a soft breeze lifted his fur. Cloudstar pressed his ear to the bark and heard the tiniest scratching sound. *Squirrel!* Lifting his head, he waited for a moment, opening his jaws so that the scents of the forest flooded in. His prey was farther up the tree, on one of the thinnest branches. SkyClan warriors tended to avoid hunting at the tops of the trees because it was more dangerous, with the branches much less able to bear their weight, but hunger

quelled Cloudstar's nerves. He clawed his way upward, stretching his tail behind him to keep his balance. There was a desperate scrabble above him as the squirrel spotted Cloudstar launching himself up, but Cloudstar put on an extra burst of speed and slammed one of his front paws into the tiny fluffy creature before it had a chance to run.

He studied his catch disappointedly. It was hardly old enough to be out of its nest, and wouldn't feed an elder let alone a warrior. But it was a start. Peering down through the leaves, Cloudstar carefully dropped the squirrel between the branches, then scampered down the trunk to bury it beneath a heap of earth and twigs until he collected it

later.

He hunted until the sunbeams slanted low through the trees and the first star appeared in the hazy sky. He was exhausted, his pelt ruffled and filthy, and the stiffness along his spine had sharpened to a fierce burn. But all he had to add to his squirrel was a blackbird, plump enough but hardly a good meal for more than two cats. Unearthing the squirrel, Cloudstar dragged his fresh-kill back to the camp.

Birdflight was waiting for him on the far side of the brambles. "Where have you been? Weaselwhisker said you went out hunting on your own!"

Cloudstar nodded. "Let me put these on the fresh-kill pile, and let's eat

together.”

“I’ve already eaten,” Birdflight meowed. “I’m sorry, I should have saved some for you.” Cloudstar was about to protest when his gaze fell on the pile beneath the elderflower tree. There were a few scraps that might have been the vole he had seen earlier, but nothing else. He spun around to face Birdflight. “Has every cat eaten?”

She flinched at his fierce tone. “I think so,” she mewed. “Petalfall shared hers with Hazelwing and the kits. She said she wasn’t hungry.”

Cloudstar curled his lip. “She’s said that before.”

Birdflight’s eyes widened. “You think she’s deliberately letting the other

cats eat her share?”

Cloudstar nodded. “But if there isn’t enough food to go around, we’ll all have to go hungry for a while. Just until the prey comes back. Buzzardtail!” He called to his deputy, who was sharing tongues with Fernpelt outside the warriors’ den. “From now on, we’ll eat once a day, at dusk. There isn’t enough prey for two meals a day.”

Buzzardtail looked startled. “We’ll starve!”

“No, we won’t,” Cloudstar snapped, fighting the panic rising inside his chest. “We survive on one meal during leaf-bare. Why should this be different?”

“Because we need to eat more in the warm seasons in order to survive leaf-

bare!” Buzzardtail pointed out. “We won’t have the strength to hunt if we’re hungry all the time.”

“Then figure out a different way to hunt!” Cloudstar hissed. He whirled around and stalked to his den. *They look to me for answers, but how am I supposed to conjure prey out of an empty forest?*

There were soft paw steps behind him, and Birdflight followed him into the den. “Cloudstar, I’m worried about you.”

“Well, I’m worried about everyone,” Cloudstar muttered, circling in his nest to flatten the moss.

“That’s your duty, as our leader,” Birdflight mewed. “But I just have to

worry about you—and our kits, when they come. Cloudstar, they need their father! If you work yourself to death before they arrive, I'll have to raise them alone! Please, take care of yourself for their sake, if nothing else.”

Cloudstar reached out and rested his muzzle on Birdflight's shoulder. “I'm sorry. I will look after myself, I promise. And the rest of the Clan. Everything will be fine when the monsters leave and the prey comes back.”

Birdflight squeezed in beside him. Cloudstar shuffled to the edge of the nest to make room for her swollen belly. “Do you really believe SkyClan will survive this?” Birdflight murmured as she settled against him.

“Of course,” Cloudstar purred. “StarClan would not have made me leader if they did not know for certain that I would be able to save my Clan. Now sleep, my precious. Our kits need us both to be strong.”



CHAPTER 6



Cloudstar stood at the edge of the Great Rock, washed in silver moonlight, and gazed down at the cats below. Countless pairs of eyes gleamed up at him, ears pricked, the only sound the whispering of the leaves from the four giant oaks. How long have the five Clans gathered here? Cloudstar wondered. And how long will they continue? Until the Twolegs destroy these trees as well?

There was a quiet cough from the foot of the rock, and Cloudstar saw Buzzardtail looking expectantly at him. Three sunrises had passed since Cloudstar and the apprentices were

caught in the falling tree, and the Twolegs had encroached no farther onto SkyClan's territory. Instead they had cleared the ruined trees away and started to place rows of large gray stones, sharp and square, in the empty space. There was still too much noise, and the prey had not yet returned—leaving SkyClan thin and hungry on reduced fresh-kill—but Cloudstar felt a stirring of hope that the worst was over.

He had wanted to say nothing about the Twolegs at the Gathering, and let the other Clans believe that all was well in SkyClan. But Buzzardtail insisted that he had to acknowledge there was something going on. They knew that the noise of the yellow monsters had reached

ThunderClan, and it was impossible that RiverClan hadn't heard something too. Better to acknowledge what the Twolegs are doing, Buzzardtail had argued, than let rumors spread among the other Clans.

Greenleaf held sway in the forest, weighting the trees with glossy green leaves and plumping the prey. The other Clans reported overflowing fresh-kill piles, healthy litters of kits, and new warriors who looked as strong and sharp as their seniors. Cloudstar pictured the scant pile of food beneath the elderflower bush, the scrawny elders, and the wails of Hazelwing's kits when their bellies ached with hunger.

Scraping his claws over the silver stone, he lifted his head. "Cats of all the

Clans, I am proud to speak for the SkyClan cats. Hazelwing's kits continue to grow, and are wearing us all out with their games!" There was a purr of amusement from below, mostly from she-cats and elders. "I look forward to presenting them to you as apprentices in three more moons. My warriors are hunting with great skill for their Clanmates, and like you we are grateful for the fresh-kill that greenleaf brings to the forest." He paused and took a breath. *Stay calm! Don't let them see that you are worried one tiny whisker about what is happening.*

"I'm sure some of you have heard the rumblings of Twolegs and their monsters just beyond our border." There were

nods and murmurs from below the rock, and Cloudstar felt Redstar stiffen beside him. “Well, you know Twolegs, always trying to ruin something!” Cloudstar’s throat ached as he tried to keep his tone light. “They’ve taken a few trees at their edge of our territory, but we have plenty more. The Twolegs will get bored soon and take their monsters somewhere else.” He narrowed his eyes and tried to meet the gaze of as many warriors as possible from the other Clans. “We in SkyClan would hate for you to waste time on rumors and lies about what may be going on in our territory.” Cloudstar let an edge creep into his tone, but then he caught sight of Buzzardtail looking alarmed, and softened his voice a little. *I*

don't want to seem like I am trying to hide something. “And by the next Gathering, I hope to have even better news. Kits of my own, thanks to Birdflight!”

There were mutters of approval; Cloudstar hoped he had distracted the cats from gossiping about Twoleg nonsense. He stepped back from the edge of the rock and sat down again. Redstar leaned over and murmured in his ear, “Glad to hear that SkyClan doesn't mind sharing their territory with Twolegs.”

Cloudstar shot a fierce glance at the ginger tom, and reminded himself with an effort that this was the night of the full moon, so hostility between Clans was

forbidden. “Of course we aren’t sharing our territory with Twolegs,” he meowed, opening his eyes wide as if surprised that Redstar would have such a mouse-brained idea. “Our borders are strong, and our scent marks refreshed as usual.”

“More often than usual, I’ve noticed,” Redstar commented, with the tiniest flick of his tail.

Cloudstar was saved from replying by Swiftstar, the WindClan leader, standing up and stretching each leg in turn. “Ah, I’m getting too old to sit on this cold rock for long,” he grunted. “Shall we join the others?”

Dawnstar of ShadowClan and Birchstar of RiverClan nodded, and jumped side by side down from the

Great Rock. Birchstar looked plump and content beneath her glossy pelt, and even Dawnstar looked less lean than usual. Cloudstar made a deliberate effort to fluff up his fur to hide his jutting ribs. In spite of his promise to Birdflight, he had been eating less than any of his warriors. *The prey will come back before our kits arrive*, he told himself.

Fawnstep was waiting for him at the foot of the rock. "Cloudstar, can we talk?" Her blue eyes looked anxious.

Cloudstar followed her into the shadows behind the stone. "It's the other medicine cats," Fawnstep told him, her voice trembling. "They've all had dreams about us, about SkyClan being swallowed up by yellow monsters,

trampled like dust beneath falling trees. Molepelt of ShadowClan is convinced we will all be dead before the next Gathering!”

“Molepelt of ShadowClan should worry more about his own warriors and less about sticking his muzzle into other Clans’ business,” growled Cloudstar. “He’s no better than a gossiping elder! He can hardly take care of his own pelt, let alone an entire Clan.”

“But the others listen to him,” Fawnstep persisted. “And they are all worried about SkyClan.”

Cloudstar raised his head. “Do they live in our camp? Have they seen our hunting patrols working tirelessly to find enough food for us? Do they know that

the trees have stopped falling? Or have you told them we are starving to death, crippled by Twolegs and their pathetic monsters?" His voice was harsher than he intended, and Fawnstep winced.

"I have told them that we are fine and can take of ourselves," she mewed sharply. "I would never tell them anything else."

Cloudstar felt a stab of guilt for doubting his medicine cat. "I know you wouldn't. I'm sorry. Now, let's join the others before we fuel more gossip from our neighbors."

It was a strain to stay cheerful and seem interested in what was going on in the other Clans, and Cloudstar was relieved

when the cats began slipping away from the hollow in search of a brief rest before dawn. He led his Clanmates back along the river at a run, wrinkling his nose at the stench of ThunderClan scent marks at the edge of the shore. SkyClan was allowed to follow the edge of the water to reach Fourtrees, but Redstar seemed determined to keep them trapped on the pebbles by a wall of reeking scent.

Quailheart met them just inside the brambles. His eyes were full of sorrow. "It's Petalfall," he meowed as soon as Cloudstar and Fawnstep emerged from the thorns. "She's had another falling fit, and she's so weak she can hardly open her eyes."

Fawnstep and Cloudstar ran to the medicine cat's den. The old she-cat lay in a faint moonbeam that filtered through the branches above her. Her rose-cream pelt was stretched tight over her jutting hip bones, and her eyes were sunken into her skull. The scent of death clung to her fur and her breath rattled in her chest. She raised her head when Cloudstar and Fawnstep entered and opened her mouth to speak, but suddenly her whole body stiffened, her legs shot out, and her eyes rolled back. She started to tremble and foam bubbled at her lips.

Fawnstep crouched beside her. "It's all right, Petalfall," she soothed. "It will be over soon."

A high-pitched moan came from

between Petalfall's clenched teeth. "Bring me two poppy seeds," Fawnstep meowed to Quailheart. The tom hurried to the store, and Cloudstar hunkered down beside the sick cat.

"Two poppy seeds?" he queried. "Is that safe?" He knew that one poppy seed was usually all Fawnstep would allow a cat to eat.

Fawnstep didn't take her eyes from Petalfall's wretched, shaking body. "Would you rather she kept having these terrible fits? If I can keep her in a deep sleep, she'll have a chance to rest and regain her strength."

Cloudstar looked down at the sharp bones that seemed about to pierce the old cat's pelt. It didn't seem to him that

Petalfall had a whisker of strength left in her frail body. She needed food more than sleep, but the Clan couldn't give her that. Cloudstar swallowed the urge to yowl in despair.

Slowly, Petalfall stopped shaking. Cloudstar drew his tail softly over her flank. "Everything's fine, Petalfall. Rest now."

The old cat blinked, and one faded blue eye focused on Cloudstar. "Don't lie to me, Cloudstar," she rasped, so quietly that Cloudstar had to bend closer. He winced at the stench of her breath, and hoped she hadn't noticed.

"I may be old, but I'm not dumb," Petalfall croaked. "I know we are in great trouble. Oh my poor Clan. We have

survived so much, yet now we will be destroyed by Twolegs.”

“No, Petalfall!” Cloudstar mewed in her ear. “SkyClan can still survive this!”

The clouded eye swiveled to hold his gaze with a stony glare. “Promise me, Cloudstar,” the old cat wheezed. “Promise me you will not let the Twolegs drive us from our home.”

“I promise,” Cloudstar whispered. “This is where SkyClan belongs. For as long as I have my nine lives, we will never leave the forest.”



CHAPTER 7



Faint, cream-colored beams of light filtered through the branches, heralding the sunrise. Cloudstar tried to straighten his hind leg without disturbing Petalfall. The old cat had eaten the poppy seeds and fallen into a deep slumber, broken only by rumbling snores. Cloudstar had stayed beside her, too troubled to close his eyes but unwilling to let Petalfall sleep alone. She was used to being warmed by the fur of the other elders close beside her.

“Cloudstar!” Fawnstep’s soft mew pierced the hushed den. “Stop wriggling, or you’ll wake Petalfall! Why don’t you

go for a walk?" The medicine cat loomed out of the shadows. "Go on, I'll lie beside Petalfall until she wakes."

Cloudstar heaved himself up, stumbling on numb paws, and crept out of the den. Outside, the air was already warm and tiny flies buzzed around his ears. The camp was silent; it was too early even for the dawn patrols. Cloudstar crawled under the bramble bush and trotted through the quiet trees. For once, the forest was silent. It was too early for the Twolegs and their yellow monsters to be awake. But the silence felt wrong. Cloudstar's ears buzzed as he strained to hear the sound of any other living creatures. There were no bird-calls greeting the dawn, no

squirrels scampering along the branches, not even butterflies stirring with the first rays of the sun. The forest felt empty, lifeless, and for the first time in Cloudstar's life, unwelcoming.

He emerged from the woods where the trees had been felled and stood on a splintered stump to survey the devastation. This part of the forest had changed beyond anything Cloudstar could recognize. Where was the tiny path used by badgers and deer that had led to the open heathland beyond? Or the holly bush that had once sheltered Cloudstar and his fellow apprentices during a hailstorm? All the trees had gone, and now the squares of gray stones were being covered with smaller, bright

red stones. Some rows were tall enough to have gaps in them, some spaces reaching all the way to the ground and others stopping at the height of a young Twoleg. Something stirred in Cloudstar's mind. These constructions looked familiar...half-built, but definitely something he had seen before.

Twoleg nests! The Twolegs are building new nests on SkyClan's territory!

Cloudstar looked around him. This was *his* home! Not the Twolegs'! Cloudstar felt a pain in his chest as if a Clanmate had died. There would be no chance to reclaim this part of the territory. It was lost forever, to Twolegs and their kits and monsters. Would they

stop here? Or keep swallowing up the forest, tree by tree, until nothing remained? Cloudstar felt a yowl rise in his throat, and he tipped back his head and let his cry echo his despair across the half-built stone nests.

“My home! My precious home!”

His legs felt heavy as stone as he made his way back to the camp. What was he going to tell the Clan? They deserved to keep some whisker of hope. Perhaps Cloudstar didn't have to force them to face the truth yet—at least, not until he had figured out a way for them to survive this. When he crawled through the brambles, he knew this was not the time to tell them anything. A soft keening

sound came from Fawnstep's den; it was Starlingfeather and Hawksnow, mourning their denmate.

Fawnstep squeezed through the entrance to her den and trotted over to meet Cloudstar. "Petalfall died a few moments ago," she mewed. Her eyes were clouded with sorrow. "She was peaceful at the end. She slept well after you promised her SkyClan would be okay."

Cloudstar closed his eyes. *Run swiftly to StarClan, Petalfall. Don't look back. Your Clanmates will miss you, always.*

Starlingfeather and Hawksnow emerged from Fawnstep's den, rumps first, as they carefully dragged

Petalfall's body into the sunlight.

"We will sit vigil for her today," Fawnstep explained to Cloudstar. "It's so hot, we must bury her body at dusk."

Cloudstar nodded. "Do you have enough herbs?" he asked. Quailheart had followed the elders out with a mouthful of soft green leaves, and was strewing them over Petalfall's fur so that the clearing filled with their grassy scent.

"I think so," Fawnstep replied. She looked at the nursery, her eyes troubled. "I'll go tell Hazelwing so she can prepare the kits. Cloudstar, it's rare I would give any orders to my Clan leader, but please, don't go out on patrol today. You need to rest as much as any of us, and without you, the Clan will have

no hope at all.” She ran her tail lightly along her spine as she padded away.

Cloudstar walked over and lay down beside Petalfall’s head. Her eyes were closed, and she looked as if she were sleeping. *Go well in StarClan, my old friend.* The air stirred beside him, and Birdflight sat down. She was already panting from the heat.

“Do you want to move to the shade?” Cloudstar suggested, but Birdflight shook her head.

“My place is here, beside Petalfall,” she meowed.

“It’s like another piece of our past has been ripped away, along with the trees,” Cloudstar murmured as he rested his muzzle on Petalfall’s herb-sweet

cheek.

“I know,” mewed Birdflight. “Fawnstep told me you promised Petalfall everything would be fine, and SkyClan would not lose its home, but how can you be so certain? We cannot fight the Twolegs!”

“StarClan is watching over us,” Cloudstar reminded his mate. “If we give up, we are only showing that we don’t trust them to keep us safe. Have faith in them, especially now that Petalfall walks among the stars, too.”

“I wanted her to meet our kits,” Birdflight whispered.

“She will see them from wherever she is,” Cloudstar vowed.

Buzzardtail sent out the early patrols,

leading one group himself before joining Cloudstar beside Petalfall. Hazelwing had ushered her kits past, the four of them wide-eyed with curiosity at the unmoving cat. Emberkit had tried to lick Petalfall's ear to see if she tasted different now, and received a clout over her own ear from her angry mother. The whole camp was quieter than usual, muffled by sadness, yet the sun had scarcely reached the treetops before the rumbling of the monsters started up, and now Petalfall's fur quivered gently from the tremors through the earth.

Buzzardtail settled beside Cloudstar for his vigil. They sat in silence, breathing in the scent of the herbs, each with his own memories of the former

deputy. Birdflight had retreated to the shade, where she lay on her side, panting in spite of the soaked moss Fawnstep had placed beneath her head.

Suddenly the brambles crackled and Mousefang burst into the clearing. "Fetch Fawnstep!" she cried.

Behind her, Nightfur's black pelt emerged from the thorns, rump first as he guided his apprentice Oakpaw through the branches. The gray tabby tom was smeared with mud and held one front paw off the ground, wincing every time he lurched forward on his other three legs. Cloudstar leaped to his feet.

"What happened?" he demanded.

Nightfur was grim faced. "We were hunting at the edge of the trees." He

noded toward the border ravaged by Twolegs. "Oakpaw found a squirrel and chased it onto the empty ground, where the Twolegs are laying red stones. He fell into a ditch they must have dug."

Fawnstep had run from her den by now and was sniffing Oakpaw's shoulder. "You're lucky," she commented. "I don't think any bones are broken. Come to my den and I'll find something to help with the pain." She led Oakpaw away, letting him rest his weight on her shoulder.

Buzzardtail came to join Cloudstar and Nightfur. "Fawnstep's right," he growled. "Oakpaw was lucky to get off so lightly. He could have broken his neck!"

Cloudstar nodded. “It’s too dangerous to try to hunt there anymore. From now on, no cat must go anywhere near the new border, not even if all the squirrels in the forest are sitting on the other side.”

Nightfur looked at him in surprise. “But we have to eat!”

“More importantly, we have to stay alive,” Cloudstar pointed out. “That territory no longer belongs to SkyClan. The Twolegs have stolen it from us, and there is nothing we can do. We will have to look for some other way to find enough food.”



CHAPTER 8



“Weaselwhisker, you take Fernpelt, Stoatfur, and Acornpaw and hunt along the river. You might get lucky and find a vole’s nest, if you don’t mind getting your paws wet. Mousefang, your patrol can hunt—”

“Buzzardtail, wait!” Cloudstar ordered, striding out of his den. He dipped his head to the deputy, apologizing for interrupting him. “No cats will hunt today. I want all of them—warriors as well as apprentices—to do battle training.”

Buzzardtail stared at him in surprise. “But the fresh-kill pile is almost empty!

With so little prey in the forest, we have to hunt as much as we can!”

“No,” meowed Cloudstar, his heart as heavy as stone. His eyes burned from his sleepless night, thrashing in his nest as he realized there was only one chance left to find enough food for his Clan. “We have to fight.”

“We can’t take on the Twolegs!” Weaselwhisker protested.

Cloudstar shook his head. “Not the Twolegs. ThunderClan. We need to take back the territory that Duskstar gave to them. Without it, we don’t have enough hunting grounds to support the Clan.”

Buzzardtail gave Cloudstar a long, thoughtful look. “Duskstar would have done the same,” he mewed quietly.

“You’re not breaking the warrior code.”

Cloudstar wasn’t even sure that Duskstar—or any StarClan cats—were watching SkyClan anymore. His dreams had been empty since that night the former leaders had reassured him of how strong SkyClan was, how they would live in the forest forever.

Buzzardtail started reorganizing the patrols. The apprentices looked excited about the change in routine. “We’ve been hunting for days!” Acornpaw meowed. “I can’t wait to try the sky-drop again!”

“I want to practice the reverse branch swing,” Mintpaw mewed. “I kept falling off the branch last time, but I’m definitely strong enough to hold on now.”

The warriors were quieter, and Cloudstar wondered if they had realized how desperate he was, that he was prepared to go back on Duskstar's word. He stood in the center of the clearing and watched the patrols vanish into the bushes. SkyClan warriors fought by leaping out of trees, swinging from branches, using height and weight to overpower their enemies. It had been moons since they had gone into battle against another Clan, beyond a mere border skirmish. Every bone in Cloudstar's body ached at the thought of leading his Clanmates into a fight when they were weakened by hunger and sleepless from fear of what the Twolegs were doing in their territory. But he

could not see any choice. They had to expand their territory somehow.

At sunrise the following day, Cloudstar gathered the Clan beneath the gnarled thorn tree. He balanced on the spindly branches at the top of the gorse bush and gazed down at them in the soft dawn light.

“Clanmates, it is time to take back what is rightfully ours. I will be at the head of the attack, with Buzzardtail behind me. You will all get the chance to fight—except for you, Snailpaw and Mintpaw.” The two apprentices let out wails of disappointment.

“But we want to fight!” Mintpaw protested. “We practiced really hard

yesterday, and I only fell off the branch three times!”

“We’re not scared,” Snailpaw added, puffing out his soft brown fur.

“No cat doubts your courage,” Cloudstar promised. “But I need strong, brave cats to stay behind and guard the queens and elders. Will you two do that for me? I know Tansypaw will help you as much as she can.”

Their cream-colored littermate straightened up. She still walked with a limp where she had wrenched her shoulder, and hadn’t been able to join in with the training the day before. Cloudstar prayed that these brave young cats wouldn’t be called upon to defend their Clanmates while the others were

away. But they were too small to take into battle, and he had to find some way of easing the frustration of being left behind.

Cloudstar looked at his warriors. They all looked thin and tired, their fur matted and their eyes sunk in their heads as if they were ready to join the elders. *Somehow, we must find strength to fight for this territory.* “Cats of SkyClan!” he declared. “Today is a glorious day! Today we have the chance to reset our border marks, to make ThunderClan realize that we will no longer tolerate their trespassing on what was SkyClan’s hunting ground long before theirs.”

“Yes!” cheered the warriors at the foot of the hazel bush. “We’ll drive out

those mangy intruders and show them that SkyClan deserves to hunt here instead!”

Buzzardtail caught Cloudstar’s eye and nodded. It was time to leave. The deputy started to divide the warriors into three attack patrols, while Cloudstar jumped down from the tree. Birdflight was waiting for him. Her amber eyes were full of fear. For a moment Cloudstar was afraid she was going to tell him not to fight, to save his life for the sake of their kits.

“Even though I cannot fight alongside you,” Birdflight meowed solemnly, “I will always be with you in your heart. Let me be your courage and your strength.” She rested her muzzle against

his shoulder, and Cloudstar breathed in her scent one more time.

He lifted his head to meet her gaze and whispered, "We have to win this battle. If we don't, everything is lost."

"Remember, I am in your heart," she whispered back.

Cloudstar straightened up and stalked across the clearing to lead his warriors out of the camp.

"To ThunderClan!" he yowled, and raced into the brambles.

The SkyClan cats launched themselves across the ThunderClan boundary and started pushing through the undergrowth to set new border marks on the far side of the oak trees. Cloudstar and

Buzzardtail had made it clear what their plan was: set new marks, resist all challenges, and let ThunderClan know that SkyClan would no longer tolerate trespassers in this part of the forest. Cloudstar's patrol was only a few strides over the boundary when they crashed into a ThunderClan border patrol.

Startled faces whirled to look at them. "What in the name of StarClan...?" yowled the ThunderClan warrior in the lead.

"We're being attacked!" snarled his Clanmate, unsheathing his claws.

"Trespassers!" hissed a third.

"No, you're the trespassers!" Cloudstar growled. "This is SkyClan's

territory once more.”

The first warrior let out a yelp of amusement. “Oh, really? Prove it!” He sprang at Cloudstar, landing squarely on his tender spine and sinking his teeth into Cloudstar’s scruff.

Weaselwhisker leaped forward and hauled the ThunderClan warrior off, holding him down and pummeling him with his hind paws. Another ThunderClan jumped onto Weaselwhisker, and his brown-and-ginger pelt vanished in a flurry of fur and kicked-up leaves. Cloudstar launched himself into the tangled heap of warriors, claws out, just as more ThunderClan cats burst out of the ferns. The forest was split with shrieks and

hisses as ThunderClan realized it was under attack and raced to defend its borders.

Cloudstar managed to haul Weaselwhisker out of the throng and held off one of the ThunderClan warriors while the brown-and-ginger tom caught his breath. Cloudstar risked a glance around and saw that the SkyClan cats were scrambling up into the trees. *Yes! Fight to your strengths!* he urged. The ThunderClan warriors watched, frustrated, as their enemies vanished among the branches.

“Come back and fight!” snarled one of them, flicking specks of blood from her muzzle. “Cowards!”

There was a moment’s silence, then

the trees exploded with cats leaping into the air. Nightfur, Weaselwhisker, and Acornpaw plunged onto a sturdy gray tom called Nettleclaw. Cloudstar felt a surge of satisfaction, then stared in dismay as the warrior shook the cats off as if they were thistledown and pounced on Acornpaw before the apprentice could find his paws. Cloudstar raced over to help, but claws seared his pelt from behind and he staggered backward, feeling hot stinking breath on his neck fur.

He whipped around and saw Seedpelt snarling at him. "SkyClan needs to learn to respect our borders," she hissed, lunging at him and raking her claws across his muzzle. Cloudstar

shook blood from his nose and reared up to scratch the ThunderClan deputy's ears, but she dodged away, well fed and strong.

With a start, Cloudstar saw that even Redstar had joined the fight. He was nose to nose with Fernpelt, who had clawed a patch of fur from his flank as she swung from a branch into his hindquarters. Now she was on the ground, swiping at the dark ginger tom with alternate paws. Redstar looked down at her, then knocked her sideways with one mighty blow. Fernpelt spun away into the bracken and lay in an unmoving heap. Cloudstar was about to go to her when she scrambled up, shook herself, and raced back into the throng.

Cloudstar focused instead on an orange ThunderClan warrior named Amberclaw. The cat was looking the other way, so Cloudstar crouched down and steadied himself for a leap onto Amberclaw's haunches. Just before he sprang, a voice from above called, "Watch out!"

In the next heartbeat, Mousefang hurled herself out of the tree and plummeted through the air. But the warning she had given to Cloudstar had been heard by Amberclaw too, and the ThunderClan warrior leaped sideways. Mousefang crashed into the earth with a sickening thud. She screeched in agony. Amberclaw's eyes gleamed and he reared up on his hind legs, ready to claw

her exposed belly. Cloudstar pushed down with his hind paws and sprang over Mousefang's body, slamming into Amberclaw and shoving him backward. The ThunderClan cat writhed underneath him, and Cloudstar realized there was no way he was going to hold the warrior still. He rolled off before Amberclaw could sink his teeth into his neck.

At least it had given Mousefang a chance to crawl away, dragging her hind leg behind her. Cloudstar caught sight of her vanishing into the ferns, and he could tell from the angle of her paw that her leg was broken. He looked around at his warriors, their rage driven by fear and hunger, and he knew they were too weak and too thin to fight the sturdy, glossy-

pelted ThunderClan cats. His Clanmates were making foolish mistakes out of desperation, and too often the ThunderClan warriors were simply waiting for their attackers to stumble over their own paws. The oak trees were still drenched in ThunderClan scent, even though their trunks and the fallen leaves were spattered with SkyClan blood. Cloudstar knew this was a battle he could not win. If he let his warriors fight any longer, there would be worse injuries than Mousefang's broken leg.

Weary beyond measure, burning with pain from more than the scratches on his pelt, Cloudstar raised his head. "SkyClan, retreat!"



CHAPTER 9



“Clanmates, we lost.”

Cloudstar dragged his aching paws into the clearing. Every scratch on his pelt burned like fire, and his paws were numb from leaping onto the hard, dusty ground. “I’m so sorry,” he murmured.

Birdflight trotted up to him, her eyes dark with horror. “You...you *lost*? But you said we had to win this battle!”

“Yes, we had to. But we didn’t!” Cloudstar snapped. He saw Birdflight flinch, and he softened his tone. “I’m sorry. You’re right, we should have won. We need that piece of territory to feed us.”

Buzzardtail squeezed under the brambles, one eye closed and swollen, his pelt sticky with blood. "Go straight to Fawnstep," Cloudstar ordered.

All around the clearing, queens and elders huddled around the returning warriors. They spoke so quietly, Cloudstar could hear a thrush warbling somewhere in the territory. *Brave, foolish bird*, he thought. *If you stay here, you'll be prey tomorrow*. There were so few birds left, he wondered if he should send a warrior now to catch it. But every cat fit enough to hunt had fought in the battle, and all had come back with injuries, from ripped ears to Mousefang's broken leg.

Cloudstar wondered if StarClan had

watched their humiliating defeat. It certainly hadn't felt as if any of SkyClan's warrior ancestors were on their side.

"You need to get that cut on your flank seen to," Birdflight told him.

"Not yet," Cloudstar replied. "I must speak to the Clan first, tell them that we're not giving up after one defeat."

He clawed his way up to the branch in the gnarled thorn tree. The branch seemed higher than usual, and his hind leg exploded with pain when he tried to push himself up. Cloudstar hauled himself up with his front paws instead and balanced on the swaying twigs. Once he could stare into the trees from here and only guess where his territory

ended. Now the half-built Twoleg nests loomed beyond the thin screen of branches, red and hard and threatening.

A cough below him brought his attention back to the cats below. The cats who had fought alongside him looked empty and battered beyond recovery; the only signs of hope were in the eyes of the cats who had stayed behind.

“Cats of SkyClan!” Cloudstar raised his voice, trying to sound like a leader his cats could have faith in to save their Clan. “The reason we lost today is that ThunderClan fought harder and better. They wanted victory more than us.”

There were a few looks of surprise from his exhausted warriors, but others nodded and twitched their tails as if they

were feeling guilty for letting their Clanmates down. Something stabbed deep inside Cloudstar's heart. He knew his warriors had given everything they could, but they were outnumbered, hungry, and exhausted from too many fruitless hunting patrols.

“I don't blame any of you. All I ask is that you look at what you did today and see if you could have done any more. If the answer is yes, then there will be other battles, other chances to prove what it means to be a SkyClan warrior.”

The cats below stirred, lifting their heads as if already contemplating future clashes with their neighbors. Cloudstar winced at their defiance. *I can't bear*

the thought of making you fight again, yet we will have to. I'm so sorry.

He finished: "SkyClan will take back what is rightfully ours. We will seize that territory from those ThunderClan thieves!"

There were a few thin cheers. Cloudstar let out a sigh. His cats were so brave, so loyal. He could ask for no better warriors; but could they ask for a better leader? He jumped carefully down from the thorn tree and limped to Fawnstep's den. He needed cobwebs and something to ease his bruises—but not poppy seed. He had to stay awake tonight and figure out a better way to attack ThunderClan, a different strategy that would give his warriors the best—

perhaps the only—chance of winning.

“Cloudstar! Cloudstar, wake up!”

A wet muzzle was thrust into Cloudstar’s ear. Grunting, he swatted it aside and sat up. Through the branches of his den, he could see the sky turning milky with dawn, but it was dark enough that the stars still glittered overhead. *Are you still watching, StarClan? Any words of wisdom now?*

“Cloudstar, I have to talk to you!”

“What is it?” Cloudstar demanded, recognizing Fawnstep’s grassy scent. “Is Birdflight having her kits?” He jumped up, wide awake. “Is she all right? Do you need me to fetch herbs?”

“Sit down,” hissed Fawnstep, “or

you'll wake every cat in the Clan. Birdflight is fine. Her kits will be here in the next quarter moon, but not tonight. She's sleeping peacefully in the nursery." She shuffled farther into the den and sat down. Her pale brown fur was just visible against the leaves, and her eyes gleamed when she turned her head toward him.

"I've had a dream," she began. Her voice was higher pitched than usual, and Cloudstar recognized another scent beneath the herb-dust clinging to her pelt: fear.

"I'm sure StarClan was showing me the future. Not far off—Birdflight was there with your kits, and they were still very small—"

“But strong?” Cloudstar interrupted. “There’s nothing wrong with them, is there?”

Fawnstep shook her head. “No, your kits looked...healthy.” She took a deep breath. “SkyClan was leaving the forest. We were at a Gathering, all of us. We... we had asked to stay, but the other Clans refused. We couldn’t stay here any longer.”

“What? That’s absurd!” Cloudstar lashed his tail. “It’s not up to the other Clans whether we stay here or not. This is our territory!”

Fawnstep gazed at him, and Cloudstar winced at the sorrow in her eyes. “You don’t understand,” she meowed gently. “There was no territory

left. Not for us. The Twolegs had taken it all, and we had nowhere else to go.”

Cloudstar stared at her in dismay. Was this really how it was going to end, with SkyClan hounded out of their home like a fox?

Fawnstep rested her tail on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Cloudstar. You should not have lost that battle. It is a defeat that we cannot survive.”



CHAPTER 10



A pale half moon cast a beam of light into the nursery. Birdflight opened her mouth to let out a thin wail. Cloudstar crouched over her.

“You’re doing really well,” he urged. “Just one more push, and our first kit will be here!”

Birdflight’s eyes rolled around to fix him with a furious glare. “Don’t make it sound so easy!” she hissed between clenched teeth. “You have no idea what this is like!”

“Ah, but it’s the same for all toms,” Fawnstep mewed. “Cloudstar’s doing the best he can. Focus on your breathing,

Birdflight.”

Cloudstar grimaced as Birdflight sank her claws into his front leg. He reminded himself that it was nothing compared to the pain his mate was in. A spasm rippled along Birdflight’s belly and a tiny shape slithered onto the moss. Fawnstep leaned over and nipped the birth sac with her teeth. The little shape started wriggling, and Birdflight twisted around to lick its wet fur.

“A tom!” Fawnstep announced, nudging the kit closer to Birdflight’s belly. Cloudstar gazed down at his son in delight. His dark fur was spiked all over from Birdflight’s tongue, and his eyes were tightly shut, yet he still found his way to the source of the milk scent.

Birdflight stiffened. “There’s another one coming,” she gasped.

“Good!” Cloudstar meowed. “We want four, remember?”

Birdflight just glared at him. One more heave, and a second shape appeared, even smaller than the first. Fawnstep freed the kit’s muzzle from the birth sac and pushed it toward Birdflight’s head. The kit was much less wriggly than the first one.

“Is it all right?” Cloudstar asked.

Birdflight started licking the kit with vigorous strokes of her tongue. The kit lifted its head and let out a tiny wail.

“She’s fine,” Fawnstep purred. “A lovely little she-cat to join her brother.” The medicine cat ran her paw along

Birdflight's belly. "That's all, I think. I'll bring you some soaked moss, Birdflight. Try to get some sleep while they suckle." Fawnstep slipped out of the nursery, and Cloudstar heard Hazelwing, who was waiting just outside, ask about the kits.

He bent down and rubbed his muzzle gently over Birdflight's ears. "I'm so proud of you," he murmured. "A son and a daughter!"

Birdflight looked up at him. "I'm sorry I couldn't give you two more."

"Don't be mouse-brained. These two are perfect. They'll keep us busy enough for the moons to come!" Cloudstar studied the tiny, squirming shapes beside Birdflight's belly. "What should we call

them?”

Birdflight raised her head to look at them. “The spiky-furred tom looks like a tuft of gorse! How about Gorsekit?”

“Perfect,” Cloudstar mewed. He ran his paw softly over the she-kit. “Look, her fur is turning dappled as it dries, like the sun shining through leaves. Spottedkit for this one?”

“Spottedkit and Gorsekit,” Birdflight murmured, settling back in her nest. “Our precious kits...” Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes.

Cloudstar padded out of the den and took a deep breath. This should have been the most joyful night of his life, but nothing could shift the heavy stone of sorrow that was lodged in his belly. He

raised his head and looked at the silhouettes that loomed around the Clan. Where once they had been circled by trees, now yellow monsters surrounded them on all sides. The rest of the forest had gone, cut down and hauled away to make room for more rows of gray and blood-red stones. Only the densest part of the woods remained—the part where SkyClan had made their home.

Cloudstar pushed through the brambles and walked into the empty, churned-up space where the glade of birch trees had once stood. He stared up at the claw-pricks of silver light glimmering in the purple sky. *Warriors of StarClan, do you see that I have new kits? Are you going to watch over them,*

or abandon them like you have abandoned the rest of us?

Suddenly a wave of tiredness swept over Cloudstar. He had spent all day hunting in the reeds by the river, the only place left where there was any hope of finding prey. Some of the warriors had even tried to hook fish out of the water like RiverClan cats, but had received only scraped claws and wet fur for their efforts. Every cat had started to loathe the taste of water vole, even Hazelwing's kits, who complained loudest of being hungry.

Cloudstar closed his eyes and tucked his nose under his tail. He slipped into sleep, and found himself walking in StarClan, through the lofty, whispering

trees where he had met his ancestors before. He looked around, sniffing the air, searching for those cats who had told him how strong and safe SkyClan was, how it would survive in the forest forever. But the forest was empty, with only the scent of leaves and tree bark on his tongue.

“Cowards!” Cloudstar yowled. “Where are you? Come and face me, and tell me now that SkyClan is safe!” He began to run through the trees, ferns whipping at his ears and snagging his tail. Had the whole of StarClan vanished into the night? Or were his ancestors watching him in secret, avoiding him because they had realized they were powerless to help?

Cloudstar halted in a clearing, his sides heaving. “Give me a sign that there is still some hope,” he begged. “Show me that you haven’t given up on us! You are all we have left!”

But there was nothing except the rustling of the leaves, which grew louder and louder until Cloudstar’s ear fur quivered. He put his paws over his ears, trying to block out the terrible noise, but it drew steadily nearer. With a gasp, he lifted his head and saw a yellow monster bearing down on him, huge and menacing against the milky dawn sky. With a shriek, Cloudstar raced back to the edge of the empty ground and watched as the monster rumbled past, growling.

“I doubt our ancestors even recognize their old home,” rasped a voice beside him.

Cloudstar turned, startled, to see Starlingfeather crouched in the dirt, his pelt ruffled and his eyes cloudy from age. “I have come here every day to watch the Twolegs destroy our territory,” the old cat went on. “Tail-length by tail-length, they have taken our trees, our prey, and our shelter. And worst of all, they have taken our hope.”

Cloudstar lashed his tail. “Don’t say that! We will fight on! We have to!”

Starlingfeather fixed his rheumy gaze on him. “Cloudstar, look at what lies around you. There can be nobility in admitting defeat and seeking another

path. You have always led this Clan well, and that will not change, even though everything else might.”

“Our only hope lies in finding more territory,” Cloudstar meowed. He looked down at his paws, smeared with mud. “At the next Gathering, I shall ask the other Clans to help by giving us some of theirs, just as Duskstar did once.”

“And if they refuse?” Starlingfeather prompted.

Cloudstar stared bleakly at the old cat. “Then I don’t know what else I can do,” he confessed.

The full moon hung heavily in the cloudless sky, turning the forest to silver and the pelt of every cat to a pale,

washed-out gray. Cloudstar slipped through the bushes at the top of the hollow and led his Clanmates down over the edge. The scents on the warm air told him that the other Clans had already arrived. Cats circled beneath the four great oak trees, and the leaders waited on the Great Rock. They were staring in astonishment at the SkyClan cats stumbling down the side of the hollow.

“Cloudstar!” Swiftstar called. “What kept you?”

Cloudstar didn’t answer at once. Instead, he pushed his way through the cats below the rock and scrambled up to join the other leaders. He looked down at the rest of his Clanmates emerging

from the bushes that grew on the slopes of the hollow. The apprentices were bunched together, wide-eyed and nervous beneath the stares of the other cats. Next came Starlingfeather and Hawksnow, looking far too frail to be at a Gathering. Cloudstar heard hisses of disapproval from elders belonging to the other Clans; they all expected to be left in peace once they reached such a great age.

There was a short gap, then Hazelwing and Birdflight appeared. Hazelwing carried Gorsekit, whose mouth gaped wide as he protested about being dragged through the thorns. Birdflight held Spottedkit, looking even tinier as she dangled from her mother's

jaws. Webkit, Hatchkit, Emberkit, and Mistlekit stumbled behind the queens, too tired from the trek along the river to be excited anymore about attending a Gathering. The warriors circled the queens and elders protectively, bushing up their tails and pressing close as if they wanted to save their Clanmates from the gasps of alarm around them.

“Great StarClan!” Swiftstar exclaimed. “Cloudstar, any cat would think you’d brought your whole Clan to the Gathering.”

Cloudstar forced himself to meet the WindClan leader’s gaze. “Yes,” he mewed, “that’s exactly what I’ve done.”

“Why in the name of StarClan have you done that?” Birchstar demanded.

Cloudstar took a deep breath. *This is the moment I have to beg the other Clans for help. Oh StarClan, is this really what you wanted?* “Because we can no longer live in our territory,” he announced. “Twolegs have destroyed it.”

“What?” Redstar stepped forward. “My patrols have reported more Twolegs in your territory, and noise from monsters, but they can’t possibly have destroyed it all.”

“They have.” Cloudstar stared through the dark trees, as if he might be able to see all the way to SkyClan’s ravaged home. “They came with huge monsters that pushed over our trees and churned up the earth. All our prey is dead or frightened off. The monsters are

crouched around our camp now, waiting to pounce. SkyClan's home has gone." He turned back to the other leaders. "I have brought my Clan here to ask your help. You must give us some of your territories."

Yowls of protest rose from the cats below the rock. Cloudstar's heart ached as he saw his Clanmates stiffen, as if they were bracing themselves for an attack. *We are only asking for help!*

Swiftstar was the first to reply. "You can't just walk in here and demand part of our territory. We can barely feed our own Clans as it is."

Redstar scraped one forepaw over the hard gray stone. "The prey is running well now in greenleaf, but what's going

to happen when leaf-fall comes? ThunderClan won't be able to spare any then."

"Nor will ShadowClan," Dawnstar meowed, standing up and meeting Cloudstar's gaze. "My Clan is bigger than any other. We need every paw step of ground to feed our own cats."

Cloudstar looked at the fourth leader. "Birchstar? What do you think?"

"I'd like to help," she mewed. "I really would. But the river is very low and it's harder than ever to catch enough fish. Besides, SkyClan cats don't know *how* to fish."

"Exactly," Swiftstar added. "And only WindClan cats are fast enough to catch rabbits and birds on the moors."

There's certainly nowhere in our territory where you could make a camp. You'd soon get tired of sleeping under gorse bushes."

Cloudstar looked at them for a long moment. "Then what is my Clan supposed to do?"

Every cat in the hollow was silent. Cloudstar felt his heart pounding beneath his fur. *Please help us! Without StarClan, you are our only help!*

Redstar spoke first. "Leave."

Cloudstar blinked. *What?*

"That's right." There was a hint of a snarl in Swiftstar's meow. "Leave the forest and find yourselves another place, far enough away that you can't steal our prey."

At the foot of the rock, Larkwing, the WindClan medicine cat, stood up. “Swiftstar,” she called, “as your medicine cat, I can tell you that StarClan won’t be pleased if the rest of us drive out SkyClan. There have always been five Clans in the forest.”

Swiftstar looked down at her with a hint of impatience in his eyes. “Larkwing, you say you know the will of StarClan, but can you tell me why the moon is still shining? If StarClan didn’t agree that SkyClan should leave the forest, they would send clouds to cover the sky.”

Larkwing shook her head and sat down again, looking troubled.

Cloudstar felt a wave of panic rising

in his chest. “Five Clans have lived in this forest for longer than any cat can remember,” he reminded the other leaders. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Things change,” Redstar replied. “Is it possible that the will of StarClan has changed also? StarClan gave each Clan the skills they need to survive in their own territory. RiverClan cats swim well. ThunderClan cats are good at stalking prey in the undergrowth. SkyClan cats can leap into trees because there’s not much cover in their territory. Doesn’t this mean that each Clan couldn’t live in another Clan’s territory?”

Molepelt, ShadowClan’s scrawny

and rumpled medicine cat, tipped his head back to look directly at Cloudstar. "You keep saying that StarClan wants five Clans in the forest, but are you sure that's true? There are four oaks here at Fourtrees. That could be a sign that there should be only four Clans."

"SkyClan doesn't belong here," hissed a WindClan silver tabby in the middle of the hollow. "Let's drive them out now."

Cloudstar saw his warriors bristle and unsheathe their claws, ready to fight in spite of their hunger and exhaustion. *Oh my brave Clanmates! I am so sorry it has come to this. Abandoned by StarClan, and now by the only cats who could have helped us.*

“Stop!” he called. “Warriors of SkyClan, we are not cowards, but this is a battle we cannot win. We have seen tonight what the warrior code is worth. From now on we will be alone, and we will depend on no cat but ourselves.” He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling his heart break in two. Without territory, SkyClan had no food and no shelter. Without StarClan, they had no hope. *There is nothing left for us here. I am the leader who could not save his Clan.*

Cloudstar jumped down from the Great Rock and pushed through the cats until he was standing next to Birdflight. His kits mewled at her paws, staring up at him with huge, frightened eyes. They looked as fragile as hatchlings.

Cloudstar met Birdflight's gaze, and knew at once what she was going to say.

"Cloudstar." Birdflight's voice trembled. "Our kits are too small to make a long journey. I'll stay here with them, if any Clan will have us."

For a heartbeat Cloudstar cursed the night that StarClan had given him nine lives. If he wasn't SkyClan's leader, he could stay here as well, or live with Birdflight as rogues, beyond the wretched warrior code. Now his nine lives stretched ahead of him, cold and lonely and endless. *Oh Birdflight. Do I have to lose you, too?*

Kestrelwing, the ThunderClan medicine cat, pushed his way between two SkyClan warriors, ignoring their

snarls, and bent his head to sniff the kits. “You will all be welcome in ThunderClan.”

Cloudstar spun around to face him. “Are you sure?” he demanded. “After what your leader said to us today?”

Kestrelwing’s eyes darkened. “I believe my leader was wrong,” he meowed. “But he won’t condemn helpless kits to die. They will have a future in ThunderClan, and so will you, Birdflight.”

Birdflight dipped her head. “Thank you.” She turned to Cloudstar, sorrow brimming in her green eyes. “Then this is good-bye.”

“Birdflight, no.” Suddenly, Cloudstar couldn’t be brave any longer. “How can

I leave you?"

"You must." Birdflight's voice shook. "Our Clan needs you, but our kits need me just now."

Cloudstar bowed his head. "I'll wait for you," he whispered. "I'll wait for you forever." He pressed his muzzle against Birdflight's side. "Stay with Kestrelwing. He'll find warriors to help carry the kits back to ThunderClan's camp." To the ThunderClan medicine cat, he added, "Take care of them."

Kestrelwing nodded. "Of course."

Cloudstar nuzzled each of his kits in turn, first Gorsekit, then Spottedkit. He inhaled their sweet milky scent, knowing he would carry it with him until his last breath. He wondered if they would ever

remember him. Then he looked at Birdflight, drinking in the sight of her as if it were the only thing he would see for the rest of his life. *I'm so sorry.*

Birdflight gave a tiny nod, and Cloudstar knew what she was thinking. She was reminding him that he was still the leader of their Clan. Without their home, without food, without StarClan, their Clanmates depended on him alone. Cloudstar lifted his head and signaled with his tail to the rest of his Clan. "Follow me."

He led the way toward the slope, but before he could plunge into the bushes Redstar called from the top of the Great Rock. "May StarClan go with you!"

Cloudstar turned and fixed a cold

gaze on the ThunderClan leader. "StarClan may go where they please," he hissed. "They have *betrayed* SkyClan. From this day on, I will have nothing more to do with our warrior ancestors." He ignored the gasps of shock around him, some from his own Clan. "StarClan allowed the Twolegs to destroy our home. They look down on us now, and let the moon go on shining while you drive us out. They said there would always be five Clans in the forest, but they *lied*. SkyClan will never look to the stars again."

With a last flick of his tail he plunged into the bushes. His Clanmates poured in after him, and they were swallowed up in leafy shadows.

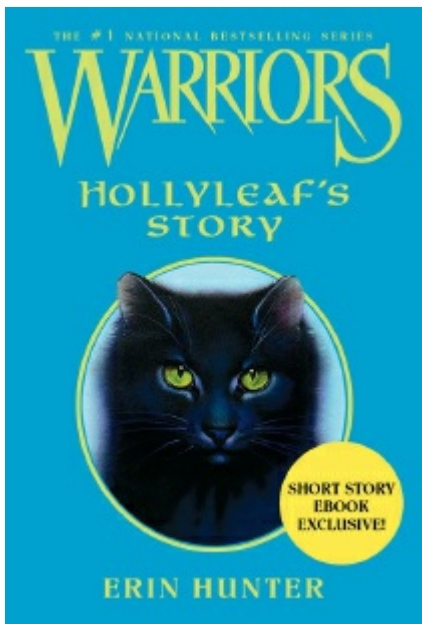
Cloudstar had no idea where they were going, or where they would end up. At that moment, all that mattered to him had been left behind beneath the four giant oaks.

Farewell, Birdflight, Gorsekit, Spottedkit. I will find you again one day, I promise.

KEEP READING FOR A PEEK AT

WARRIORS

HOLLYLEAF'S
STORY



When Hollyleaf disappeared in the tunnels by the lake, ThunderClan believed she was lost to them forever. But her adventure was only beginning.

Lost and lonely, Hollyleaf soon meets a mysterious cat named Fallen Leaves, who teaches her how to live in the tunnels. But Hollyleaf can't help wondering if leaving her Clanmates was the right choice. She knows she's a ThunderClan cat at heart, but can she ever truly go back?



CHAPTER 1



Thunder crashed, louder than anything Hollyleaf had heard before. There was a ripple overhead and a strange cracking sound. The sky is falling! And then it was all around her, sharper and harder than Hollyleaf expected, throwing her to the ground and crushing her bones. I can't breathe! She struggled frantically, feeling her claws rip, but the sky was too heavy, too cold, and she let the endless dark sweep her away.

Hollyleaf was standing on the edge of a cliff. Behind her, the hollow yawned like a hungry mouth. Flames,

hissing and orange, filled the air with smoke and bitter ash. Hollyleaf's littermates, Lionblaze and Jayfeather, crouched beside her; she could feel them trembling against her fur. In front of them, Ashfur stood at the end of a branch that would lead them through the fire. Squirrelflight stood next to him, fury blazing in her eyes. Hollyleaf stared at her mother, waiting for her to move Ashfur out of the way.

"Enough, Ashfur," Squirrelflight hissed. "Your quarrel is with me. These young cats have done nothing to hurt you. Do what you like with me, but let them out of the fire."

Ashfur looked at her in surprise. "You don't understand. This is the only

way to make you feel the same pain that you caused me. You tore my heart out when you chose Brambleclaw over me. Anything I did to you would never hurt as much. But your kits...If you watch them die, then you'll know the pain I felt."

Squirrelflight met his gaze. "Kill them, then. You won't hurt me that way." She took a step away from him, then looked back over her shoulder. "If you really want to hurt me, you'll have to find a better way than that. They are not my kits."

The ground lurched beneath Hollyleaf's paws. Squirrelflight is not my mother? Hollyleaf was Clanless, codeless. She could be a rogue, even a

kittypet. There was no way Hollyleaf could let Ashfur tell the four Clans about Squirrelflight's confession. She and her littermates would be driven out! Everything they had done up till now, all their loyalty to the warrior code, would count for nothing.

The silence was deafening, pressing more heavily on Hollyleaf's ears than the stones that pinned her to the cold floor. Dust filled her mouth and nose, and pain stabbed through one of her legs. *I've been buried alive!* Hollyleaf thrashed and bucked against the weight of the rocks. Her head broke free with a shower of small stones. There wasn't a sliver of light from the mouth of the

tunnel. She was trapped in the dark.

“Help! Help me! I’m stuck!”

She stopped. Who was she calling to? She had no Clanmates now. She had left that life behind—on the other side of the rocks, as far away as if it were the moon. Her brothers and Leafpool knew that she had killed Ashfur. And now Jayfeather and Lionblaze probably thought she had died in the rockfall. *Maybe it’s better that way. At least they won’t come looking for me.* Hollyleaf closed her eyes again.

Hollyleaf had followed Ashfur to the WindClan border. She had stalked him like she would a piece of prey, treading softly, claws sheathed to keep

them from catching in brambles or scratching on stone. When he reached the bank of the stream, with the water foaming far below, Hollyleaf sprang on him, twisted his head to one side, sank her teeth into his fur and skin, telling herself over and over: This is the only way! Ashfur dropped to his belly and Hollyleaf jumped back as he rolled into the stream. She washed the blood from her paws, letting the cold water chill her legs, her flanks, all the way to her heart. I did it for my Clan!

Hollyleaf forced the images from her mind with a shudder. Taking a deep breath, she wriggled her front paws free and pushed away the stones that were

pressing against her chest. Then she reached out as far as she could and started to haul herself out. She hissed when one of her hind legs moved. It was so painful, her leg felt as if it might be broken. Hollyleaf pictured the well-stocked medicine den, with comfrey to mend the bone and poppy seeds to help her sleep through the worst of the discomfort. *As far away as the moon*, she reminded herself. Gritting her teeth, she dragged the rest of her body out of the stones. Her wounded leg bounced agonizingly onto the floor.

“Great StarClan, that hurts!” Hollyleaf growled. Speaking aloud seemed to help, so she carried on. “I’ve been down here before. I know there are

other ways out. I just need to follow this tunnel until I find a source of light. Come on, one paw in front of the other.” In spite of her fear, in spite of the pain in her leg, the memories kept flooding back....

“I am your mother, Hollyleaf,” Leafpool had whispered. Hollyleaf shook her head. That was impossible. How could she be the daughter of a medicine cat, when medicine cats were forbidden to have kits? Worse than being a rogue or a kittypet, her own birth had broken the code of the Clans.

Hollyleaf unsheathed her claws to give her a better grip on the stone. To her

dismay, several of them had already broken off in her struggle to get out, and the tips of her pads felt wet and sticky. She smelled blood and pictured the trail she was leaving as she crawled along the tunnel. If Lionblaze and Jayfeather dug through the rockfall, they'd know she'd survived and would follow the trail to find her. Suddenly her front paws thudded into stone. She yelped with pain and swiveled sideways to follow the curve of the wall. It was so dark, she couldn't even tell if her eyes were open. *If I can just find some light. If, if, if...*

Jayfeather had figured out who their father was. "It's Crowfeather."

Hollyleaf stared at him in disbelief.

“But...Crowfeather’s from WindClan! I’m a ThunderClan cat!”

“Yellowfang came to me in a dream,” Jayfeather insisted. “She told me it was time we knew the truth.”

For Hollyleaf, there was nothing left. Half-Clan? She stood in the mouth of the tunnel and felt the scent of stone smooth her ruffled fur. She could disappear down here and emerge somewhere far from the Clans. She could begin a new life, away from all these lies and broken promises.

Hollyleaf turned and ran into the tunnel. She heard Jayfeather calling to her—and then the thunder came, and the sky fell in, and she was swallowed up by the dizzying black.

Hollyleaf kept going. *Breathe, scrape, haul.* Over and over. She longed to stop, to sleep, to wait for a StarClan warrior to come for her. But did StarClan even know she was here? Her birth had broken the warrior code. She had killed another cat. And she had given up her place in ThunderClan. No ancestors would be watching over her. Had they been watching when Hollyleaf spilled all her Clan's secrets at the Gathering?

“Wait!” Hollyleaf leaped to her paws. “There’s something that I have to say that all the Clans should hear.” There had been too many lies, too much damage done to the warrior code, for

her to keep quiet any longer.

The clearing was so quiet that Hollyleaf could hear a mouse scuttering among the dead leaves under the Great Oak. "You think you know me," she began. "And my brothers, Lionblaze and Jayfeather of ThunderClan. You think you know us, but everything you have been told about us is a lie! We are not the kits of Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight."

"What?" Brambleclaw shot to his paws from where he sat with the other deputies among the roots of the Great Oak. "Squirrelflight, why is she talking such nonsense?"

"I'm sorry, Brambleclaw, but it's true. I'm not their mother, and you are

not their father.”

*The Clan deputy stared at her.
“Then who is?”*

Squirrelflight turned her sad green gaze on the cat she had always claimed as her daughter. “Tell them, Hollyleaf. I kept the secret for seasons; I’m not going to reveal it now.”

“Coward!” Hollyleaf flashed at her. Her gaze swept around the clearing, seeing the eyes of every single cat trained on her. “I’m not afraid of the truth! Leafpool is our mother, and Crowfeather—yes, Crowfeather of WindClan—is our father.”

Yowls of shock greeted her words, but Hollyleaf shouted over them. “These cats were so ashamed of us that

they gave us away and lied to every single one of you to hide the fact that they had broken the warrior code. It's all her fault." She whipped her tail around to point at Leafpool. "How can the Clans survive when there are cowards and liars at the very heart of them?"

Her words seemed to echo from the walls of the tunnel. Hollyleaf wished she could go back to the start of the Gathering, take back the terrible truth she had spilled, spare her Clanmates the pain and shock she had seen in their faces. *What have I done?*

The constant dark was making her eyes ache. She had been searching for a

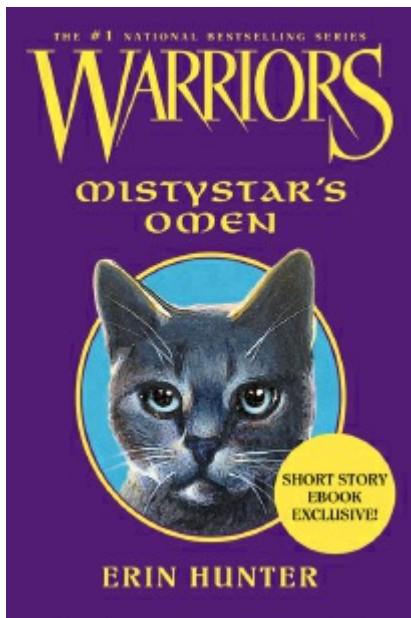
chink of light for so long that she imagined one had appeared up ahead. The faintest line of something paler than black, like the first hint of milky dawn above the trees. Hollyleaf blinked and shook her head, trying to clear her vision. But the gray stripe was still there. Maybe it *was* light? She limped faster, ignoring the burn in her hind leg. The light grew stronger. It was seeping from a gap in the wall: another, smaller tunnel leading off. Hollyleaf dragged herself around the corner. Was it her imagination, or could she see the walls of a cave opening out ahead? In her excitement, she tried to stand up. Her hind leg buckled beneath her and stars exploded in her head. The last thing she

saw was the stone floor rushing up to meet her.

KEEP READING FOR A PEEK AT

WARRIORS

MISTYSTAR'S
OMEN



When Leopardstar loses her ninth life, her longtime deputy, Mistyfoot, steps up to receive her new name—Mistystar—and lead her Clan through a troublesome

time. But Mistystar is about to discover a shocking secret about RiverClan, and her leadership is plunged into crisis as soon as it begins.



CHAPTER 1



Mistyfoot stood at the edge of the rock and watched the water swirl below her paws. It was brown and thick with debris—twigs, scraps of leaf, even a knot of roots that had once held up a tree—and however hard Mistyfoot stared, she was unable to glimpse the stones on the bottom of the lake, or the distinctive flash of silver that gave away the position of a fish. She stretched down to lap at the surface with her tongue. The water tasted bitter and muddy.

“It’s not the same, is it?” Leopardstar commented beside her. Mistyfoot raised her head and looked at

her leader. Leopardstar's golden fur looked dull and dusty in the gray dawn light, and the dark spots that had inspired her name seemed to have faded in the last moon. "I thought when the water returned that everything would be as it was before," Leopardstar went on. She dipped her paw in the lake, staggering a little as she straightened up again, and watched the drips fall from the tips of her claws onto the stone.

"The fish will come back soon," Mistyfoot meowed. "Now that the streams are flowing, there's no reason for them to stay away."

Leopardstar gazed at the ruffled water. "So many fish died in the drought," she sighed, as if Mistyfoot

hadn't spoken. "What if the lake stays empty forever? What will we eat?"

Mistyfoot moved closer to her leader until her shoulder brushed Leopardstar's fur. She was shocked to feel the she-cat's bones sharp just beneath the skin. "Everything will be fine," she murmured. "The beavers' dam has been destroyed, the rain has come, and the long thirst is over. It's been a hard greenleaf, but we have survived."

"Blackclaw, Voletooth, and Dawnflower didn't," Leopardstar snapped. "Three elders lost in a single season? I had to watch my Clanmates starve to death because there were no fish to catch, nothing left in the lake but mud. And what about Rippletail? He

was as brave as any of the other cats who went to find where the water had gone—why didn't he deserve to come back? Did he go too far beyond the sight of StarClan?"

Mistyfoot let her tail curl forward to rest on Leopardstar's back. "Rippletail died saving the lake, and all the Clans. He will be honored forever."

Leopardstar turned away and began to pad up the shore. "He paid too high a price," she growled. "If the fish haven't returned with the water, we're no better off than we were during the drought." She stumbled, and Mistyfoot jumped forward, ready to support her. But Leopardstar shrugged her off with a hiss and continued over the stones, limping.

Mistyfoot followed at a respectful distance, not wanting to fuss over the proud golden cat. She knew Leopardstar was in pain most of the time now, worn down by a sickness that had resisted all of Mothwing's medicine skills, although it wasn't unknown: the ravaging thirst, the dramatic weight loss in spite of constant hunger, the growing weakness that dulled a cat's eyes and hearing. Mistyfoot felt her gaze soften as she watched Leopardstar reach the end of the pebbles and push her way into the ferns that ringed the RiverClan camp.

Suddenly there was a muffled cry from the depths of the undergrowth.

"Leopardstar?" Mistyfoot bounded into the green stalks. A few strides in,

she reached her leader's side. She was slumped on the ground, her eyes stretched wide with pain, her flanks heaving with the effort to draw another breath. "Don't move," Mistyfoot ordered. "I'll fetch help." She thrust her way through the rest of the ferns and burst into the clearing at the heart of the territory. "Mothwing! Come quick! Leopardstar has fallen!"

There was the sound of racing paws; then Mothwing's sandy pelt, so close to the shade of Leopardstar's, appeared at the entrance to her den. The medicine cat paused, looking around, and Mistyfoot called, "This way!"

Side by side, the cats pushed through the ferns to their leader. Leopardstar had

closed her eyes, and her breath rattled in her chest as she gasped for air. Mothwing bent over her, sniffing and tasting her fur with her tongue. Mistyfoot leaned forward but recoiled from the musty stench coming from the sick cat. Close up, she could see dirt and scurf in Leopardstar's pelt, as if the leader hadn't groomed herself in days.

"Fetch Mintfur and Pebblefoot," Mothwing mewed quietly over her shoulder. "They haven't gone out on patrol yet. They can help us carry Leopardstar to her den."

Relieved to have an excuse to leave, and guilty that she wanted to, Mistyfoot backed away and raced to the clearing. She returned with Mintfur and

Pebblefoot and watched as Mothwing eased Leopardstar to her paws, propped heavily on either flank by the warriors. Mistyfoot held the ferns aside as the cats half guided, half dragged their leader into the camp.

“Is Leopardstar *dead*?” Mistyfoot heard one of Duskfur’s kits whisper.

“Of course not, dear. She’s just very tired,” Duskfur mewed.

Mistyfoot stood at the entrance to the den and watched Pebblefoot pat moss into place beneath Leopardstar’s head. This was more than mere exhaustion. Already the den seemed darker, the shadows thicker, as though warriors from StarClan were gathering to welcome the RiverClan leader. Mintfur

brushed past Mistyfoot as he left, his pale gray pelt smelling sharply of ferns. "Let me know if I can do anything else for her," he murmured, and Mistyfoot nodded. Pebblefoot followed, his head lowered and the tip of his tail leaving a faint scar in the dust.

Mothwing tucked Leopardstar's front paw more comfortably under the she-cat's chest and straightened up. "I need to fetch some herbs from my den," she meowed. "Stay with her; let her know that you are here." She rested her muzzle briefly against Mistyfoot's ear. "Be strong, my friend," she whispered.

The den seemed deathly quiet after Mothwing had gone. Leopardstar's breathing had grown shallow, a barely

audible wheeze that did little more than flex the moss by her muzzle. Mistyfoot crouched down by her leader's head and stroked her tail along Leopardstar's bony flank. "Sleep well," she mewed softly. "You're safe now. Mothwing is gathering herbs to make you feel better."

To her surprise, Leopardstar stirred. "It's too late for that," rasped the she-cat without opening her eyes. "StarClan draws near; I can feel them all around me. This is my time to leave."

"Don't say that!" hissed Mistyfoot. "Your ninth life has barely started! Mothwing will heal you."

Leopardstar let out a grunt. "Mothwing has served me so well, but some things are beyond even her skills.

Let me go peacefully, Mistyfoot. I won't fight this last battle, and neither should you."

"But I don't want to lose you!" Mistyfoot protested.

One clouded blue eye opened and gazed at her. "Really?" Leopardstar wheezed. "After what I did to your brother? To all the half-Clan cats?"

For a heartbeat, Mistyfoot was plunged back into the dark and stinking rabbit hole in RiverClan's old camp in the forest. Tigerstar and Leopardstar had united to form TigerClan, and in their quest for the purest warrior blood, they had imprisoned all cats with mixed Clan heritage. Mistyfoot and Stonefur, who had been the RiverClan deputy, had

recently learned that Bluestar of ThunderClan was their mother. This had been enough to condemn them in Leopardstar's eyes, and she had allowed Tigerstar to persecute them until Stonefur had been killed, murdered in cold blood by Tigerstar's deputy, Blackfoot. Mistyfoot had been rescued by Firestar and taken to ThunderClan until the terrible battle with BloodClan had ended Tigerstar's death-soaked rule.

"I never deserved your forgiveness," Leopardstar whispered, jerking Mistyfoot back to the cold, quiet den.

"Tigerstar was responsible for the death of my brother," Mistyfoot growled. "Tigerstar and Blackfoot. The time of TigerClan had nothing to do with the

warrior code that I believe in. I was always loyal to RiverClan—and to you, as our leader.”

Leopardstar sighed. “Your life has been harder than I wanted, Mistyfoot. Losing your brother and three of your kits. You have borne your heartache well.”

Mistyfoot stiffened. No cat would ever know the pain she had felt when she buried her children. “Every queen knows that the life of a kit is a precious and fragile thing. I will see them again in StarClan, and I walk with them in my heart every day,” she mewed.

There was a pause as Leopardstar strained to take a breath, and Mistyfoot half rose, ready to call for help. Then

Leopardstar relaxed again. "I am sorry not to have known the joy of having kits. There was a time when I thought it might happen, but it was not to be." Her words faded away as though she was picturing something she had dreamed of long ago. "Perhaps it was for the best. But I would have been proud to call you my daughter, Mistyfoot."

Mistyfoot couldn't reply. Her heart ached with the familiar sorrow that she had never had a chance to know her real mother, Bluestar. The ThunderClan leader had revealed her darkest secret to Mistyfoot and Stonefur just before she died on the banks of the river. For a moment, Mistyfoot had been scorched by the love of a mother, but then it had

vanished, leaving a cold emptiness that could never be filled.

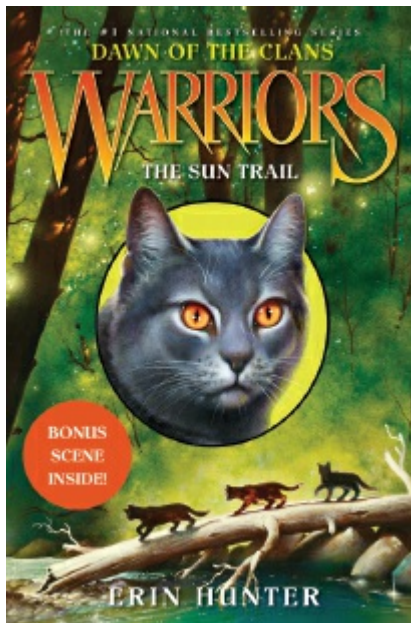
She curled herself around Leopardstar, just as she had tried to warm Bluestar's sodden body all those moons ago.

"Sleep now," she murmured into Leopardstar's ear. "I'll be here when you wake."

KEEP WATCH FOR
DAWN OF THE CLANS

WARRIORS

BOOK 1:
THE SUN TRAIL



A mysterious vision leads a group of cats away from their mountain home in search of a land filled with prey and shelter. But the challenges they face

threaten to divide them, and the young cats must try to figure out how to live side by side in peace.



PROLOGUE



Cold gray light rippled over the floor of a cave so vast that its roof was lost in shadows. An endless screen of water fell across the entrance, its sound echoing from the rocks.

Near the back of the cavern crouched a frail white she-cat. Despite her age, her green eyes were still clear and deep with wisdom as they traveled over the skinny cats swarming the cave floor, restlessly pacing in front of the shimmering waterfall; the elders huddled together in the sleeping hollows; the kits mewling desperately, demanding food from their exhausted mothers.

“We can’t go on like this,” the old she-cat whispered to herself.

A few tail-lengths away, several kits squabbled over an eagle carcass, its flesh stripped away the day before as soon as their mothers had caught it. A big ginger kit shouldered a smaller tabby away from the bone she was gnawing.

“I *need* this!” he announced.

The tabby sprang up and nipped the end of the ginger kit’s tail. “We *all* need it, flea-brain!” she snapped as the ginger tom let out a yowl.

A gray-and-white elder, every one of her ribs showing through her pelt, tottered up to the kits and snatched the bone away.

“Hey!” the ginger kit protested.

The elder glared at him. "I caught prey for season after season," she snarled. "Don't you think I deserve one measly bone?" She turned and stalked away, the bone clamped firmly in her jaws.

The ginger kit stared after her for a heartbeat, then scampered away, wailing, to his mother, who lay on a rock beside the cave wall. Instead of comforting him, his mother snapped something, angrily flicking her tail.

The old white she-cat was too far away to hear what the mother cat said, but she sighed.

Every cat is coming to the end of what they can bear, she thought.

She watched as the gray-and-white

elder padded across the cave and dropped the eagle bone in front of an even older she-cat, who was crouching in a sleeping hollow with her nose resting on her front paws. Her dull gaze was fixed on the far wall of the cave.

“Here, Misty Water.” The gray-and-white elder nudged the bone closer to her with one paw. “Eat. It’s not much, but it might help.”

Misty Water’s indifferent gaze flickered over her friend and away again. “No, thanks, Silver Frost. I have no appetite, not since Broken Feather died.” Her voice throbbed with grief. “He would have lived, if there had been enough prey for him to eat.” She sighed. “Now I’m just waiting to join him.”

“Misty Water, you can’t—”

The white she-cat was distracted from the elders’ talk as a group of cats appeared at the entrance to the cave, shaking snow off their fur. Several other cats sprang up and ran to meet them.

“Did you catch anything?” one of them called out eagerly.

“Yes, where’s your prey?” another demanded.

The leader of the newcomers shook his head sadly. “Sorry. There wasn’t enough to bring back.”

Hope melted away from the cats in the cave like mist under strong sunlight. They glanced at one another, then trailed away, their heads drooping and their tails brushing the ground.

The white she-cat watched them, then turned her head as she realized that a cat was padding up to her. Though his muzzle was gray with age and his golden tabby fur thin and patchy, he walked with a confidence that showed he had once been a strong and noble cat.

“Half Moon,” he greeted the white she-cat, settling down beside her and wrapping his tail over his paws.

The white she-cat let out a faint *mrrow* of amusement. “You shouldn’t call me that, Lion’s Roar,” she protested. “I’ve been the Teller of Pointed Stones for many seasons.”

The golden tabby tom sniffed. “I don’t care how long the others have called you Stoneteller. You’ll always be

Half Moon to me.”

Half Moon made no response, except to reach out her tail and rest it on her old friend’s shoulder.

“I was born in this cave,” Lion’s Roar went on. “But my mother, Shy Fawn, told me about the time before we came here—when you lived beside a lake, sheltered beneath trees.”

Half Moon sighed faintly. “I am the only cat left who remembers the lake, and the journey we made to come here. But I have lived three times as many moons here in the mountains than I did beside the lake, and the endless rushing of the waterfall now echoes in my heart.” She paused, blinking again, then asked, “Why are you telling me this

now?”

Lion's Roar hesitated before replying. "Hunger might kill us all before the sun shines again, and there's no more room in the cave." He stretched out one paw and brushed Half Moon's shoulder fur. "Something must be done."

Half Moon's eyes stretched wide as she gazed at him. "But we can't leave the mountains!" she protested, her voice breathless with shock. "Jay's Wing promised; he made me the Teller of the Pointed Stones because this was our destined home."

Lion's Roar met her intense green gaze. "Are you sure Jay's Wing was right?" he asked. "How could he know what was going to happen in the future?"

“He had to be right,” Half Moon murmured.

Her mind flew back to the ceremony, so many seasons before, when Jay’s Wing had made her the Teller of the Pointed Stones. She shivered as she heard his voice again, full of love for her and grief that her destiny meant they could never be together. “Others will come after you, moon upon moon. Choose them well, train them well—trust the future of your Tribe to them.”

He would never have said that if he didn’t mean for us to stay here.

Half Moon let her gaze drift over the other cats: her cats, now thin and hungry. She shook her head sadly. Lion’s Roar was right: something had to be done if

they were to survive.

Gradually she realized that the cold gray light in the cave was brightening to a warm gold, as if the sun was rising beyond the screen of falling water—but Half Moon knew that night was falling.

At her side Lion's Roar sat calmly washing his ears, while the other cats in the cave took no notice of the deepening golden blaze.

No cat sees it but me! What can it mean?

Bathed in the brilliant light, Half Moon remembered how, when she first became Healer, Jay's Wing had told her that her ancestors would guide her in the decisions she must make—that, sometimes, she would see strange things

that meant more than they first appeared. She had never been directly aware of her ancestors, but she had learned to look out for the signs.

Possible meanings rushed through Half Moon's mind, thick as snowflakes in a blizzard. *Maybe the warm weather is going to come early. But how would that help, when there are so many of us?* Then she wondered whether the sun was really shining somewhere else, where there was warmth and prey and shelter. *But how would that help us, up here in the mountains?*

The sunlight grew stronger and stronger, until Half Moon could barely stand to look into the rays. She relaxed as a new idea rose in her mind.

Maybe Lion's Roar is right, and only some of us belong here. Maybe some of us should travel toward the place where the sun rises, to make a new home in the brightest light of all? Somewhere they will be safe, and well fed, with room to nurture generations of kits?

As Half Moon basked in the warmth of sunlight on her fur, she found the certainty she needed within herself. Some of her cats would remain, a small enough group for the mountains to sustain, and the rest of her Tribe would journey toward the rising sun, to find a new home.

But I won't leave the cave, she thought. I will see out the twilight of my

*days here, a whole lifetime away from
where I was born. And then maybe...
just maybe...I'll find Jay's Wing again.*



CHAPTER 1



Gray Wing toiled up the snow-covered slope toward a ridge that bit into the sky like a row of snaggly teeth. He set each paw down carefully, to avoid breaking through the frozen surface and sinking into the powdery drifts underneath. Light flakes were falling, dappling his dark gray pelt. He was so cold that he couldn't feel his pads anymore, and his belly yowled with hunger.

I can't remember the last time I felt warm or full-fed.

In the last sunny season he had still been a kit, playing with his littermate, Clear Sky, around the edge of the pool

outside the cave. Now that seemed like a lifetime ago. Gray Wing had only the vaguest memories of green leaves on the stubby mountain trees, and the sunshine bathing the rocks.

Pausing to taste the air for prey, he gazed across the snow-bound mountains, peak after peak stretching away into the distance. The heavy gray sky overhead promised yet more snow to come.

But the air carried no scent of his quarry, and Gray Wing plodded on. Clear Sky appeared from behind an outcrop of rock, his pale gray fur barely visible against the snow. His jaws were empty, and as he spotted Gray Wing he shook his head.

“Not a sniff of prey anywhere!” he

called. "Why don't we—"

A raucous cry from above cut off his words. A shadow flashed over Gray Wing. Looking up, he saw a hawk swoop low across the slope, its talons hooked and cruel.

As the hawk passed, Clear Sky leaped high into the air, his forepaws outstretched. His claws snagged the bird's feathers and he fell back, dragging it from the sky. It let out another harsh cry as it landed on the snow in a flurry of beating wings.

Gray Wing charged up the slope, his paws throwing up a fine spray of snow. Reaching his brother, he planted both forepaws on one thrashing wing. The hawk glared up at him with hatred in its

yellow eyes, and Gray Wing had to duck to avoid its slashing talons.

Clear Sky thrust his head forward and sank his teeth into the hawk's neck. It jerked once and went limp, its gaze growing instantly dull as blood seeped from its wound and stained the snow.

Panting, Gray Wing looked at his brother. "That was a great catch!" he exclaimed, warm triumph flooding through him.

Clear Sky shook his head. "But look how scrawny it is. There's nothing in these mountains fit to eat, and won't be until the snow clears."

He crouched beside his prey, ready to take the first bite. Gray Wing settled next to him, his jaws flooding as he

thought of sinking his teeth into the hawk.

But then he remembered the starving cats back in the cave, squabbling over scraps. “We should take this prey back to the others,” he meowed. “They need it to give them strength for their hunting.”

“We need strength too,” Clear Sky mumbled, tearing away a mouthful of the hawk’s flesh.

“We’ll be fine.” Gray Wing gave him a prod in the side. “We’re the best hunters in the Tribe. Nothing escapes us when we hunt together. We can catch something else, easier than the others can.”

Clear Sky rolled his eyes as he swallowed the prey. “Why must you always be so unselfish?” he grumbled.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Together the two cats dragged the hawk down the slope and over the boulders at the bottom of a narrow gully until they reached the pool where the waterfall roared down. Though it wasn’t heavy, the bird was awkward to manage. Its flopping wings and claws caught on every hidden rock and buried thornbush.

“We wouldn’t have to do this if you’d let us eat it,” Clear Sky muttered as he struggled to maneuver the hawk along the path that led behind the waterfall. “I hope the others appreciate this.”

Clear Sky grumbles, Gray Wing thought, but he knows this is the right thing to do.

Yowls of surprise greeted the brothers when they returned to the cave. Several cats ran to meet them, gathering around to gaze wide-eyed at the prey.

“It’s *huge!*” Turtle Tail exclaimed, her green eyes shining as she bounded up to Gray Wing. “I can’t believe you brought it back for us.”

Gray Wing dipped his head, feeling slightly embarrassed at her enthusiasm. “It won’t feed every cat,” he mewed.

Shattered Ice, a gray-and-white tom, shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. “Which cats are going out to hunt?” he asked. “They should be the first ones to eat.”

Murmurs came from among the assembled cats, broken by a shrill wail:

“But I’m *hungry*! Why can’t I have some? I could go out and hunt.”

Gray Wing recognized the voice as being his younger brother, Jagged Peak’s. Their mother, Quiet Rain, padded up and gently nudged her kit back toward the sleeping hollows. “You’re too young to hunt,” she murmured. “And if the sharp-claws don’t eat, there’ll be no prey for any cat.”

“Not fair!” Jagged Peak muttered as his mother guided him away.

Meanwhile the hunters, including Shattered Ice and Turtle Tail, lined up beside the body of the hawk. Each of them took one mouthful, then stepped back for the next cat to take their turn. By

the time they had finished, and filed out along the path behind the waterfall, there was very little meat left.

Clear Sky, watching beside Gray Wing, let out an irritated snort. "I still wish *we* could have eaten it."

Privately Gray Wing agreed with him, but he knew there was no point in complaining. *There just isn't enough food. Every cat is weak, hungry—just clinging on until the sun comes back.*

The pattering of paws sounded behind him; he glanced around to see Bright Stream trotting over to Clear Sky. "Is it true that you caught that huge hawk all by yourself?"

Clear Sky hesitated, basking in the pretty tabby she-cat's admiration. Gray

Wing gave a meaningful purr.

“No,” Clear Sky admitted. “Gray Wing helped.”

Bright Stream gave Gray Wing a nod, but her gaze immediately returned to Clear Sky. Gray Wing took a couple of paces back and left them alone.

“They look good together.” A voice spoke at his shoulder; Gray Wing turned to see the elder Silver Frost standing beside him. “There’ll be kits come the warmest moon.”

Gray Wing nodded. Any cat with half an eye could see how close his brother and Bright Stream were as they stood with their heads together murmuring to each other.

“More than one litter, maybe,” Silver

Frost went on, giving Gray Wing a nudge. "That Turtle Tail is certainly a beautiful cat."

Hot embarrassment flooded through Gray Wing from ears to tail-tip. He had no idea what to say, and was grateful when he saw Stoneteller approaching them. She took a winding path among her cats, pausing to talk to each one. Though her paws were unsteady because of her great age, Gray Wing could see the depth of experience in her green gaze and the care she felt for every one of her Tribe.

"There's still a bit of the hawk left," Gray Wing heard her murmur to Snow Hare, who was stretched out in one of the sleeping hollows, washing her belly. "You should eat something."

Snow Hare paused in her tongue strokes. "I'm leaving the food for the young ones," she replied. "They need their strength for hunting."

Stoneteller bent her head and touched the elder's ear with her nose. "You have earned your food many times over."

"Perhaps the mountains have fed us for long enough." It was Lion's Roar who had spoken from where he sat a tail-length away.

Stoneteller gave him a swift glance, full of meaning.

What's that all about? Gray Wing asked himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by Quiet Rain, who came to sit beside him.

“Have you eaten anything?” she asked.

All we ever talk about is food, Gray Wing thought. *Or the lack of it*. Trying to curb his impatience, he replied, “I’ll have something before I go out again.”

To his relief, his mother didn’t insist. “You did very well to catch that hawk,” she meowed.

“It wasn’t just me,” Gray Wing told her. “Clear Sky made this amazing leap to bring it down. I just helped hold it while he killed it.”

“You *both* did well,” Quiet Rain purred. She turned to look at her young kits, who were scuffling together close by. “I hope that Jagged Peak and Fluttering Bird will be just as skillful when they’re old enough to hunt.”

At that moment, Jagged Peak swiped his sister's paws out from underneath her. Fluttering Bird let out a wail as she fell over, hitting her head on a rock. Instead of getting up again, she lay still, whimpering.

“You're such a silly kit!” Jagged Peak exclaimed.

As Quiet Rain padded over to give her daughter a comforting lick, Gray Wing noticed how small and fragile Fluttering Bird looked. Her head seemed too big for her body, and when she scrambled to her paws again her legs wobbled. Jagged Peak, on the other hand, was strong and well muscled, his gray tabby fur thick and healthy.

While Quiet Rain took care of his

sister, Jagged Peak scampered over to Gray Wing. “Tell me about the hawk,” he demanded. “How did you catch it? I bet I could catch one if I was allowed out of this stupid cave!”

Gray Wing purred excitedly. “You should have seen Clear Sky’s leap—”

A loud yowl cut off Gray Wing’s story. “Let all cats be silent! Stoneteller will speak!”

The cat who had made the announcement was Shaded Moss, a black-and-white tom who was one of the strongest and most-respected cats of the Tribe. He stood on a boulder at the far end of the cavern, with Stoneteller beside him. The old cat looked even more fragile next to his powerful figure.

As he wriggled his way toward the front of the crowd gathered around the boulder, Gray Wing heard murmurs of curiosity from the others.

“Maybe Stoneteller is going to appoint Shaded Moss as her replacement,” Silver Frost suggested.

“It’s time she appointed some cat,” Snow Hare agreed. “It’s what we’ve all been expecting for moons.”

Gray Wing found himself a place to sit next to Clear Sky and Bright Stream, and looked up at Stoneteller and Shaded Moss. Stoneteller rose to her paws and let her gaze travel over her Tribe until the murmuring died away into silence.

“I am grateful to all of you for working so hard to survive here,” she

began, her voice so faint that it could scarcely be heard above the sound of the waterfall. "I am proud to be your Healer, but I have to accept that there are things even I cannot put right. Lack of space and lack of food are beyond my control."

"It's not your fault!" Silver Frost called out. "Don't give up!"

Stoneteller dipped her head in acknowledgment of the elder's support. "Our home cannot support us all," she continued. "But there is another place for some of us, full of sunlight and warmth and prey for all seasons. I have seen it...in my dreams."

Utter silence greeted her announcement. Gray Wing couldn't make sense of what the Healer had just said.

Dreams? What's the point of that? I dreamed I killed a huge eagle and ate it all myself, but I was still hungry when I woke up!

He noticed that Lion's Roar sat bolt upright as Stoneteller spoke and was staring at her, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"I believe in my heart that these mountains are not where every cat belongs," Stoneteller went on. "The other place is waiting for those of you who are brave enough to make the journey. Shaded Moss will lead you there, with my blessing."

The old white cat glanced once more around her Tribe, her gaze full of sadness and pain. Then she slid down

from the top of the boulder and vanished into the tunnel at the back of the cave that led to her own den.

A flood of shocked speculation passed through the rest of the cats. After a couple of heartbeats, Shaded Moss stepped forward and raised his tail for silence.

“This has been my home all my life,” he began when he could make himself heard. His voice was solemn. “I always expected to die here. But if Stoneteller believes that some of us must leave to find the place of her dream, then I will go, and do my best to keep you safe.”

Dappled Pelt sprang to her paws, and her golden eyes were shining. “I’ll go!”

“So will I!” Tall Shadow added, her sleek black figure tense with excitement as she leaped up to stand beside her friend.

“Are you flea-brained?” Twisted Branch, a scraggy brown tom, stared incredulously at the two she-cats. “Wandering off with no idea where you’re heading?”

Gray Wing remained silent, but he couldn’t help agreeing with Twisted Branch. The mountains were his home: He knew every rock, every bush, every trickling stream. *It would tear my heart in two if I had to leave just because Stoneteller had a dream.*

Turning to Clear Sky, he was amazed to see excitement gleaming in his

brother's eyes. "You're not seriously considering this?" he asked.

"Why not?" Clear Sky demanded in return. "This could be the answer to all our problems. What's the point of struggling to feed every mouth if there's an alternative?" His whiskers quivered eagerly. "It will be an adventure!" He called out to Shaded Moss: "I'll go!" Glancing at Bright Stream, he added, "You'll come too, won't you?"

Bright Stream leaned closer to Clear Sky. "I don't know.... Would you really go without me?"

Before Clear Sky could reply, little Jagged Peak wormed his way forward between his two older brothers, followed by Fluttering Bird. "I want to

go!” he announced loudly.

Fluttering Bird nodded enthusiastically. “Me too!” she squeaked.

Quiet Rain followed them, and drew both kits closer to her with a sweep of her tail. “Certainly not!” she meowed. “You two are staying right here.”

“You could come with us,” Jagged Peak suggested.

His mother shook her head. “This is my home,” she said. “We’ve survived before. When the warm season returns, we’ll have enough to eat.”

Gray Wing dipped his head in agreement. *How can they forget what Quiet Rain told me when I was a kit? This place was promised to us by a cat*

*who led us here from a faraway lake.
How can we think of leaving?*

Shaded Moss's powerful voice rose up again over the clamor. "No cat needs to decide yet," he announced. "Give some thought to what you want to do. The half moon is just past; I will leave at the next full moon along with any—"

He broke off, his gaze fixed on the far end of the cave. Turning his head, Gray Wing saw the hunting party making their way inside. Their pelts were clotted with snow and their heads drooped.

Not one was carrying prey.

"We're sorry," Shattered Ice called out. "The snow is heavier than ever, and there wasn't a single—"

“We’re leaving!” some cat yowled from the crowd around Shaded Moss.

The hunting party stood still for a moment, glancing at each other in confusion and dismay. Then they pelted down the length of the cavern to listen as their Tribemates explained what Stoneteller had told them, and what Shaded Moss intended to do.

Turtle Tail made her way to where Gray Wing was sitting and plopped down beside him, beginning to clean the melting snow from her pelt. “Isn’t this great?” she asked between licks. “A warm place where there’s plenty of prey, just waiting for us? Are you going, Gray Wing?”

“I am,” Clear Sky responded, before

Gray Wing could answer. “And so is Bright Stream.” The young she-cat gave him an uncertain look, but Clear Sky didn’t notice. “It’ll be a hard journey, but I think it’ll be worth it.”

“It’ll be *wonderful!*” Turtle Tail blinked happily. “Come on, Gray Wing! How about it?”

Gray Wing couldn’t give her the answer she wanted. As he looked around the cave at the cats he had known all his life, he couldn’t imagine abandoning them for a place that might exist only in Stoneteller’s dream.

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About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as 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 bestselling Survivors and Seekers series.

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