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WARRIORS

MISTYSTAR'S OMEN



**SHORT STORY
EBOOK
EXCLUSIVE!**

ERIN HUNTER

WARRIORS

MISTYSTAR'S
OMEN

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HARPER

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Allegiances

RIVERCLAN

LEADER

LEOPARDSTAR—unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat

DEPUTY

MISTYFOOT—gray she-cat with blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT

MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat
APPRENTICE, WILLOWSHINE (gray tabby
she-cat)

WARRIORS

REEDWHISKER—black tom
APPRENTICE, HOLLOWPAW (dark brown
tabby tom)

GRAYMIST—pale gray tabby she-cat
APPRENTICE, TROUTPAW (pale gray
tabby she-cat)

MINTFUR—light gray tabby tom
ICEWING—white she-cat with blue eyes

MINNOWTAIL—dark gray she-cat
APPRENTICE, MOSSYPAW (brown-and-
white she-cat)

PEBBLEFOOT—mottled gray tom
APPRENTICE, RUSHPAW (light brown
tabby tom)

MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom

ROBINWING—tortoiseshell-and-white
tom

BEETLEWHISKER—brown-and-white
tabby tom

PETALFUR—gray-and-white she-cat

GRASSPELT—light brown tom

QUEENS

DUSKFUR—brown tabby she-cat

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with
blue eyes

ELDERS

DAPPLENOSE—mottled gray she-cat

POUNCETAILE—ginger-and-white tom

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

FIRESTAR—ginger tom with a flame-colored pelt

DEPUTY

BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

MEDICINE CAT

JAYFEATHER—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

GRAYSTRIPE—long-haired gray tom

MILLIE—striped gray tabby she-cat

DUSTPELT—dark brown tabby tom

SANDSTORM—pale ginger she-cat with
green eyes

BRACKENFUR—golden brown tabby tom

SORRELTAIL—tortoiseshell-and-white
she-cat with amber eyes

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with
blue eyes

BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with
ginger patches

THORNCLAW—golden brown tabby tom

SQUIRRELFIGHT—dark ginger she-cat
with green eyes

LEAFPOOL—light brown tabby she-cat
with amber eyes

SPIDERLEG—long-limbed black tom with
brown underbelly and amber eyes

BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom

WHITEWING—white she-cat with green
eyes

BERRYNOSE—cream-colored tom

HAZELTAIL—small gray-and-white she-
cat

MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

APPRENTICE, IVYPAW

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with
amber eyes

APPRENTICE, DOVEPAW

FOXLEAP—reddish tabby tom

ICECLOUD—white she-cat

TOADSTEP—black-and-white tom

ROSEPETAL—dark cream she-cat

BRIARLIGHT—dark brown she-cat
BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white
she-cat

BUMBLEFLIGHT—very pale gray tom
with black stripes

APPRENTICES

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

DOVEPAW—pale gray she-cat with blue
eyes

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

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

FERNCLOUD—pale gray (with darker
flecks) she-cat with green eyes

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the
horseplace

POPPYFROST—tortoiseshell she-cat
(mother to Cherrykit, a ginger she-cat,
and Molekit, a brown-and-cream tom)

ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now
retired)

MOUSEFUR—small dusky brown she-cat

PURDY—plump tabby former loner with a
gray muzzle

LONGTAIL—pale tabby tom with black
stripes, retired early due to failing sight

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER

BLACKSTAR—large white tom with huge jet-black paws

DEPUTY

RUSSETFUR—dark ginger she-cat

MEDICINE CAT

LITTLECLOUD—very small tabby tom
APPRENTICE, FLAMETAILED (ginger tom)

WARRIORS

OAKFUR—small brown tom
APPRENTICE, FERRETPAW (cream-and-gray tom)

ROWANCLAW—ginger tom

SMOKEFOOT—black tom

TOADFOOT—dark brown tom

APPLEFUR—mottled brown she-cat

CROWFROST—black-and-white tom

RATSCAR—brown tom with long scar
across his back

APPRENTICE, PINEPAW (black she-cat)

SNOWBIRD—pure-white she-cat

TAWNYPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with
green eyes

APPRENTICE, STARLINGPAW (ginger tom)

OLIVENOSE—tortoiseshell she-cat

OWLCLAW—light brown tabby tom

SHREWFOOT—gray she-cat with black
feet

SCORCHFUR—dark gray tom

REDWILLOW—mottled brown-and-ginger
tom

TIGERHEART—dark brown tabby tom

DAWNPELT—cream-furred she-cat

QUEENS

KINKFUR—tabby she-cat, with long fur
that sticks out at all angles

IVYTAIL—black, white, and tortoiseshell
she-cat

ELDERS

CEDARHEART—dark gray tom

TALLPOPPY—long-legged light brown
tabby she-cat

SNAKETAIL—dark brown tom with tabby-
striped tail

WHITEWATER—white she-cat with long
fur, blind in one eye

WINDCLAN

LEADER

ONESTAR—brown tabby tom

DEPUTY

ASHFOOT—gray she-cat

MEDICINE CAT

KESTRELFIGHT—mottled gray tom

WARRIORS

CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom

OWLWHISKER—light brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, WHISKERPAW (light brown tom)

WHITETAIL—small white she-cat

NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat

GORSETAIL—very pale gray-and-white
she-cat with blue eyes

WEASELFUR—ginger tom with white
paws

HARESPRING—brown-and-white tom

LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with amber
eyes

ANTPELT—brown tom with one black ear

EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark
paws

HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-
cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICE, FURZEPAW (gray-and-white
she-cat)

BREEZPELT—black tom with amber
eyes

APPRENTICE, BOULDERPAW (large pale

gray tom)

SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat

SWALLOWTAIL—dark gray she-cat

SUNSTRIKE—tortoiseshell she-cat with large white mark on her forehead

ELDERS

WEBFOOT—dark gray tabby tom

TORNEAR—tabby tom

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

SMOKY—muscular gray-and-white tom who lives in a barn at the horseplace

FLOSS—small gray-and-white she-cat

who lives at the horseplace

OTHER ANIMALS

MIDNIGHT—a star-gazing badger who
lives by the sea

Maps



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."



Chapter 2

The wind had risen, stirring the bushes and making the waves splash against the shore, when Mistyfoot woke. The den

was pale with dawn light that flickered as the branches of the rowan tree swayed in the breeze. Beside Mistyfoot, Leopardstar was cold and still. Mistyfoot rested her muzzle on the old cat's head, then slipped out of the den and padded through the sleeping camp down to the shore. She stared over the choppy gray water, wondering if Leopardstar had joined their ancestors yet.

Paw steps behind her made Mistyfoot turn. Mothwing was stepping carefully over the stones. "Leopardstar is dead," the medicine cat announced.

"I know," Mistyfoot meowed. She closed her eyes against the rush of pain.

She felt Mothwing come to stand beside her, spilling warmth and softness from her fur. “I don’t feel ready to lead this Clan,” Mistyfoot confessed in a whisper without opening her eyes. “How can I follow in Leopardstar’s footsteps?”

Mothwing rested her tail on Mistyfoot’s back. “You are more than ready,” she promised. “Think of the path you have traveled so far. You have seen more than most cats ever will in their lifetime.”

“That’s because I am old,” Mistyfoot pointed out. “Blackclaw was only a few seasons older than me! Sometimes I feel as if I have outstayed my welcome here, as if I should be walking in StarClan

with Stonefur by now.”

“That’s mouse-brained, and you know it,” Mothwing retorted. “You have a long life yet to live. Nine long lives, in fact.”

Nine lives! For a heartbeat, Mistyfoot felt overwhelmed with tiredness. How would she find enough energy to lead her Clan when she could barely move her paws? Would she have a chance to feel sad about Leopardstar’s death, with so much to do? Mothwing seemed to sense her hesitation.

“There will be plenty of time to grieve for Leopardstar. I will be here whenever you need me. You are not alone, Mistyfoot. You must summon our Clanmates; tell them about Leopardstar.

You are their leader now, and they need you as much as they needed Leopardstar.”

Keeping her tail on Mistyfoot’s spine, Mothwing led her back to the camp. Mistyfoot breathed in the delicate scent of herbs from her friend’s pelt and began to feel better. “I couldn’t do this without you,” she murmured.

“Nor should you have to,” Mothwing replied briskly. “I am your medicine cat, and I will do everything I can to help you.”

The clearing was already filling up with cats, who circled anxiously, whispering. Mistyfoot jumped onto the broad willow stump outside

Leopardstar's den and called to her Clanmates. "Let all cats old enough to swim gather to hear my words!" In spite of her grief, she couldn't help feeling a rush of excitement as the cats stopped circling and settled on their haunches around the tree stump, gazing expectantly up at her. *Mothwing was right! They see me as their leader even before I have been given my nine lives and my new name!*

"Leopardstar has gone to walk with StarClan," she announced. A murmur of sadness spread through the cats like a gust of cold wind.

"We were lucky to have her as our leader for so many moons," Graymist

mewed. “She was brave and strong-willed on behalf of all of us.”

“She told me I was doing really well in my battle training,” the apprentice Mossypaw commented mournfully.

Duskfur drew her kits closer with a sweep of her tail. “I had hoped she would live long enough to see these little ones become apprentices,” she sighed.

Beetlewhisker stood up, his brown-and-white pelt gleaming in the early rays of the sun. “When will you be getting your nine lives?” he asked Mistyfoot.

Mistyfoot winced. This was what she had been afraid of, that she would scarcely have time to draw breath—let alone mourn the former leader—before

she was plunged into her new life. But she had been Leopardstar's deputy for a long time, and she had always known what her duties would be when this moment came. And she couldn't help looking forward to the chance to walk with Mothwing among her warrior ancestors, to learn the secrets of the future that would help her to lead her Clan. "I'll go to the Moonpool as soon as I can," she declared.

Mothwing stirred, and Mistyfoot looked questioningly at her. "We can wait until tomorrow," meowed the medicine cat. "We must sit vigil for Leopardstar tonight."

A black tom stood up and nodded to

Mistyfoot. “I speak for all the warriors when I say that I will be honored to serve you as my leader,” he announced.

“Thank you, Reedwhisker,” Mistyfoot purred. Her mind flashed back to the time she had nursed this cat at her belly with his littermates; he was the only one of her kits who had survived, and every day she took pride in the warrior he had become.

Petalfur twitched her tail. “Some of us can speak for ourselves,” she mewed irritably. “But I will be as loyal to you as I was to Leopardstar, may she walk in peace among the stars.”

“Mistystar!” called Troutpaw.

Mistyfoot narrowed her eyes at the

pale gray apprentice. “Not yet, Troutpaw. Not until I have received my nine lives.” *Tomorrow I will walk with our ancestors, and say good-bye to my warrior name forever.*

Mistyfoot jumped down from the tree stump and called to Grasspelt: “Could you lead a hunting patrol before sunhigh? Take Minnowtail and Mossypaw, and Icewing if she feels up to it.”

The white she-cat sniffed. “Of course I’m up to it! I’ve spent the last three sunrises stuck in this camp, so I’m more than ready to stretch my legs.”

Mistyfoot hid a purr of amusement. “You’re allowed to rest as much as you want after journeying to the beavers’

dam,” she reminded Icewing. “But if you feel like hunting, then we’d all be grateful for your sharp eyes.”

Reedwhisker padded up to Mistyfoot. “Would you like me to visit the other Clans and let them know about Leopardstar’s death?”

Mistyfoot shook her head. “No. They’ll find out soon enough. We must honor Leopardstar by carrying out our duties as usual.”

“In that case, should I lead a boundary patrol?” Reedwhisker offered. “I want to be sure that the fox we scented yesterday hasn’t come any closer to the camp.”

Mistyfoot nodded. “Yes, please. And

keep an eye out for squirrels or mice while you're on that side of the territory. In case there aren't many fish to be found in the lake yet." She wondered if any of her Clanmates knew just how empty the water seemed to be. *If they haven't noticed on their own, I'm not going to point it out to them. But we might need to stock the fresh-kill pile with other prey for a while.*

"You won't have to do this for much longer," mewed Graymist close to her ear.

Mistyfoot jumped. "Do what?" She wondered if she had said something about the lack of fish out loud.

Graymist nodded toward the cats who

were gathering into groups. “Organize patrols. You’ll have to appoint a deputy before moonhigh, won’t you?”

“A deputy?” Mistyfoot echoed. “Yes, of course.”

The she-cat looked at her closely. “Do you know who you’ll choose? You must have thought about it before now.”

Mistyfoot didn’t think she could admit that no, she hadn’t. Of course she had known that Leopardstar was sick, but she hadn’t really imagined that the leader’s ninth life would end. There was so much to do! And all of it seemed to rest on her shoulders. To her relief, Reedwhisker called Graymist to join his border patrol and Mistyfoot didn’t have

to answer.

For a moment the bushes were alive with movement as cats headed out on their patrols; then suddenly the clearing was empty and silent. Mistyfoot drew a deep breath and looked around. Everything was reassuringly familiar, from the well-trodden bare earth where the cats sat to eat and share tongues to the carefully draped brambles that hid the different dens. Only Mistyfoot felt changed beyond recognition, daunted and breathless at the thought of what lay ahead.

“Mistyfoot?” Willowshine was standing at the entrance to the medicine cats’ den, which was shielded between

two mossy rocks. She trotted across the flattened grass with her tail kinked over her back. “Do you want me to come with you to the Moonpool? When you go to receive your nine lives, I mean.”

Mistyfoot blinked. “Isn’t that Mothwing’s duty?”

“Well, yes,” mewed Willowshine, sounding a little uncertain. “But as it’s your first time sharing tongues with our ancestors, I thought you might like more company.”

Mistyfoot purred. “I’m not afraid of walking in StarClan, little one. But you are kind to offer, and one day I’m sure you will accompany your leader as they receive their nine lives. But it’s

Mothwing's responsibility this time."

Again there was a puzzling flash of hesitation in the gray tabby's eyes; then she nodded. "Of course," she meowed. "Whatever happens tomorrow, I wish you well." She ducked away, back to her den, leaving Mistyfoot frowning after her. *Whatever happens tomorrow?* Was there something she should be afraid of? She shrugged, deciding that Willowshine was just a little too eager to prove her merit as a medicine cat, and perhaps not quite experienced enough for all of the responsibilities.

She crossed the clearing to the Clan's favorite basking place, a sandy slope that was a poor substitute for

Sunningrocks, according to the cats who remembered the forest. Dapplenose and Pouncetail lay in the soft golden light, their tails twitching and their eyes half-closed. *But I bet they haven't missed a single moment of what's happened this morning,* Mistyfoot thought.

“We need to find somewhere to bury Leopardstar,” she mewed, feeling grief weigh in her belly like a stone.

The elders nodded, and Dapplenose stood up, shaking sand from her mottled gray pelt. “I know just the place. Follow me.” Pouncetail got to his paws more stiffly, stretching out each ginger-and-white leg in turn. Dapplenose led them over the crest of a slope and into the

spindly trees on the other side. She swerved along a half-hidden path through a dense patch of comfrey until they emerged in a little clearing, shaded by a young rowan tree with a clear view of the lake and the island where the Clans gathered at each full moon. Behind the island, the hills where WindClan lived rose up to meet the clouds—and beyond that ridge lay the forest, Leopardstar's first home.

“I’ve always thought this would be a good spot for Leopardstar to rest,” Dapplenose explained.

Mistyfoot nodded. “It’s perfect. Are you able to dig the hole, or should I fetch some help?”

Pouncetail snorted. "For StarClan's sake, trust us to do this one last duty for our leader! Do you think we've lost the use of our legs?"

Dapplenose lay her tail across her denmate's shoulders. "Ignore this bad-tempered old trout," she told Mistyfoot. "But he's right that we can manage. You should go back to the clearing and have something to eat. You look exhausted, and you'll need your strength for the journey to the Moonpool."

Feeling a little overwhelmed by the old she-cat's motherly sympathy, Mistyfoot thanked them and pushed her way back through the comfrey. In the clearing, Grasspelt's patrol had returned

with a catch of two tiny minnows, and set out again. Duskfur was prodding the minnows thoughtfully, but when Mistyfoot appeared, she pushed them toward her. "You take these," she urged. "My kits and I can eat later."

Mistyfoot blinked. Was she so old that her Clanmates were worried about her ability to cope with becoming leader?

Duskfur seemed to guess her thoughts. "Let us help you however we can," she prompted gently. "We know the sacrifices you will be making for us from now on."

Mistyfoot didn't argue. She couldn't tell Duskfur how isolated she suddenly felt from the cats who had been her

friends and denmates all her life. Leopardstar's death had changed everything. *Thank StarClan I have Mothwing*, she thought. *She's the only cat who understands how it feels to be responsible for the entire Clan.*

As she chewed on the minnow, she watched the two medicine cats carefully pull Leopardstar's body out of her den and cover her pelt with rosemary and watermint. The scent of the fresh herbs hung in the air, smothering the taint of death. Mistyfoot heard Willowshine warn Mothwing that they were using the last of their supplies of watermint, but Mothwing just shook her head and told her to keep going. "Leopardstar needs it

more than we do now,” she insisted.

Mistyfoot’s heart swelled with warmth toward her old friend. She knew how lucky she was to have Mothwing as her medicine cat. There was no way she could even contemplate the path ahead without her.

As the light began to fade, the cats of RiverClan gathered around the body of their former leader for the start of the long night vigil. The air was filled with the scent of herbs, and the wind had dropped so that the waves were little more than a gentle whisper beyond the bushes. Mistyfoot sat at Leopardstar’s head, watching her Clanmates file sadly

past.

Mothwing appeared beside her. “Are you ready to name your deputy? The moon is rising.”

The cats closest to them pricked their ears, and Mistyfoot felt their gazes prick her pelt. She nodded and stood up. “Let all cats old enough to swim gather to hear my words!”

At once the line of cats stopped moving and turned to face her. They all knew what was coming. Would they approve of her choice? Mistyfoot wondered. Once more she felt her legs tremble beneath the weight of new duties, and she took a step toward Mothwing so she could draw strength

from the warmth of the medicine cat's fur.

“It is time for me to name my deputy,” Mistyfoot announced, her voice sounding sharp and high-pitched in the cool night air. “Reedwhisker, I invite you to walk beside me and help me to lead this Clan. May StarClan hear and approve my choice.”

There was a moment of silence; then the cats broke into cheers. “Reedwhisker! Congratulations!”

Mistyfoot's son stepped forward, his dark gray eyes shining. “I am honored to be chosen,” he purred. “And I will lay down my life to protect you and my Clanmates.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that,” Mistyfoot told him. She stretched out her neck to rest her muzzle on top of his head. Reedwhisker’s fur still smelled as it had when he was her kit.

There was a cross-sounding mutter from the shadows at the edge of the clearing: “I bet she only chose him because he’s her son!”

“Hush, Mossypaw!” snapped Minnowtail. “Reedwhisker is a loyal and brave warrior, and will make a great deputy.”

I hope so, thought Mistyfoot. She had expected some criticism for naming her son as her deputy, but she wanted to believe that wasn’t the reason behind her

decision.

“A brave choice,” murmured Mothwing in her ear. “But the right one, I think.”

Mistyfoot felt a bit better, but she would have been more comforted if Mothwing had mentioned some sign of approval from StarClan, or even an omen that foresaw her announcement.

“Excuse me, Mistyfoot?” Duskfur was standing in front of her. “Is it okay if I take my little ones off now? They’re getting tired.”

Mistyfoot looked at the two kits, who were yawning and blinking their huge, round eyes. “Of course,” she purred.

As Duskfur herded her family across

the clearing, the line of cats started moving again.

“Farewell, Leopardstar. May you have good hunting in StarClan.”

“We’ll meet again, old friend. Save me a place to enjoy the sun.”

“Wow! I’ve never seen a dead body before! What’s all that green stuff on her fur?”

“Rushpaw, go to your den if you can’t behave properly. And put that watermint down!”

Finally Mistyfoot was alone in the clearing with Leopardstar and the elders, who would stay beside their former leader all night. Mistyfoot bent and touched her muzzle to Leopardstar’s

cool, leaf-thin ear. "May the sun warm your back and the fish leap into your paws," she murmured.

"I haven't heard that said for a long time," rasped Pouncetail. "Not since we lived in the forest."

"Graypool used to say it when Stonefur and I were going to sleep," Mistyfoot mewed. "It was her way of wishing us good dreams."

"Ah, Stonefur," sighed Pouncetail. "I still miss him." He looked at Mistyfoot, narrowing his eyes through the gloom. "You had much to forgive Leopardstar for, didn't you?"

Mistyfoot swallowed. "She was a good leader for most of her life," she

replied. "That is what she should be remembered for." She lay down with her nose pressed against Leopardstar's fur. *I promise to be the strongest, wisest leader I can be. I will do my best to echo your loyalty to RiverClan and your courage to speak out on our behalf, and I will learn from your mistakes. I know that I don't need to prove to the other Clans that RiverClan is the strongest or most powerful. I just want my Clanmates to be happy and at peace.*

"And that is the best ambition of all," murmured a voice behind her.

Mistyfoot sprang up and spun around. A gray cat stood behind her, this thick fur

glowing with starlight. "Stonefur!"

The cat nodded. "Did you think I would miss this night?" he meowed. "I have been watching you all this time, and I am so proud that you are going to lead our Clan."

Mistyfoot's tail drooped. "It should have been you."

Stonefur shook his head. "That was not my destiny. I wish you well, Mistyfoot. You will need great courage for what lies ahead, but remember that you are not alone. I will always walk beside you. We will meet again soon."

His fur began to fade, until Mistyfoot could see the dark leaves on the bushes behind him. "Wait!" she called. "What

do you mean? Why will I need great courage? Is there a battle coming?"

But there was no answer, just a muffled snore from Pouncetail, who was sleeping beside her. Mistyfoot stared wildly around the clearing, but her brother had gone. Had he been trying to warn her that something dreadful was on the horizon? There was no chance that Mistyfoot would be able to sleep now. She padded carefully past the sleeping elders and went to the entrance of the medicine cats' den.

"Mothwing!" she called in a loud whisper.

There was a faint murmur from behind the boulders; then the medicine cat

appeared. She looked wide-eyed and ruffled, as if she hadn't been able to sleep either. "What it is?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

"I need to go to the Moonpool now!" Mistyfoot told her. "Stonefur visited me in a dream, and there are things I need to ask him."

Mothwing looked alarmed. "Why? What did he say?"

"Nothing that made sense!" Mistyfoot hissed. "Come on, we have to go!"

"It would be safer to wait until dawn," Mothwing hedged. "Since we have to cross WindClan territory."

"No, we have to leave now," Mistyfoot insisted. "If trouble is coming,

RiverClan cannot be without a leader any longer! There is so much I have to learn!”

Mothwing padded out from her den and shook a few clinging scraps of herb from her fur. “Yes,” she murmured. “There is more to learn than you know.”



Chapter 3

The first light of dawn was beginning to appear on the horizon when Mistyfoot and Mothwing reached the top of

WindClan's ridge. It had been too early for any patrols, so they had crossed the moor unchallenged, traveling in silence apart from the soft brush of their paws on the grass. Mistyfoot paused to catch her breath at the crest of the hill and looked back down at the lake. The water looked thick and almost black from here, pushing against the curls and points of the shoreline. The RiverClan camp was a dark smudge on the far side; Mistyfoot pictured the cats in the clearing, and she wondered if any of them were looking up at the ridge at this moment, spotting her silhouetted against the milky sunrise.

Beside her, Mothwing shifted her paws. "We should keep going," she

meowed. Mistyfoot was surprised that she didn't seem more excited about the nine lives ceremony. Was visiting the Moonpool and sharing tongues with StarClan just a matter of routine for medicine cats?

Their pace slowed as they began the long, steep scramble over the rocks. Mistyfoot had only traveled this way once before, and she had forgotten how hard it was—or perhaps her legs had just grown older.

“Is it much farther?” she panted after losing her grip on one boulder and almost falling off backward.

“No,” Mothwing replied over her shoulder. “See those bushes up there?”

The path that leads down to the Moonpool is just behind them.”

Mistyfoot’s head was spinning by the time they pushed their way through the thorny branches and started to follow the spiraling path downward. Her paws slotted into the imprints left by generations of cats before, and for a moment she felt their pelts brush past her, bathing her in musky scent. *Welcome, welcome.* Did she hear their voices, too, or was it just her imagination?

Mothwing led her to the edge of the pool. It gleamed under the pale sunlight, reflecting the clouds and the swift flight of a bird across its surface. Mistyfoot’s

heart started to beat faster. This was it! She was actually going to be the leader of RiverClan! She glanced at Mothwing and was surprised to see that the medicine cat looked nervous too. The tip of her fluffy tail was twitching, and she seemed reluctant to meet Mistyfoot's gaze. Perhaps she was feeling anxious about the unfamiliar ceremony after all.

"You'll be fine," Mistyfoot reassured her old friend. "It's the first time for both of us, but we'll get through it together."

Mothwing just blinked. "Lie down at the edge of the pool," she instructed, "and let your muzzle touch the water."

Mistyfoot settled down with her paws tucked under her. The stone was cold

beneath her belly, but the water was colder still, sparkling like ice against her nose. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “Good luck,” she heard Mothwing say softly, as though she were very far away.

There was a rush of stars around her, and then a dizzying blackness swallowed her up. Mistyfoot fought the urge to cry out. *Am I falling?* There were whispers and cries in her ears, but none of them clear enough to hear, and the scents of many cats, some half-recognized, some strange and sharp. Just as Mistyfoot was about to shriek in terror, she felt firm sand underneath her paws. She opened her eyes and looked

around. She was standing on a gently sloping shore beside a broad, shallow river that splashed over pebbles and carried the scent of fish. Above, the sky was bright and the sun blazed down, warming her fur. Mistyfoot felt an urge to wade into the water and let fish swim onto her claws; somehow she knew there would be no difficulty in catching a haul of prey.

The bushes behind her rustled, and a pale gray cat appeared. For a moment Mistyfoot thought it was her brother, Stonefur, but then she recognized the scent and knew it was Graypool, the RiverClan she-cat she had called mother for so long. Mistyfoot purred loudly, and

in two strides Graypool was beside her, licking her fur and nuzzling her head with her chin. Mistyfoot buried her nose in Graypool's feather-soft chest, suddenly feeling like a kit again.

"I'm so worried I'll make a mistake in the ceremony," she confessed.

"Hush, little one," Graypool soothed her. "You'll be fine. There's nothing to get wrong; I promise. Are you ready?"

Mistyfoot straightened up and nodded. She was startled to realize that the shore was crowded with cats now, their fur lit by stars and their eyes shining with warmth. She wondered for a fleeting moment where Mothwing was, but then Graypool stepped forward and lifted her

voice above the splashing of the river.

“My precious Mistyfoot, beloved nearly-daughter, I give you a life for loving your Clanmates as if each cat were your kit, borne of your body and your pain.” She rested her muzzle against Mistyfoot’s, and a bolt like lightning shot through Mistyfoot’s pelt. She squeaked and leaped back in pain, but Graypool’s eyes glowed at her, giving her strength, and Mistyfoot dug her claws into the sand to hold her ground. The fire beneath her skin passed and she gasped for breath.

“Thank you, Graypool,” she whispered. The she-cat nodded and stepped back.

Then a familiar shape loomed over Mistyfoot, and she basked in her brother's scent. "I told you we would meet again," Stonefur purred. "I give you a life for treating all cats equally, for fighting against injustice and unfairness wherever it comes."

Mistyfoot braced herself, but the shock from this life was less severe, feeling instead like a wave of strength building inside her, swelling from nose to tail-tip until she felt as if she could leap over mountains.

The next cat was a slender, soft-furred gray tabby with eyes that reflected the blue of the sky. "Feathertail!" Mistyfoot cried. "I have missed you!"

Feathertail's gaze softened. "I have missed you too, Mistyfoot. I haven't forgotten the lessons I learned as your apprentice. The life I give you is for accepting your destiny, however hard that may seem. Some things are beyond our control; that doesn't mean they should be fought against."

This life was uncomfortable, prickling like thorns and choking her like a fishbone caught in her throat. Mistyfoot struggled to keep still and not spit out the invisible bone. Perhaps this was a warning of how difficult her destiny was going to be? Mistyfoot felt a tremor of unease.

"Welcome, Mistyfoot," purred a deep

voice. She opened her eyes to see Crookedstar, leader of RiverClan before Leopardstar, looking down at her. Mistyfoot bowed her head. "You don't have to do that now," Crookedstar reminded her. "We are equals here. I give you a life with the wisdom and strength to carry the burden of leadership. It will weigh heavy, but remember that every problem is nothing more than a challenge to be overcome."

Mistyfoot's legs buckled as she felt a huge, invisible pressure crushing her. She forced herself to stand straight, and felt the pressure transform into a soft, powerful warmth. *I am strong enough to carry this burden*, she told herself.

The next life came from the broad-shouldered brown tabby Oakheart, who had been Crookedstar's brother and deputy. But Mistyfoot knew him now as something else: her father. "My beautiful daughter," he murmured, resting his muzzle against her ears. "I am so sorry I could not be a true father to you. Live well, believe in yourself, and we will walk in StarClan together one day. I give you a life with the courage to follow your heart," he purred, and Mistyfoot braced herself against the jolt of feeling that seared through her. She felt a flash of sorrow as her father stepped away from her, but almost at once another cat was close beside her, breathing warmly

into her ear.

“Oh, my daughter,” Bluestar whispered. “If only you knew how much I missed you.”

Mistyfoot lifted her head and studied the dark gray she-cat. Bluestar looked young and lithe and strong, very different from the soaked and battered cat she and her brother had dragged from the river.

Bluestar let her tail-tip rest on Mistyfoot's flank. “The life I give you is for doing what is right, however hard that might be.” The regret in her voice almost broke Mistyfoot's heart. She forced out a purr, in spite of the fire that was scorching through her blood.

“I know you only ever tried to do the

right thing,” she rasped.

Bluestar leaned forward until her muzzle was touching the tip of Mistyfoot’s ear. “Thank you,” she breathed.

A beautiful she-cat with delicate silver markings came forward. Mistyfoot tipped her head on one side. “Silverstream? Is that you?”

The she-cat purred. “Well met, Mistyfoot. I am so proud of what you have become. I give you a life for finding happiness, even in the most unlooked-for places. Whatever happens, never forget how to be joyful.” When she touched Mistyfoot’s nose, a bright silver light flashed, making Mistyfoot

blink. Her fur tingled and she felt the hair stand up along her spine.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

A dark gray tabby took Silverstream’s place. Mistyfoot’s heart ached as she gazed at him. “Oh, Rippletail. I’m so sorry you didn’t return. You saved the lake, you know? The water came back!” *If not the fish*, she added silently, though she wasn’t going to tell her former Clanmate that.

Rippletail dipped his head. “I only ever wanted to help my Clan,” he meowed. “My life was worth that. The life I give you is for curiosity, for the courage to find out what lies beyond the horizon. Never turn down a chance to

learn something more.”

“I won’t; I promise,” Mistyfoot whispered as the heat burned through her once more. She was beginning to feel dizzy and weak, and her vision was blurred.

At first she thought no cat had come up after Rippletail. There was an empty space in front of her. She had one more life to come, didn’t she? Then there was a tiny squeak below her, and Mistyfoot looked down at a small black kit with piercing green eyes.

“Perchkit! My baby!”

The tiny cat bounced on his paws. “I knew I’d see you again,” he chirped. “They said I could give you a life, too.

So mine is for bravery, even when you are walking into shadows. There will always be light, even in the darkest night.”

He stretched up to press his nose against Mistyfoot’s chin. She inhaled his precious kit scent and drank in the energy that flowed from him. *I never forgot you, not for a single moment.*

“Mistystar! Mistystar!”

The cats on the shore raised their voices, sending her new name echoing up to the sky. Two more cats pushed through the throng and wound around Mistystar’s legs. “Pikepaw! Primrosepaw!” She felt a rush of love for her kits who hadn’t lived long

enough to become the warriors they should have been.

“We will be waiting for you,” Pikepaw promised earnestly.

“We are so proud of you!” Primrosepaw added, pressing her cheek against Mistystar’s shoulder.

Mistystar opened her mouth to tell her kits how much she missed them, but the light was turning gray and misty, and the shore vanished to be replaced by curved cliffs of stone. Mistystar was lying beside the Moonpool once more, her ears ringing and her fur still ruffled from the agony of the nine lives.

Mothwing padded up to her. “Are you all right?”

Mistystar blinked. She pictured the cats by the shore again, and knew there had been one missing. “You weren’t there!”

Mothwing winced, then relaxed as if a weight had been lifted off her. “No.” She held Mistystar’s gaze without flinching. “You will always visit StarClan alone. They don’t exist for me in the way that they do for you.”

Mistystar stared at her friend in dismay. What was Mothwing saying? She was a medicine cat! How could this be true? She fought to speak, even though the ground was lurching under her feet.

“You . . . you don’t believe in StarClan?”



Chapter 4

“But you’ve been our medicine cat for so long! Have you never walked with StarClan in your dreams?”

Mothwing shook her head. “You have your beliefs,” she meowed calmly. “I have mine. The cats you see in your dreams guide and protect you in ways that I have lived without. I am skilled at healing and caring for my Clanmates, and that has been enough to serve my Clan.”

Mistystar’s mind was whirling. Surely this couldn’t be happening! How could a medicine cat not believe in StarClan? Why had none of the cats said anything to her during the nine lives ceremony? They must know that Mothwing never walked with them. What about omens? Did StarClan bother to send any if Mothwing would never be watching for

them? She took a step forward, suddenly desperate to get back to the lake, to find a footing for her paws on ground that seemed to have shifted.

“Come on, let’s go home.”

As Mothwing followed her up the paw-printed path, Mistystar thought she heard the medicine cat murmur, “I’m sorry.” But there was nothing she could think of to say in reply.

They traveled quickly and in silence, leaping and scrambling down the tumbled rocks until they were standing on the short, springy grass of WindClan’s territory once more. Scents from ThunderClan drifted to them across the narrow stream that marked the

boundary between the two Clans. “Let’s stop and tell Firestar what has happened,” Mistystar suggested. The other leaders would have to learn about Leopardstar’s death sometime.

Mothwing nodded. They jumped over the stream and trotted down the other side until they reached a clear path that led into the trees. Fresh ThunderClan scent hung in the air; they had clearly just missed a patrol. Mistystar took the lead along the trail, reminding herself that she was a Clan leader now, and had every right to visit her neighbors with this important news without being accused of trespassing. But it still felt strange to be walking in another Clan’s

territory without constantly looking over her shoulder, wary of ambush.

They reached the gap in the walls of the hollow and forced their way in through the thorns. Mistystar shook her head to dislodge the prickles that had caught in her nose. She didn't know how the ThunderClan cats put up with such an uncomfortable entrance to their home. Firestar was crossing the clearing to meet them.

“Is everything all right?”

Mistystar stood still and waited for him to reach her. “Leopardstar’s dead,” she announced.

Firestar lowered his head. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

“We’ve just come from the Moonpool,” Mothwing explained. “Mistystar has received her nine lives.”

Firestar dipped his muzzle even lower. “Mistystar,” he mewed respectfully.

“Mistystar,” echoed Graystripe, a sturdy tom who Mistystar had known since he was an apprentice back in the forest.

“Mistystar, Mistystar,” called the other ThunderClan cats.

Mistystar felt a bit uncomfortable. She had never liked being the center of attention, and it seemed all the more strange because she was still getting used to her new name. “Thank you,” she

mewed when the cats were silent. “I have chosen Reedwhisker as my deputy. We look forward to a long and fair relationship with ThunderClan.”

Firestar raised his head and lightly touched her muzzle. “How’s RiverClan?” His tone was lighter, more relaxed; now that the formal greeting was over, he sounded more like the cat Mistystar had known—and confided in—for so long.

She told him about the loss of three elders, and that the drought had hit the whole Clan hard. Firestar was sympathetic, and Jayfeather offered Mothwing some herbs to replenish her stocks, including watermint. Laden with

green-scented leaves, the RiverClan cats retraced their steps through the trees. When they broke out into the open and reached the stream again, Mistystar put down her mouthful of herbs.

“Does Jayfeather know that you don’t believe in StarClan?” she mewed.

Mothwing nodded.

“What does he think?”

Mothwing carefully placed her herbs on a tussock of grass. “He knows that I am a good medicine cat and will do anything to help my Clan.”

Mistystar stared at her Clanmate in frustration. How could she be so calm and accepting? She longed to ask Mothwing about omens and dreams and

ceremonies—all the responsibilities of a medicine cat that involved trusting in the unseen presence of their warrior ancestors. But standing in ThunderClan territory, still a long way from home, wasn't the right place for that conversation. The questions would have to wait. Mistystar picked up her herbs and leaped over the stream.

Mothwing followed, and they picked their way down to the edge of the lake to walk along the shore, which lay outside WindClan territory. As they neared the border with RiverClan, a WindClan patrol spotted them and raced up, bristling, but their fur flattened when Mistystar told them about Leopardstar's

death, and the warriors offered sympathy and congratulations to Mistystar on receiving her nine lives. They promised to tell Onestar as soon as they returned to their camp.

Mistystar realized that she should let Blackstar of ShadowClan know as well, but by the time she reached the RiverClan camp her paws were too weary to walk another step. She wanted to be at full strength when she first met Blackstar as his equal, another Clan leader with the power to challenge him if one of his warriors so much as placed a whisker over their shared border. There was too much history between Mistystar and the ShadowClan leader—

the memory of him killing Stonefur was too sharp—for her ever to contemplate an alliance with his Clan.

Reedwhisker met her as she limped toward her den. “Did you meet with our ancestors? Do you have your nine lives?”

Mistystar nodded. “Yes, I do.” She forced herself to lift her head higher. “With StarClan’s blessing, I will lead this Clan until the last breath of my last life.”

“Hurrah! Mistystar!” Her Clanmates cheered, but Mistystar noticed Mothwing standing at the edge of the clearing, her gaze troubled.

“Mothwing said you’d seen Firestar

and a WindClan patrol,” Reedwhisker meowed. “Would you like me to take the news to Blackstar?”

Mistystar blinked gratefully at her deputy. “Thank you,” she mewed. “Make sure you return before it gets dark.”

Reedwhisker dipped his head and raced off. Mistystar watched him dive into the bushes on the far side of the clearing. She wondered if his littermates were watching from StarClan. She would have to tell Reedwhisker that one of her lives came from his brother Perchkit.

“Mistystar?” Dapplenose was standing a little way off. “We’re going to bury Leopardstar now. Would you like to

join us?”

“Of course,” Mistystar meowed. She stretched her legs to ease some of the stiffness. Sleep could come later.

Almost the whole Clan gathered in the clearing by the lake to watch the elders gently scoop earth over Leopardstar’s body. Mothwing stood by the former leader’s head and spoke the words of the ceremony, letting them drift in the air like scent.

“May StarClan light your path, Leopardstar. May you find good hunting, swift running, and shelter when you sleep.”

Mistystar stared at Mothwing’s golden pelt, wondering what the other cats

would do if they knew the truth. Mistystar was surrounded by Clanmates, their cheers of her new name still echoed in her ears, yet she had never felt more alone. How could she lead her Clan without a medicine cat who believed in their warrior ancestors? Why had none of the StarClan cats told her the truth? Were they angry with RiverClan for having a medicine cat who could never fulfill all her duties? And yet they had still given Mistystar her nine lives. . . .

After the ceremony, Mistystar headed to Leopardstar's den beneath the rowan tree and started to pull out the dusty bedding. A matted chunk of moss got

stuck at the entrance to the den, and Mistystar dug in her hind paws as she struggled to yank it free. Graymist joined her, and together they tugged the moss into the open air. It smelled damp and musty, making Mistystar sneeze.

“You must be exhausted,” Graymist commented.

Why does everyone keep telling me how tired I must be? “I’m fine,” Mistystar snapped, a little more sharply than she intended.

Graymist tipped her head on one side and studied Mistystar. “Is everything okay? You seem upset.”

Mistystar shrugged as she clawed at the chunk of moss, breaking it into small

pieces that would be easier to carry out of the camp. "There's a lot to do," she mewed. "And I miss Leopardstar."

"We all do," Graymist reminded her. "But there's no rush for you to fill her paw steps. With all the Clans still recovering from the drought, things should be peaceful for a while. Don't be too hard on yourself."

Mistystar felt a sudden urge to confide in Graymist about Mothwing, to tell her how lost she felt without a medicine cat who would be able to share tongues with StarClan. But this was too huge a secret to share with her Clanmates. She would have to find a way of dealing with this alone. She touched Graymist lightly on

the flank with her tail.

“I’m fine,” she meowed. “I’ll clear this away later. I just want to get some sleep now.”

Graymist looked doubtful. “What about clean bedding? Shall I have the apprentices fetch some for you?”

Mistystar shook her head. “I can sleep on what’s left. I’ll add it to their duties tomorrow.” Graymist trotted away, and Mistystar crawled into the narrow den beneath the rowan tree. Even though the moss had been cleared out, Leopardstar’s scent still clung to the walls and the branches overhead. Mistystar curled up with her nose tucked under her tail and shut her eyes. As she

drifted into sleep, she wondered if she would dream herself back into StarClan, where she could question her ancestors about Mothwing, but instead she found herself searching through a dark, empty landscape, with the sound of running water just out of reach and no cats to answer her cries.

She was woken the following day by the sound of the rowan branches clashing in the wind. A few leaves tumbled into the den, blown by a gust that pierced Mistystar's fur. For a moment, Mistystar stared at the curved earthen walls around her, wondering where the other warriors were; then she remembered that

Leopardstar was dead, she was now the leader of RiverClan, and this would be her den for the rest of her life. *My nine lives.*

Outside she heard Mothwing giving Willowshine instructions: “Thanks to Jayfeather, we have plenty of watermint and tansy, but our stocks of comfrey are running low and we should gather more while the plants are still growing. I used most of our cobwebs on Rushpaw’s cut when he fell off that tree trunk, so we need to stock up on those, too.”

Mistystar recalled Willowshine’s offer to come to the Moonpool with her, and she felt her stomach churn as she realized Mothwing’s apprentice must

know the truth about her mentor's lack of faith. There was such a large part of her training that could never come from Mothwing. Had Willowshine spoken to the other medicine cats about it? Mistystar pushed herself to her paws, feeling every one of her seasons as she stretched her spine. She padded out of her den just as Willowshine was making for the entrance to the camp.

“Wait, Willowshine! I’ll come with you!”

The medicine cat turned, looking surprised. “Er, okay, Mistystar.”

Mistystar saw Mothwing watching them from the far side of the clearing. The golden cat's expression was

impossible to read. Was she afraid of what Willowshine might say, or was she relieved that the truth was out? Mistystar ducked through the gap in the bushes and fell in beside Willowshine as they pushed their way through the dripping ferns.

“Yuck!” squeaked Willowshine as a leaf spilled sparkling raindrops onto her neck fur.

“We need the rain,” Mistystar reminded her, swerving to avoid a particularly wet-looking clump of stalks.

“Couldn’t it fall at night, and let us stay dry during the day?” Willowshine complained, half joking, as she shook her pelt.

“Perhaps you should put in a request to StarClan,” Mistystar teased back.

Willowshine was negotiating a prickly tendril that lay across the path. “I’ll try,” she replied, sounding amused.

“So, how’s the training going?” Mistystar asked, hoping that her question didn’t sound forced.

Willowshine swerved to avoid a puddle. “It’s great,” she mewed. “Mothwing’s teaching me how to combine herbs to make them more effective. She knows so much about plants! I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to learn it all.”

“I’m sure you will,” Mistystar meowed. “What about the . . . the

StarClan side of your duties? Has she taught you about that, too?"

Mistystar had drawn level with Willowshine now, so she could see the little cat blink and look away. "Mothwing is the best mentor I would wish for," she replied.

Her evasive answer spoke volumes to Mistystar. *She knows that Mothwing doesn't believe in StarClan!* For a moment, Mistystar was torn. She didn't want to challenge Willowshine's loyalty and respect for her mentor, but how could they ignore the fact that Mothwing could not fulfill all her medicine cat duties? Mistystar stopped and turned to face Willowshine.

“I know the truth,” she mewed. “Mothwing didn’t come with me to StarClan when I received my nine lives. That’s why you offered to come, isn’t it?”

Willowshine nodded, her blue eyes full of pain. “It’s not Mothwing’s fault! She’s the best medicine cat RiverClan could have!”

“But what about visiting the Moonpool, sharing tongues with StarClan, recognizing signs from our ancestors? Those are all part of a medicine cat’s responsibilities,” Mistystar pointed out.

“I can take care of those!” Willowshine insisted. She rolled a piece

of fern under her front paw. “When I started training, Leafpool visited me in my dreams. She helped me learn the things that Mothwing couldn’t teach me. I know enough to help; I promise!”

Mistystar shook her head. “I’m sure you do, little one. But you are too young to carry all that responsibility alone. Mothwing should have said something long before we got this far.”

Willowshine’s fur fluffed up and she opened her mouth to speak, but Mistystar raised one paw to stop her. “Don’t say something you might come to regret, Willowshine,” she warned. “This isn’t up to you now. Go collect the herbs for Mothwing, and I’ll see you back in the

camp.”

Willowshine shut her mouth with a snap and thrust her way into the long grass. Mistystar watched her go for a moment, then turned and headed back to the clearing. Mothwing was standing in the center of the empty camp as if she was waiting for her.

“Did you speak with Willowshine?” Mothwing asked.

Mistystar nodded. “You have a loyal and brave apprentice,” she remarked.

“I couldn’t be more proud of her,” Mothwing agreed. “But my . . . my relationship with StarClan has nothing to do with her. You shouldn’t have questioned her about it.”

“It has everything to do with her!” Mistystar flashed back. “You are supposed to be training her to be a medicine cat! That means being able to walk in StarClan and speak with our warrior ancestors!”

Mothwing’s hackles rose. “I have never stopped Willowshine from doing that. I would never tell her what she should believe.”

“But you should believe in StarClan, too! You are our medicine cat! Can’t you see that you are betraying your Clan by living your entire life as a lie?”

“I am *not* lying!” hissed Mothwing. “I have never pretended to do anything I cannot.”

Mistystar glared at her old friend. “Actually, I think you have. You have risked the safety of your Clan by not being able to read signs from StarClan or walk with our ancestors at the Moonpool. I’m sorry, Mothwing, but you can no longer consider yourself a medicine cat.”



Chapter 5

Mothwing flinched as if Mistystar had struck her. “I have served my Clan for many seasons,” she argued. “I have

guarded the health of every cat as if they were a kit of my own. Leopardstar trusted me.”

“Leopardstar didn’t know the truth!” Mistystar snapped. “Did she?”

Mothwing shook her head. “No,” she admitted. Her eyes clouded with sadness. “What do you want me to do now?”

Mistystar twitched the tip of her tail. “I don’t know. Restock your supplies with Willowshine, and let me figure something out. We don’t want every cat in the Clan learning about this.” She walked away, feeling her stomach churn. Had she really just dismissed her medicine cat? *Oh, StarClan, why didn’t*

you tell me the truth when you had the chance?

Rapid paw steps sounded, and Mallownose appeared at the head of his hunting patrol. He was carrying a tiny minnow in his mouth, which he dropped in the space where the fresh-kill pile should be. Robinwing, Petalfur, and Minnowtail placed similar-sized prey beside the miniscule fish. Minnowtail's apprentice, Mossypaw, was covered in stinking green weed but had nothing to contribute that could be eaten.

Mistystar stared at the pile in dismay. "Is that it?" she gasped. "That won't feed Duskfur's kits, let alone the rest of us!"

“I’m sorry,” meowed Mallownose. “The water may have come back, but the fish haven’t. The lake is empty.”

“Apart from weeds,” Mossypaw put in crossly, trying to pull the slimy fronds off her ears.

“I warned you that rock was slippery,” sighed Minnowtail.

Mistystar felt a wave of panic rise in her chest. “We’ll have to look elsewhere for prey, then. Start hunting away from the lake for different kinds of prey.”

Mossypaw made a face. “Yuck! Who wants to eat fur and whiskers?”

Mallownose flicked her with his tail. “Any cat who doesn’t want to starve,” he growled.

“StarClan must really hate us if they won’t bring the fish back,” Mossypaw muttered.

Mistystar bristled. *There is no way StarClan would punish us for letting Mothwing be our medicine cat, is there? No, of course not. She has been our medicine cat since before we came to the lake; why would StarClan turn against us now? And yet if they sent us a sign guiding us to a better source of prey, who would see it?*

The bushes at the entrance quivered, and Reedwhisker pushed his way through. “Blackstar says he is sorry to hear that Leopardstar has lost her last life, and looks forward to greeting you at

the next Gathering,” he announced to Mistystar. His gaze fell on the puny pile of minnows. “Great StarClan! Did everyone eat already?”

“No,” meowed Mistystar. “We were just discussing finding other places to hunt until the fish return to the lake.”

Reedwhisker nodded. “I can take a patrol into the marshes now if you like. And Mintfur?” He called to the pale gray tom who was washing himself on the far side of the clearing. “Why don’t you take the apprentices upstream to see what you can find in the reeds beyond the border?”

For a moment Mistystar was taken aback by Reedwhisker’s brisk string of

commands; then she remembered that he was the deputy now, and it was his duty to organize patrols. “Right, thanks, Reedwhisker,” she mewed. “I’ll come with you, if that’s okay?”

Reedwhisker looked surprised. “Of course it is. Icewing, Pebblefoot, will you join us?” The two warriors had just returned from a border patrol, but they nodded and trotted over. Mistystar fell in behind them as they filed out of the camp. She felt Mothwing watching her from the entrance to the medicine cats’ den, but she didn’t turn around. It was too painful to look into her old friend’s eyes and know that she had been keeping a secret that threatened the whole Clan.

There was a strong wind blowing across the marshes, scented with rain. Mistystar's fur stood on end as she trekked across the sodden ground, leaping from tussock to tussock of spiny grass. The lake beckoned invitingly, sending waves fluttering over the stony shore. But Mistystar reminded herself that the water was empty, that the end of the drought had not brought an end to RiverClan's hunger. *Oh, StarClan, did Rippletail die in vain?*

Suddenly Icewing let out a hiss and stiffened as a vole crept out of a clump of grass. The white cat pounced a fraction too late, and the vole shot away. Icewing stumbled over a muddy rut, and

for a moment it looked as if the vole was safe. Then Mistystar realized it was heading toward her, so she leaped forward, blocking the vole's path with her front paws, and thrust her head down so that it practically ran into her jaws. One sharp, frantic bite and the creature lay dead at her feet.

“Good catch!” called Reedwhisker.

Mistystar looked at Icewing, who had stumbled to a halt beside her, panting. “We did it together,” she meowed. Icewing nodded, too breathless to speak.

Up ahead, Pebblefoot was crouching at the foot of a wind-warped pine tree. “I can see a squirrel,” he yowled over his shoulder.

“Don’t climb up after it!” Mistystar warned. RiverClan cats most definitely did not belong in trees. “Wait until it comes down!”

Pebblefoot scraped his claws impatiently down the trunk. There was a brief gray blur, and the squirrel dropped down from one of the lower branches and set off across the marsh, its fluffy tail bobbing behind it. Pebblefoot tore after it, sending scraps of grass and mud flying up from his hind paws. With a start, Mistystar realized he was running too fast to see where he was.

“Stop, Pebblefoot!” she screeched. “You’re too close to the border!”

Reedwhisker bounded after his

Clanmate, but the squirrel leaped the final tussock of marsh grass onto the smooth, cropped surface of WindClan's territory and took off up the slope. Pebblefoot raced after it, straight into a patrol of shocked-looking WindClan cats who had just appeared around the side of the hill. A brown warrior named Antpelt sprang forward to block his path.

“Trespasser! Prey thief!” he screeched.



Chapter 6

“He’s not stealing prey!” Mistystar yowled, pounding past the scent markers and skidding to a halt beside her startled

Clanmate.

“I’m sorry,” Pebblefoot puffed. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Antpelt’s hackles rose. “Oh, I think you knew exactly where you were going,” he sneered. “Onto territory with better prey than yours!” His eyes raked over the RiverClan warriors, and Mistystar winced as she saw their scrawny frames through an outsider’s eyes. It was painfully obvious that the RiverClan cats hadn’t had a proper meal in moons.

Ashfoot, the WindClan deputy, stepped forward. “Mistystar, I heard about Leopardstar’s death, and I am truly sorry. But what are you doing, letting

your warriors stray onto our territory? Did you forget to replace your border markers?”

Her tone was gentle, but Mistystar heard reproach beneath it. What kind of leader allowed her own patrol to cross a boundary? “I’m sorry, Ashfoot,” she meowed, struggling to keep her fur flat. “It was a genuine mistake. Pebblefoot just got carried away chasing that squirrel.”

“Well, it’s ours now,” Antpelt put in. “So you can remove your mangy pelts from our territory before we make you.” He raised one front paw and let his claws slide out. Pebblefoot glared at him, with the fur rising along his spine.

“Antpelt, enough!” ordered Ashfoot. “Mistystar, take your cats home. I suggest you renew the border markers to remind your warriors to hunt inside their own territory in future.”

Feeling her pelt burn with shame, Mistystar dipped her head. “Yes, Ashfoot. May StarClan light your path.”

“And yours,” Ashfoot mewed briefly before summoning her warriors with a sweep of her tail. “Antpelt, put your claws away. Come on, back to camp.”

The WindClan cats raced away over the turf, their bellies low enough to brush the grass. Mistystar led her Clanmates back to the border and didn’t stop until they were well past the

markers—which were plenty strong enough. Pebblefoot was still bristling.

“Antpelt treated us like mangy rats,” he fumed. “And how dare Ashfoot tell you to renew the border markers? You’re a leader! She’s only a deputy!”

Mistystar sighed. “She was just making a point, Pebblefoot. You did cross the boundary, after all. Let’s see if we can catch something that doesn’t run into a different Clan, okay?”

She watched her warriors spread out across the marsh, lifting their paws high to avoid tripping over the tussocks, and flattening their ears as they tried to pick up the scent of prey. *We train to catch fish, not mice and voles*, she thought.

*We're as hopeless as kits on dry land.
Oh, StarClan, why are you letting us
starve?*

Three sunrises later, with the fresh-kill pile still pitifully small, Mistystar spotted the faint outline of a half-moon floating between the clouds. That night the medicine cats from all four Clans would gather at the Moonpool to share tongues with StarClan. Mistystar cast her mind back to previous half-moons, realizing that she could hardly remember one when Mothwing hadn't sent Willowshine in her place on the excuse that a sick or kit-heavy cat needed her to stay in the Clan. How had Leopardstar

not realized that Mothwing was neglecting so many of her responsibilities?

After a day of fruitless hunting in the bushes around the camp, Mistystar settled outside her den and waited for one of the medicine cats to leave. She saw Mothwing emerge from between the rocks, and for a moment Mistystar thought the golden cat might be making one last attempt to prove her right to be RiverClan's medicine cat. But then Willowshine padded out behind her.

"Thank Jayfeather for the herbs," Mothwing instructed. "And ask Kestrelflight if Tornear's cough cleared up with the poultice of bright-eye and

lovage.”

Willowshine nodded. “See you later,” she meowed, stretching up to brush her muzzle against Mothwing’s. With an anxious glance at Mistystar, she trotted out of the camp.

Mistystar stood up. Mothwing had vanished back into the shadows behind the rocks, and the clearing was silent apart from the murmurs of sleepy warriors in their nest. Mistystar pushed her way through the ferns and went down to the edge of the lake. She paced along the shore, feeling the stones smooth beneath her paws. Sparkling reflections of stars swirled and danced on the surface of the water—the empty, fishless

water that mocked the RiverClan cats and their hungry bellies. Mistystar stared at the silvery patterns, desperately trying to read a message in their shapes. Should they be fishing in a different way? Were the fish about to return? Perhaps the hunger was nearly at an end.

But how would she know if there were any messages to be seen? She wasn't a medicine cat! Mistystar hissed and sank her claws into the grit between the pebbles. Mothwing had made it impossible for her to lead her Clan with any sort of confidence.

"Oh, Stonefur!" Mistystar whispered. "I can't do this alone!"

Mistystar tossed and wriggled all night, unable to get comfortable in her nest. The fresh moss seemed full of thorns, and she was convinced there was a lump of gorse caught up in it. As the first rays of the sun slanted through the rowan branches, she jumped up and trotted into the clearing. She just caught sight of Willowshine's gray striped tail whisking into the medicine cats' den. Mistystar followed and stood in the entrance. The two medicine cats blinked at her from the shadows.

“Willowshine, from now on you will be RiverClan's sole medicine cat,” she announced. Her heart pounded, and she dug her claws into the earth to stop her

legs from shaking. “Mothwing will no longer live with you in this den.”

“That’s not fair!” cried Willowshine. “I still have so much to learn!”

“StarClan will help you,” Mistystar mewed. She looked at Mothwing, who was staring at her in dismay. “I’ve had enough time to think about this. Mothwing, you have served RiverClan for many seasons, and we are grateful. As an elder, you will be well cared for. No cat needs to know about . . . anything.”

Mothwing stepped forward. “Mistystar, I know you want to punish me—”

“This is not about punishment!”

Mistystar interrupted. "This is about doing what is right for the Clan!"

Mothwing twitched one ear. "Don't you think the Clan has suffered enough change recently, with the loss of Leopardstar? Let them come to terms with that before you make them accept something else. You are not the only cat who has their best interests at heart, Mistystar. I'll announce my retirement at the next Gathering, but not before." Her blue eyes flashed briefly with anger.

Mistystar gritted her teeth. *She must see that I have no choice in this! She cannot be a medicine cat if she doesn't believe in StarClan!* "Very well," she hissed. "You may stay here for the rest of

this moon.”

She started to back away, but stopped as Mothwing moved toward her. Placing her muzzle close to Mistystar’s ear, she murmured, “I am so sorry.”

So am I, thought Mistystar. *You were my closest friend*. But there was nothing to say, so she just shook her head and walked quickly away from the rocks, feeling her heart break with every step.

“Mistystar! Watch this!” It was Podkit, Duskmour’s sturdy son. He had sunk his claws into a twig and was dragging it toward the nursery. “I caught this giant fish and I’m going to feed the whole Clan!” he squeaked proudly.

Mistystar purred. “Great catch,

Podkit. Make sure it doesn't eat you first!"

"It won't. I killed it with one paw!"

Duskfur appeared at the entrance to the nursery. "Podkit! I hope you aren't bothering Mistystar!"

"He's not," Mistystar assured her. "If he can catch a fish that size, we might have to make him a warrior already!"

"Really?" gasped Podkit, his eyes huge.

"Of course not," snapped his sister, Curlkit, who was wriggling out past their mother. "You're such a minnow-brain!"

"Don't be rude to your brother," Duskfur chided. "If you can't play

nicely, one of you will have to go back to the nest.”

“She started it,” Podkit muttered, slicing the bark of the twig with his tiny claws.

Duskfur rolled her eyes. “Tell me it gets better,” she begged Mistystar. “Some days I feel I do nothing but scold them from dawn until dusk!”

“It does get easier,” Mistystar promised, though inside she felt a stab of agony that her time with four playful kits had passed so quickly.

Duskfur shuffled her paws as if she realized she had said something clumsy. “We’re all so pleased that you’re our leader,” she mewed earnestly. “Not that I

didn't like Leopardstar, of course, but every cat thinks you're the best choice for RiverClan."

Even though we're still hungry? Mistystar wondered. What will they say when we lose one of our medicine cats at the next full-moon?

"There was one thing I wanted to talk to you about," Duskfur went on. "I found Curlkit up to her belly in mud yesterday by the stream, and I wondered if we could put up some sort of barrier to keep kits away from the edge of the water. I know it's inside the boundary of the camp, but I'd hate for there to be an accident with a very small kit."

Mistystar nodded. "That's a good

point. The recent rain has made that bank very slippery, and I've nearly lost my footing there myself. I'll ask Grasspelt if he can sort something out. He can get the apprentices to help."

"He'll be lucky," grumbled Pouncetail, getting up from outside the elders' den. "Our bedding was supposed to be changed today, but there's been no sign of any apprentices."

Pebblefoot looked up from the shrew that he was chewing unenthusiastically. "Really? I definitely told Rushpaw and Hollowpaw that they had to do it before we did battle practice after sunhigh."

"Well, you'd better check their hearing," grunted Pouncetail.

Pebblefoot pushed the remains of the shrew away from him and stood up. “If you haven’t seen them, where are they?” he pondered, looking troubled.

“They could be collecting fresh bedding first,” Mistystar suggested, not wanting the apprentices to get into trouble unnecessarily.

Robinwing crossed the clearing and dropped a bundle of moss on the ground outside the warriors’ den. “I didn’t see them when I was gathering this,” he remarked.

Troutpaw and Mossypaw padded into the camp, dragging a wet, dark-furred creature between them.

“Is that a rat?” squeaked Curlkit.

“Gross! There’s no way I’m eating that!”

Duskfur flicked her daughter’s ear with her tail. “Then you’ll have to go hungry,” she snapped. “This isn’t the time to start being fussy.”

Mistystar went to greet the apprentices and their mentors, Graymist and Minnowtail. “Have you seen Hollowpaw and Rushpaw? They were supposed to be clearing out the elders’ den, but no cat has seen them.”

Graymist frowned. “They weren’t on the marshes. Did you see what Troutpaw and Mossypaw caught? That should feed us for a while!”

Troutpaw looked proudly over the spine of the bedraggled corpse. “It took

ages to drag it back!” she declared. “My teeth ache now!”

Privately Mistystar shared Curlkit’s feelings about tucking into a rat—that was ShadowClan food, not RiverClan. But she nodded and mewed. “Well done! Now, where else might Hollowpaw and Rushpaw be?”

Mossypaw shrugged. “I don’t know. They were muttering about something last night when I was trying to go to sleep, but I didn’t hear what they were saying.”

Mistystar felt the ground dip beneath her paws. Was she losing control of her entire Clan? No fish, prey scarce on land, a medicine cat who didn’t believe

in StarClan, and now half the apprentices gone missing?

Just then, the brambles behind the medicine cats' den rustled, and Rushpaw and Hollowpaw emerged, looking triumphant and somewhat ruffled. They were each carrying a tuft of moss.

"Where have you been?" demanded Pebblefoot. "The elders' den should have been cleared out ages ago!"

Hollowpaw dropped his mouthful of moss. "We were collecting fresh bedding!" he protested.

Pouncetail prodded the dusty moss with his paw. "From where? Some other cat's manky nest?"

"You can use what I've collected,"

Robinwing meowed. He narrowed his eyes at the apprentices. "I don't know where you found that, but stick to our usual supplies in future, okay? There's no point in refilling a den with moss that is going to be uncomfortable, especially for the elders."

"Whatever," Rushpaw muttered. "We were just trying to help."

Mistystar studied the apprentices closely. From the state of their rumped fur, they looked as if they had traveled a long way in search of bedding for the elders. Exceptional commitment, or had they been looking for something else as well? She felt a flash of fear that they might have been trying to fish on their

own. With the lake this full, that was strictly forbidden for younger cats. She'd have to warn Pebblefoot and Reedwhisker to keep an eye on them during future patrols.

The apprentices clawed out Pouncetail's and Dapplenose's old bedding and replaced it with Robinwing's fresh supply. Then they joined their Clanmates at the fresh-kill pile, as the cats divided up the prey. Mistystar noticed that Hollowpaw and Rushpaw only shared a tiny minnow between them. Were they feeling guilty for not pulling their weight properly that morning? She sighed. Whatever they had been up to, she didn't want any of her

Clanmates punishing themselves with further hunger.

She looked at the rocks that guarded the medicine cats' den. Willowshine and Mothwing seemed to be avoiding Mistystar as much as they could. Was Willowshine even watching out for omens? Or was StarClan ignoring them after all?



Chapter 7

A run of stormy days kept the RiverClan cats confined to their camp; none of them minded getting their fur wet by choice

when it came to swimming, but they hated torrential rain as much as any Clan. At last the wind eased and the rain lightened to a fur-flattening drizzle. Mistystar and Reedwhisker stood on the rocks at the edge of the lake and stared into the water. It was slightly clearer than before, and one or two tiny silver shapes darted about in the shadows, but there were still no large fish such as trout or carp.

“Is it worth fishing today?” Pebblefoot called, crunching over the stones toward them.

Reedwhisker shook his head. “Not unless you want to chase minnows again. Oh, I meant to tell you that Hollowpaw

and Rushpaw asked if they could do some battle training on their own today. They know their assessments are coming up and they wanted to practice the crouch-and-leap technique we taught them.”

Pebblefoot looked surprised. “I didn’t realize they were taking the assessments so seriously. I sometimes wonder if Rushpaw wants to go straight to the elders’ den when he reaches twelve moons. I’ve never met an apprentice who is so good at finding shortcuts to getting things done!”

Mistystar snorted. “Perhaps he’ll just be a very efficient warrior.” She headed back up the shore, and the two warriors

fell in beside her. "We can't keep waiting for the big fish to return," she mewed quietly before they reached the camp. "And our territory isn't big enough to provide enough land prey to support us all. We'll have to think about expanding upstream."

"It does seem like the only option," Pebblefoot agreed. "Hunting patrols have already caught a few birds in the reeds just beyond the border. Do you think we should go even farther?"

Mistystar nodded. "I'll take a patrol that way myself today. I don't want to announce the expansion to the whole Clan yet, but every cat knows we are running out of food."

“Would you like me to come too?”
Reedwhisker offered.

“No, thank you. I want you to lead a patrol along the border with WindClan and renew those scent markers, just in case they’re still waiting for us to cross over again. And Pebblefoot, will you take a hunting patrol onto the marshes?”
The senior warriors nodded.

Back in the clearing, Reedwhisker started selecting cats for his and Pebblefoot’s patrol while Mistystar looked around for warriors to accompany her upstream. She was just about to call out to Grasspelt when Mothwing approached. Mistystar felt her fur bristle. *Why am I so hostile?*

Mothwing used to be my friend!

Mothwing's blue eyes looked troubled. "Do you know where Hollowpaw and Rushpaw are?" she asked.

"They're practicing for their assessment," Mistystar told her.

"Are you sure? I heard them telling Mossypaw and Troutpaw that they had found something none of the warriors knew about, but they couldn't say what it was because it was a big secret. Do you think they're up to something?"

For a moment Mistystar longed to be able to talk openly to Mothwing, like they had done so many times before. *I always thought we would lead our Clan*

together! But Mothwing had kept a bigger secret than anything the apprentices might be hiding, and Mistystar couldn't see how they could find a way back to how things used to be. "They were probably just showing off," she told Mothwing. "Don't worry about them." She sounded more dismissive than she had intended, and Mothwing shrank back as if she had been hit.

"I just thought I should let you know," she mewed. She turned and walked away before Mistystar could say anything else.

Mistystar forced herself to concentrate on the upstream patrol. "Grasspelt!

Could you come over here? Bring Icewing and Mintfur!”

The three warriors trotted over. They bristled with excitement when Mistystar told them that they would be exploring beyond the border.

“It makes sense, if we don’t have enough prey around the camp,” Grasspelt meowed.

“Do you want us to set border marks?” asked Icewing.

“Not yet,” mewed Mistystar. “I don’t know how far we’ll get today. We’re just looking for hunting possibilities at the moment.”

They left the clearing and picked their way down to the edge of the narrow

stream. As Duskmour had said, the shore was muddy and slippery from the recent rain, and Mistystar felt her paws sink deeper with every step. The cats clung to the bank and scrambled through the long grass until they emerged from the trees that enclosed RiverClan's territory. Just beneath their feet, the stream was swollen and fast-flowing, impossible to fish in even if the cats wanted to. Mistystar clawed her way along the steep slope, keeping her head below the top of the bank. Her fur was soon slicked with reddish-brown mud, and her paws kept slipping. Behind her, Icewing fared better because she was more lightly built and seemed able to

leap between patches of less sodden grass. Her denmate Grasspelt plodded grimly along at the rear, cursing under his breath every time he lost his footing.

At last Mistystar's pads were so clogged with wet soil that she couldn't keep a grip on the bank any longer. She scrambled up to the top and peered over the edge. Huge expanses of flat land, rippling with dark green grass, stretched away on both sides of the stream. Feeling very exposed under the vast gray sky, Mistystar reared up on her hind legs and peered over the stems. The stretch of grass ended at a row of cloud-colored Twoleg dens, three of them side by side with dark-leaved plants growing up the

walls. As Mistystar stared, she spotted a flash of movement beside one of the dens, a blur of gray-brown fur.

“Kittypets!” growled Grasspelt beside her. “Two of them, by the looks of it.”

A second shape had joined the other; then both vanished around the side of the den.

“If there are other cats around, there might be less prey for us out here,” Icewing warned. Her fur stood on end, and she was clearly uncomfortable about being so far outside their territory in such an open, unprotected place.

Mistystar lifted her muzzle and sniffed the air. “I can’t smell any trace of them,” she commented. “Wouldn’t kittypets be

too lazy to come all the way over here if they have enough slop to eat from their Twolegs?”

“Probably,” grunted Grasspelt. He started nosing through the grass, his ears pricking. “This way!” he whispered over his shoulder.

Mistystar and Icewing tracked him along the edge of the grass to a bramble thicket that hung over the bank of the stream. Grasspelt slowed down as they approached the brambles, lowering his belly until it almost hung on the ground, before he plunged forward with both front paws outstretched. The air was split with squeals; Mistystar and Icewing raced up to see him looming

over a nest of young, hairless mice. They dove in, killing the baby mice with swift, careful blows so as not to spoil the delicate bodies.

When everything was quiet, they stood back and looked down at the instant fresh-kill pile. “That was a good find,” Mistystar praised Grasspelt.

Her Clanmate shrugged. “It’s hardly enough to replace a lake full of fish.”

“But it’s a start,” mewed Icewing. She scooped up the mice, gathering the tails in her teeth. The others helped her, and they began to make their way back down the stream, holding their prey out of the mud as they struggled to keep their footing.

Back in the camp, their Clanmates fell hungrily on their catch. “Mice are almost as yummy as trout!” Podkit declared, munching a soft, pink ear.

There were enough mice for every cat to have half each. Mistystar watched her Clanmates eating and felt a surge of satisfaction. Perhaps hunting farther upstream would be the answer until the fish came back. She looked up at the sky, wondering if her warrior ancestors agreed. *If Mothwing can't hear you, could you send a sign to Willowshine instead?*

She became aware of raised voices at the edge of the fresh-kill pile. “You can't have another one, Mossypaw,”

Reedwhisker was saying. "Hollowpaw and Rushpaw haven't had theirs yet."

"They should be here, then!" Mossypaw argued.

"Here they come," mewed Graymist. The two apprentices were trotting through the entrance.

"Look!" called Mallownose. "Fresh mice!"

"Great," mewed Hollowpaw, sounding less than excited.

"How was your battle practice?" Mistystar asked. She watched the young cats closely, mindful of what Mothwing had said about their private boasting.

"Really good!" Rushpaw meowed.

"I was the best," Hollowpaw

declared.

“Where did you go?” Mistystar put in.

Rushpaw looked surprised. “Oh, you know that elderflower bush by the holly tree? There’s a clear space under there that is just right for battle training.”

“Excellent,” Mistystar murmured. She was beginning to feel guilty about quizzing them. “Reedwhisker saved a mouse for you.”

The apprentices exchanged a glance. “We’re not hungry right now,” mewed Hollowpaw. “Is it okay if we have it later?”

“Yes, of course.” Mistystar turned away but looked back over her shoulder. “And well done for working so hard. I

know things aren't easy at the moment, but I'm proud of you for keeping up with your training."

Rushpaw twitched his tail. "We're just doing what any loyal cat would do," he insisted. "You can count on us, Mistystar."



Chapter 8

Keeping her weight balanced over her haunches so that she didn't tip forward and fall in, Mistystar sliced her paw

through the water. Her claws sank into the minnow's narrow body and she flicked it triumphantly onto the rock beside her. The tiny fish flapped for a moment before lying still.

"Nicely done!" called a voice, making Mistystar look up in surprise.

Beetlewhisker was watching her from the top of the shore. His brown-and-white fur stood out sharply against the gray stones.

"It's still not much more than a mouthful," Mistystar pointed out, glancing down at her catch in disappointment. Reedwhisker had taken a patrol upstream that morning in search of more prey outside the territory, but

Mistystar had wanted to check for herself the state of the lake.

“At least the big fish are coming back!” Beetlewhisker purred.

Mistystar put her head on one side. “They are?”

Beetlewhisker nodded. “Oh, yes. I saw a huge trout yesterday, longer than my tail. Mothwing told me to leave it alone, though.”

“She did?”

“Yes, to give the lake a chance to build up its stocks again. She said we should let the bigger fish build up their numbers and breed again before we start catching them.”

Mistystar felt her mouth fall open.

“She didn’t mention this to me.”

Beetlewhisker blinked. “Well, maybe she thought you’d feel the same?” He sounded uncomfortable, and Mistystar felt sorry for challenging him. He wasn’t the cat she needed to speak to about this. She stood up and picked up her minnow.

“I’d better add this to the fresh-kill pile,” she meowed. “See you later, Beetlewhisker.”

She left the warrior standing rather unhappily on the shore, and threaded back through the ferns to the camp. She dropped her fish onto the pile and went to the medicine cats’ den. Mothwing was inside alone, doing something complicated with a heap of leaves.

“Why did you tell Beetlewhisker not to catch the trout?” Mistystar demanded.

Mothwing looked up. “Because we want to let the lake recover first,” she meowed. “What’s the point of taking all of the big fish as soon as they appear?”

“That should have been my decision,” Mistystar insisted. She knew she was being stubborn—Mothwing had a fair point—but she couldn’t help feeling that she was being deliberately undermined.

“You weren’t there!” Mothwing pointed out. “And I’m allowed to have an opinion, aren’t I?” There was a hint of challenge in her gaze, which made Mistystar bristle even more.

“You know what? I’m not sure

anymore! Not after lying to the Clan about StarClan!”

“I didn’t lie!” Mothwing flashed back.

“By letting us believe you could be our medicine cat, you did.”

Mothwing stared at her. “Are you saying you don’t trust me to do anything?”

Mistystar felt her tail droop. “I don’t think I do,” she murmured. “Everything’s going wrong, the Clan is still hungry, and I need StarClan to know that they can send us signs at any time.”

“Willowshine will tell you if she sees a sign.”

“Will she really? Or is her loyalty to you too strong?” Mistystar suddenly felt

very tired. “Please accept that you can no longer be a medicine cat, Mothwing. Before StarClan gives up on us completely.”

Mothwing curled her tail over her back and padded out of the den. “Just because I don’t believe in StarClan, Mistystar, you don’t have to give up your faith in them,” she whispered on her way past.

As Mistystar followed Mothwing away from the rocks, she heard a small commotion beside the fresh-kill pile. Mossypaw was bickering with Troutpaw over who should have the last piece of squirrel. *At least they’re getting a taste for land prey,* Mistystar thought. She

didn't have the energy to sort out the apprentices' quarrel, so she headed for the entrance and pushed her way into the middle of the territory, where the bushes grew most densely. It was quiet and sheltered under here, and she found a patch of dry leaves to lie down on.

She listened to the leaves on the holly tree rattling in the breeze, and watched a few late elderflower petals drift down in front of her. Something stirred in her mind. Hadn't Rushpaw described a place under an elderflower bush next to a holly tree where he and Hollowpaw had practiced their battle techniques? Mistystar looked around. Holly trees weren't common in their territory, and

she was pretty sure there wasn't another one so close to an elder bush. But the ground was smooth and the layer of fallen leaves undisturbed; there had been no fighting here for a long while. Had Rushpaw lied?

Mistystar shrugged. She'd question where the apprentices were again later. Whatever they were up to, it could wait. She closed her eyes and pictured her Clanmates roaming across the marsh and up the stream in search of food. Was Beetlewhisker right? Were the trout really coming back to the lake? And if so, would her warriors be able to resist catching them until the water was fully stocked?

Mistystar felt warm breath on her ear, and a familiar, heartbreaking scent wreathed around her. “There are more sources of prey than the lake,” whispered a voice. Mistystar whirled around, peering into the shadows.

“Stonefur? Are you there?”

There was nothing but silence. But Stonefur had visited her! StarClan was still watching them. *We are going to survive!* Mistystar thought joyously.

Suddenly the branches crashed and Reedwhisker burst through the bushes. “Mistystar! Come quickly! Hollowpaw and Rushpaw are in trouble!”

Mistystar leaped up. “Where are they?”

Reedwhisker skidded to a halt, his expression grim. "By the Twoleg dens."

Mistystar didn't ask for an explanation. She just followed her deputy at a sprint through the bushes, down to the stream, and along the muddy bank that led out of their territory. *What in the name of StarClan are Hollowpaw and Rushpaw doing there? They weren't part of Reedwhisker's patrol.*

Reedwhisker clawed his way to the top of the bank with Mistystar close behind him, and the two cats stood panting on the vast stretch of grass. Reedwhisker pointed with his tail. "Mallownose, Graymist, and Robinwing are by the boundary; can you see?"

Mistystar narrowed her eyes against the wind. She could just make out the pale-furred shapes of her Clanmates crouching by the long wall of stones that marked the edge of the field. "Where are the apprentices?"

"On the other side of the wall, by the Twoleg den. They're trapped in a corner by a pair of dogs." Reedwhisker glanced at Mistystar. "It looks pretty dangerous."

"We have to get them out!" Mistystar exclaimed.

"Of course," Reedwhisker meowed. "I just wanted to warn you, that's all."

But Mistystar was already tearing over the grass, leaping high with each stride to avoid being caught in the dense

stalks. Reedwhisker caught up to her with a few bounds, and they raced side by side to the wall where the others were waiting.

“Are the dogs still there?” Reedwhisker demanded.

Graymist nodded, her eyes huge and her fur fluffed up. Mistystar jumped on top of the wall. She almost fell off again when she saw the two huge black-and-brown dogs snarling at the edge of the Twoleg den. Cowering under a tiny stone ledge were the RiverClan apprentices.

“Help, help!” shrieked Hollowpaw as one of the dogs thrust its muzzle under the ledge.

“Get back, you brute!” Rushpaw

hissed, and Mistystar saw one of his paws flash out, catching the dog on its nose. The dog merely shook its head and curled its lip again. Twin strands of drool hung from its jaws.

“Great StarClan,” Mistystar whispered.

Reedwhisker appeared beside her on the wall. “You and the others distract the dogs,” he meowed. “I’ll go along that fence”—he gestured with his tail to a narrow wooden barrier running from the wall to the Twoleg den—“and lead Hollowpaw and Rushpaw out.”

“It’s too far for you to go on your own!” Mistystar gasped, studying the distance between the wooden fence and

the tiny ledge of stone.

“The apprentices won’t come out on their own,” Reedwhisker meowed. “You have to trust me, Mistystar.”

Mistystar gazed at her son. “I do trust you,” she mewed. “Just be careful, please.”

“I will,” Reedwhisker promised. “I value my pelt even more than you do,” he teased over his shoulder as he turned to the warriors crouching below. “Come up here!” he called. Graymist, Mallownose, and Robinwing scrambled onto the wall and balanced beside Mistystar. Reedwhisker started to trot along the top of the stones. “When I’m almost at the Twoleg den, make some

noise!” he ordered.

“Are you going to let him do this?” Graymist whispered to Mistystar.

“We don’t have a choice,” Mistystar replied grimly. *Oh, StarClan, please watch over him!*

The cats watched in silence as Reedwhisker picked his way along the narrow strip of wood. His black pelt looked like a shadow as he crept noiselessly closer to the Twoleg den. When he was less than a fox-length away, Mistystar lifted her head.

“Dog-breath!” she screeched. “Over here, you foulmouthed creatures!”

One of the dogs spun around, its hackles raised. It barked, and the other

dog turned to join it.

“Scared of us, are you?” taunted Mallownose.

“Come on, flea-pelts! Pick on someone your own size!” yowled Robinwing.

The dogs took a pace toward the wall. Behind them, Mistystar saw Hollowpaw and Rushpaw peep out from under the ledge. They looked as tiny as kits, and even more vulnerable.

“Too scared to come any closer?” jeered Graymist, standing on her toes. “We’ll give you a proper fight!”

The dogs sprang forward, crossing the short, muddy grass in a few strides. Mistystar gripped the stone tightly to

keep herself from fleeing. At the far end of the wooden fence, Reedwhisker jumped down and raced along the side of the Twoleg den to where the apprentices were hiding.

“Come on!” Mistystar heard him call. “This way, quick!”

Hollowpaw and Rushpaw started to creep out from underneath the ledge. *Faster, faster*, Mistystar willed them.

In the brief silence, the dogs’ attention had turned away from the cats on the wall. One of them swung its massive head back toward the Twoleg den. When it saw the three cats outlined sharply against the pale gray stone, it let out a growl. With a mad scrabble of gigantic

paws, the dogs whirled around and started to hurtle back toward Reedwhisker and the apprentices.

“No!” screeched Mistystar. Without thinking, she leaped down behind the dogs. “Come back here! Take me instead!”

“Get back to the wall!” yowled Reedwhisker, who had reached the apprentices and was standing in front of them, shielding them with his tail.

“Run!” Mistystar hollered. She was almost at the dogs’ heels now; mud was splashing into her face from their racing paws, and she was almost knocked off her feet by one of their thick-furred tails. She sprang up and grabbed the end of the

tail in her teeth. At once the dog skidded to a halt, jerking Mistystar forward. She braced herself and sank her teeth deeper into the fleshy tail. The dog circled, and Mistystar found herself being dragged sideways.

“Let go, Mistystar!” she heard Mallownose shout from the wall. Mistystar gritted her teeth and clung on. She could feel the dog’s breath hot on her neck and the stench was enough to make her gag, but she knew she couldn’t let go.

There was a rapid pounding of paws, and suddenly Graymist and Robinwing were beside her, rearing up on their hind legs to slash at the dog. With a yelp, it

jumped backward. Mistystar lost her grip and stumbled onto her knees. Graymist shoved her up to her feet, and the three cats raced back to the wall.

“Where’s Mallownose?” Mistystar yowled, realizing that the top of the stones was empty.

“Helping Reedwhisker,” Graymist panted.

Mistystar whirled around and saw the light brown warrior clinging to the back of the other dog, distracting it while Reedwhisker pushed Hollowpaw and Rushpaw up to the top of the fence. As soon as the apprentices were clear, Mallownose sprang from the dog’s shoulders onto the fence beside them.

The narrow strip of wood shuddered and buckled as the three cats clung on.

“Reedwhisker! Watch out!” Mistystar shrieked. The deputy was crouching down, waiting for the fence to stop shaking before he jumped up. Both of the dogs leaped at him, jaws bared, drool flying from their cheeks. They landed with a thud and a dreadful tearing sound. Reedwhisker let out a shriek of pain that tore Mistystar’s heart in two.

“Reedwhisker! No!”



Chapter 9

Mistystar bunched her hindquarters beneath her, ready to spring down, but Robinwing held her back.

“Wait! Mallownose has him!”

The brown warrior had dug his claws into the top of the fence and lowered himself down until he could sink his teeth into Reedwhisker’s scruff. He hauled the barely moving cat out of the dogs’ reach and carried him along the wood, with Hollowpaw and Rushpaw stumbling in front of him. The dogs sprang and snapped at them from below, but Mallownose kept going, his eyes bulging from the effort of holding his Clanmate.

Mistystar pushed the apprentices out of the way as they stood trembling on the wall, and stretched out to take her son from Mallownose. The black tom was

moaning softly, and a huge gash stretched across his flank. The wound was so deep that Mistystar could see the white gleam of bone at the top of his hind leg.

“Oh, StarClan,” she whispered.

“We’re so sorry,” Hollowpaw whimpered. “We were just looking for food.”

“Kittypet food,” Rushpaw added. He hung his head. “We found some here before, and it didn’t taste too bad. We thought if we got enough to eat here, we wouldn’t have to take anything from the fresh-kill pile.”

Mistystar stared at the apprentices, resisting the urge to claw their ears off until they screamed as loudly as

Reedwhisker had. *They never meant for any cat to get hurt. They thought they were helping.*

Robinwing stepped alongside Mistystar. “Let’s get Reedwhisker back to the camp,” he meowed. He and Mallownose stood at the foot of the wall while Graymist and Mistystar lowered Reedwhisker onto their shoulders. The warriors stumbled a little under the deputy’s weight, then braced themselves and began the slow trek back through the grass. Mistystar walked at Reedwhisker’s head, trying to stop it from bouncing against Mallownose’s elbow. Graymist followed, with the apprentices on each side of her. The

young cats were too dazed and miserable to speak.

They kept to the top of the bank, not wanting to risk Reedwhisker falling into the still-swollen stream. Once they reached the bushes inside RiverClan territory, Graymist and Mistystar went ahead to hold branches out of the way. Reedwhisker's body was still whipped by stray twigs, though, and Mistystar whimpered every time he was lashed by another loose branch.

As they entered the camp, Graymist yowled, "Mothwing! Quick!"

Mothwing's golden head poked out from the elders' den. "What is it?" Scraps of moss clung to her fur, and

Mistystar guessed she had been building herself a nest.

“Reedwhisker is hurt!” Mallownose told her, but Mothwing was already pushing her way out of the branches and running across the clearing. The warriors let Reedwhisker slip gently to the ground.

Mothwing stared at the gaping wound. “We need cobweb, comfrey, marigold, watermint,” she began. “Robinwing, fetch some soaked moss. Do I smell *dog*?”

“Yes,” mewed Mallownose. “He was bitten by at least one, if not two.”

“In that case, we need to get this wound as clean as possible.” Mothwing

ran her paw lightly along Reedwhisker's spine. "I don't think anything's broken, but let's keep him still anyway."

Mistystar stepped forward. Her heart was pounding so hard she could hardly speak. But she reached out with one paw and moved Mothwing away from Reedwhisker. "Let Willowshine do this," she mewed.

Her Clanmates stared at her. "Mistystar, what are you doing?" Graymist exclaimed. "Mothwing is our medicine cat!"

"Not anymore," Mistystar replied softly.

Mothwing blinked. "Are you sure you mean this? Reedwhisker is very, very

sick.”

“Willowshine knows what to do,” Mistystar whispered. “StarClan will help her.”

Mothwing flinched, then turned away. “I’ll get her,” she mewed.

“I don’t understand!” growled Robinwing. “What’s going on?”

“I know what I’m doing,” Mistystar insisted.

Willowshine raced up. “Mothwing said Reedwhisker was hurt!” She stopped and stared down at the deputy, whose wound was staining the earth beneath him as scarlet as a sunset. “Great StarClan!”

Mistystar lifted her head high. “I know

you can heal him, Willowshine. Please, help him.”

Willowshine opened her mouth to protest, then shut it with a snap and began examining the injury. Mistystar gazed down at her son. *I won't lose you too, she vowed. I know you need StarClan's help to survive this, and Mothwing can't give you that. I'm doing the right thing; I must be.*

A crowd of cats gathered around Reedwhisker. Mothwing brought herbs to Willowshine, then left. Mistystar heard murmurs ripple around the Clan, ranging from puzzled to angry.

“Where's Mothwing going?”

“How can she turn her back on an

injured Clanmate? Surely that's breaking the medicine code!"

"Mistystar said she wasn't the medicine cat anymore."

"What? In the name of StarClan, why not?"

Because to Mothwing, StarClan doesn't exist! Mistystar thought desperately. She watched as Willowshine carefully rinsed Reedwhisker's wound, then packed it with cobwebs and freshly pulped herbs. Reedwhisker's eyes remained closed, and his breathing was so shallow his flank barely moved. Mistystar couldn't bear to see him suffer any longer. She padded out of the camp and headed into

the densest part of the territory. She crawled into a patch of brambles and curled up, wrapping her tail over her nose.

StarClan, we need you now! Guide Willowshine's paws; help her to heal Reedwhisker's injuries and make him strong again. Please don't take my last kit from me!

The air stirred beside her, and a faint scent drifted through the thorns. Mistystar lifted her head. "Stonefur?" She could just make out a shape against the brambles, gray-furred and broad-shouldered. "Stonefur! Have you come for Reedwhisker? Please don't take him to StarClan yet!"

Her brother leaned toward her until she felt his breath on her cheek. “Reedwhisker’s life hangs by the thinnest fish scale,” he whispered. “He needs all the help he can get.”

“Then speak to Willowshine!” Mistystar begged. “Tell her what she should do!”

Stonefur shook his head, almost in sorrow. “The lake is not the only source of prey,” he mewed, echoing what he had said before. “RiverClan has another medicine cat.”

“But Mothwing doesn’t believe in you! How can she be a true medicine cat? She has lied to the whole Clan, and she will be forever blind to what you

tell her.”

“Did StarClan tell you how to give birth to your kits?” Stonefur queried.

Mistystar gazed at her brother in astonishment. “No, of course not.”

“So you trusted your instincts, and acted alone?”

“Well, I had Mudfur to help me, but yes, I guess my instincts told me what to do,” Mistystar admitted. She had no idea where this was leading. Beside her, Stonefur was starting to fade. Mistystar reached out with her front paw, trying to hold the vision where it was.

“Perhaps you should trust Mothwing to act alone,” came the last whisper.

Dazed, Mistystar shoved her way out

of the brambles. On the last tendril, a pale green pod balanced, so delicate that Mistystar could almost see through it. Something made her pause, and as she watched, the pod began to split open. A damp, folded brown creature emerged, not much thicker than a twig. The sides of the pod fell away, leaving the creature clinging to the bramble. Mistystar watched, entranced, as the tiny shape stretched out first one wing, then the other. They gleamed in the pale light, thinner than gossamer and lifted by the softest breeze. As the wings dried, bolder colors appeared: rich fox-colored brown, bright circles of blue edged in white, and specks of black that

looked like the opposite of stars. It was a moth!

Does it know what it is? Mistystar wondered. Fly, little one! That's what your wings are for!

The moth clung to the tendril, its wings trembling. Then, with a twitch of its hair's-breadth legs, it flexed its wings and let the breeze lift it into the air. It hung for a moment above the bramble; then its wings folded and unfolded in a single heartbeat and the moth soared up through the brambles, flitting past the thorns and out into the cold, crisp sky.

Mistystar realized she had been holding her breath. Did the moth have its

own StarClan? Or had it really emerged all on its own, known how to spread its wings and take flight purely by instinct? Stonefur's words came back to her, and Mistystar's fur started to tingle. *You sent this moth, didn't you, Stonefur? You meant this to be an omen—an omen for me that I should trust Mothwing's instincts, and not judge her for what she does not do.*



Chapter 10

Mistystar raced back to the camp and burst through the entrance. The clearing was empty and quiet. There was no sign

of Reedwhisker or Willowshine or the cats who had clustered around them. Surely Reedwhisker hadn't died! Was she too late? She spotted Graymist emerging from the dirtplace and called over to her.

“Where is he? Where is Willowshine?”

Graymist looked at her, and Mistystar flinched from the judgment in her gaze. “They are in the medicine cats’ den,” she meowed.

Mistystar couldn't bear to ask how Reedwhisker was. She fled to the rocks and peered in. Willowshine was bent over the deputy's still, black shape. “Is . . . is he alive?”

“Just,” mewed Willowshine without looking up. “I’m doing everything I can.”

Mistystar stepped forward. “Where is Mothwing?”

Anger prickled from Willowshine’s fur. “In the elders’ den. Where you sent her.”

Mistystar swallowed. “I made a mistake,” she whispered. Then she turned and ran out of the den. She went over to the bush that sheltered the elders in their twilight moons and ducked her head into the den. “Mothwing?”

There was a faint stirring in the shadows. “Yes?”

“Mothwing, Reedwhisker needs you.” Mistystar paused. “*I* need you. Please

don't let me lose my son.”

Mothwing padded across the den and pushed her way out as Mistystar stepped back. Her blue eyes were wary and watchful.

“I was wrong,” Mistystar confessed. “You are still the RiverClan medicine cat. It is not up to me to take that away from you.” She pictured the moth, proud and strong and utterly confident that it could fly without any help. “Please forgive me, Mothwing.”

Mothwing stretched until her muzzle rested on top of Mistystar's head. “I will do everything I can for Reedwhisker,” she promised. Then she brushed lightly past Mistystar and vanished into her old

den.

Mistystar forced herself not to follow. Reedwhisker was in the best place to recover; she would only get in the way. Suddenly she knew where she had to go. She turned and trotted toward the entrance. She met Beetlewhisker just outside. "Is Reedwhisker okay?" the warrior asked.

"Mothwing and Willowshine are with him," Mistystar replied. When she saw his look of surprise, she added, "RiverClan is blessed by StarClan to have two medicine cats. You can tell the rest of the Clan that, if you wish."

Beetlewhisker held her gaze for a moment, then nodded. "As you say, we

are very lucky,” he meowed.

Mistystar began to move off. Beetlewhisker called after her, “Do you want some company?”

Mistystar shook her head. “No, thank you. I’ll be back later; I promise.”

She jumped over the stream and ran across the marsh, bouncing from tussock to tussock to keep her paws out of the mud. As she trotted along the shore, she looked across the ruffled water to the RiverClan camp, hidden among its sheltering bushes. “StarClan, help Mothwing and Willowshine,” she prayed.

At the stream that divided WindClan from ThunderClan, she started to climb.

She didn't meet any patrols, though she saw a group of WindClan cats racing over the moor in the distance. She still couldn't figure out how they managed to move so fast. Up and up she climbed, until her paws ached. At last the circle of bushes appeared above her, and she found herself at the top of the paw-dented path that led down to the Moonpool.

She settled down with her nose just touching the ice-cold water, and closed her eyes. She wanted to dream herself into StarClan, find Stonefur, and let him know that she had seen his sign. A soft breeze ruffled her fur and she opened her eyes expectantly. To her disappointment

she was still beside the Moonpool. Bare walls of stone encircled her, and the gray sky above was empty of stars. Mistystar felt a faint tremor of alarm. Was it a bad omen if StarClan wouldn't let her in?

Then she noticed a cat walking down the path toward her. For a moment she didn't recognize the sturdy shape and long brown pelt; then she realized it was Mudfur, the medicine cat who had stayed behind in the forest because his bones were too old for the Great Journey. Mistystar scrambled to her feet.

Mudfur padded closer until he was facing her, barely a fox-length away. He dipped his head in greeting, then

gestured with his tail. "Let's sit," he suggested. Still stunned by his appearance, Mistystar folded her haunches underneath her. Mudfur took a long breath. "I realized that Mothwing didn't believe in StarClan quite quickly," he began, staring out over the pool. "But I never saw any reason to challenge her. I could tell she was going to be a good medicine cat. She was smart and calm, and kinder than I was to cats in pain! Being a medicine cat is first and foremost about serving your Clan, and I knew that Mothwing would do that with every beat of her heart."

"But what about the rest of her responsibilities?" Mistystar argued.

“Seeing signs from StarClan, performing ceremonies?”

“StarClan can speak to any cat they want,” Mudfur replied. “We all have dreams, not just medicine cats. As for ceremonies, if Mothwing said the right words, how would any cat know what she thought in her own mind?”

“But there was a sign! You chose her because you found the wing of a moth!”

Mudfur looked down at his paws. “Ah, yes, so I did. At least, that’s what made my mind up. Maybe it was a real sign; maybe it wasn’t. If it was, then it meant StarClan saw her skills before any of us did. And if it wasn’t, well, I figured they’d find a way to tell me

something different before too long.”

“But they never did, did they?” Mistystar whispered. “StarClan allowed Mothwing to become our medicine cat even though they knew she would never listen to them.”

“I’ve had a long time to think about this,” Mudfur meowed. “Faith is not just about believing in warrior ancestors. It means being loyal to whatever is most important to you. For Mothwing, this is her Clan and her Clanmates. What else does a medicine cat need?”

Mistystar looked at the Moonpool, gray and lightless beneath the sky. What else, indeed? Mothwing had not stopped caring for her Clan since the moment she

became Mudfur's apprentice. Like the moth, she had taught herself to fly alone.

"Mistystar?"

Mistystar jerked around. Mudfur had vanished, and Mothwing was standing behind her. Why was she here, and not with Reedwhisker? The breath suddenly caught in Mistystar's throat. "Reedwhisker. . . ?" she rasped.

"Is sleeping peacefully," Mothwing finished for her. "There are no signs of infection, and as long as he stays still for a while, the wound will heal."

Mistystar sagged with relief. "Oh, thank StarClan," she breathed. Then she straightened up. "And thank *you*, Mothwing. For . . . for everything. How

did you know I was here?"

"I didn't," Mothwing replied. "But I often come here when I need some time to think. All the wisdom of the medicine cats that have come before me must have rubbed off on these stones somehow!"

"And yet you don't believe in anything that they do," Mistystar murmured.

Mothwing looked sharply at her. "I believe in the importance of learning from what has been discovered before. And in how precious health is, and how hard I must work to preserve it in all my Clanmates. The fact that the world of signs, omens, and dreams that have hidden meanings is closed to me doesn't feel like something is missing, Mistystar.

I respect what you believe. You must respect what matters to me.”

Mistystar nodded. “Who would have thought that a moth would have so much to teach me?” she whispered, half under her breath.

“What did you say?”

Mistystar let her tail rest on her friend’s shoulder. “Just something for me to remember,” she purred. “Now, shall we let our old bones rest for a while before we go back to our Clan?”

Acknowledgments

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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.



Chapter 2

Leafpool! Leafpool, I'm thirsty!
Hollyleaf was burning up. Her throat felt parched and her tongue was stuck to the

roof of her mouth. She must be in the medicine den with a fever. Where was the soaked moss that Leafpool always left close to her patients? She twisted her head, and her muzzle bumped into something soft and wet and green-smelling. Hollyleaf sucked at the tendrils of moss, trying not to wince as she swallowed the precious water. Nothing had ever tasted better.

Suddenly she realized she wasn't alone. There was a cat bending over her, pushing something beneath her injured leg. Hollyleaf hissed in pain, and the cat apologized softly. "It's just some feathers, to make you more comfortable. Lie still now."

Hollyleaf stiffened. She didn't recognize this cat's voice or scent. "Who are you? Where am I?" She started to flail her front paws. "Let me go!"

A small, cool foot was placed on her shoulder, gently pushing her back down. Strong-smelling leaves were moved close to her muzzle. "Hush, it's all right. You're safe. Eat these, then go back to sleep."

Hollyleaf allowed herself to be nudged back onto the floor. She swallowed the herbs—comfrey, from the scent of it—and two tiny poppy seeds. The feathers felt soft and warm against her wounded leg. With a small sigh, Hollyleaf closed her eyes and sleep

dragged her away once more.

When she woke next, her head felt clearer and the pain in her leg had dulled to a nagging ache. Hollyleaf lay still for a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the near-darkness. This definitely wasn't the ThunderClan medicine den. She was lying on a thin bed of feathers over cold stone. *I'm still in the tunnels!* Hollyleaf felt a jolt of relief, then alarm. Who was down here with her? Hollyleaf tried to recall the scent of the cat who had told her to go back to sleep, but her belly rumbled and suddenly all she could think about was how hungry she was. When had she last eaten? She tried to stand up

but her hind leg crumpled and she flopped onto her side, frustrated.

“You’re awake!” A face loomed from the shadows. “How is your leg?”

Hollyleaf opened her eyes wide until she could make out ginger-and-white patches on the cat’s pelt. He smelled of stone and water and moss. “Who are you?” she asked, her voice hoarse from lack of use.

The cat ignored her. Instead, he pushed something toward her with one paw. “You must be starving. Here, eat.”

Fresh-kill! Hollyleaf bent her head, ready to dive in, then pulled back. A small, slimy minnow lay in front of her. “I don’t like fish,” she mewed.

The cat twitched his ears. “Down here, you don’t always have a choice.” His tone was mild, but Hollyleaf felt embarrassed. Her belly let out a loud growl as if it would be happy with anything, even crow-food. Holding her breath, Hollyleaf bit into the fish. *Plump, tasty mouse*, she told herself. *Pine-scented squirrel. The first pigeon of newleaf.*

She swallowed the last mouthful and drank from the moss beside her. The ginger-and-white cat watched her expectantly. “Thank you,” Hollyleaf meowed. “I . . . I guess it didn’t taste too bad.”

The tom was still studying her.

“You’re Hollypaw, aren’t you?”

She blinked. “Hollyleaf, actually. How did you know? I’ve never seen you before, have I?”

The cat shook his head and his eyes clouded. “No, you’ve never seen me. But I saw you with your littermates when you came to rescue those kits, just before the river flooded.”

Hollyleaf stared at him. She would never forget the desperate search for the lost WindClan kits with Jayfeather and Lionblaze. They had been washed out of the tunnels and into the lake when the underground river overflowed. It had been a lucky escape for all of them. Now this cat was telling her that he had been

here! “Who *are* you?” she mewed.

The ginger-and-white tom busied himself with the feathers underneath her injured leg, rearranging them so that they were spread evenly. “My name is Fallen Leaves,” he meowed quietly.

“You’re not from the Clans, are you?” Hollyleaf pressed. “Where do you live?”

Fallen Leaves padded over to a small bundle of herbs and started dividing them up. “Once I lived in the hills above the lake, but this is my home now.” He turned, pushing some herbs toward Hollyleaf. “Eat this comfrey; it’ll help your leg. I won’t give you any more poppy seeds unless you have trouble

sleeping.”

Hollyleaf obediently chewed the fragrant leaves. “Were you a medicine cat?” she asked.

Fallen Leaves tipped his head to one side. “I don’t know what that is. We all learned about herbs and injuries so we could help one another. Is that what you mean?”

“Kind of.” Hollyleaf propped herself up on her front legs, feeling her heart beat faster. “Who were the other cats? Were you part of a Clan?” Was there another group of cats living near here, one that the Clans didn’t know about?

“No more questions,” Fallen Leaves ordered. “You need to rest. You haven’t

broken your leg, just wrenched it. You'll mend soon enough, and then I suppose you'll want to go back to your friends."

"No!" Hollyleaf yelped. "I can't go back! Not ever!"

Fallen Leaves just shrugged. "That's up to you. Lie down and stop wriggling. I'll bring you something to eat later." He picked up the scraps of fish bones and walked away.

Hollyleaf stared after him until the shadows swallowed him up. The walls of the tunnel seemed paler, as if more light was filtering in. When she'd been speaking, she'd heard her voice echoing from far away, which suggested that her first impression had been right and she

was lying at the entrance to a cave. She couldn't hear any water, so it wasn't the cave with the river. Hollyleaf rested her chin on her paws and closed her eyes. She was lost and injured, but somehow a cat had found her and kept her alive with food and water, and herbs for her leg. Had he been sent by StarClan? Or was she just very, very lucky? Either way, she figured that she was safe, at least for now.

She woke from a doze to find another little fish beside her, as well as freshly soaked moss and some more comfrey. It was harder to see the walls of the cave, which meant it must have gotten darker outside. Was it night? Hollyleaf

wondered how many days she had been down here. It had been a full moon when she . . . left. Perhaps Fallen Leaves could tell her what the moon was now. After eating her fish and masking the taste with the comfrey, Hollyleaf tried to stay awake, hoping that Fallen Leaves would come back. The cave grew darker until she couldn't see a thing. Hollyleaf gave up waiting for her strange companion. He would come again in the morning, she was sure.

This time she was awake and half-sitting up to wash her chest when Fallen Leaves arrived. He was carrying something bulkier and fluffier-looking

than a fish. Hollyleaf paused between licks. “Hey! You caught a mouse!”

Fallen Leaves deposited the fresh-kill at her paws. He looked flushed with triumph. “I heard it creeping into one of the tunnels,” he explained. “I hoped you’d like it.”

“I do!” Hollyleaf meowed. “Thanks!” She leaned forward to take a bite, then looked up. “There’s plenty here. Would you like some?”

Fallen Leaves shook his head. “No, it’s all yours.” While Hollyleaf continued eating, he gently prodded her injured leg. “Is it mending, do you think?”

Hollyleaf nodded with her mouth full.

“Definitely,” she mumbled. “I can bend it now, and it doesn’t hurt so much when I move.”

“You can try walking on it when you’ve finished eating,” Fallen Leaves decided. “Not too far, but you need to start exercising it before the muscles waste away.”

Hollyleaf twitched her ears with surprise. Fallen Leaves sounded just like a medicine cat. He *must* have come from a Clan! Or something very close to a Clan—like the Tribe of Rushing Water. She swallowed and mewed, “Are you a Tribe cat? Did you come from the mountains?”

Fallen Leaves stared blankly at her.

“This is my home now,” he replied.
“There is nowhere else.”

Hollyleaf shivered as if a cold claw had run down her spine. There was something about Fallen Leaves’s voice that made her feel more alone and desperate than she could imagine. She straightened up and nudged away the scraps of mouse ears and tail. “Where should I walk?” she asked.

“Don’t get too excited,” Fallen Leaves warned. “Just a few steps today, that’s all.”

Hollyleaf used her front legs to push herself to her paws. A stab of pain ran up her injured leg, but she took a deep breath and kept her paw on the ground.

Hesitantly, she took one step forward. Her hind leg held, though it felt weak and not quite connected to the rest of her. Hollyleaf limped toward the place where the light grew stronger. The walls of the tunnel opened out on either side into a small cave, about six fox-lengths wide. A tiny hole in the roof blazed with light, so bright that Hollyleaf had to screw up her eyes to look at it. “The sun is shining today,” Fallen Leaves commented as he came to stand by her shoulder.

Hollyleaf turned to face him. “Do you ever go outside? How can you live here all the time?”

Fallen Leaves looked away. “This is

my home,” he repeated. “Now, can you make it back to your nest?”

Hollyleaf started to walk back along the tunnel, frustrated that she hadn’t gone farther. But by the time she reached the dented pile of feathers her leg was aching badly, and she sank down with relief. “You can try again tomorrow,” Fallen Leaves meowed as if he could tell she was in pain. “Rest now.”

He turned to leave but Hollyleaf reached out with one paw. “Wait! I’m bored of being on my own. Can’t you stay and talk to me?”

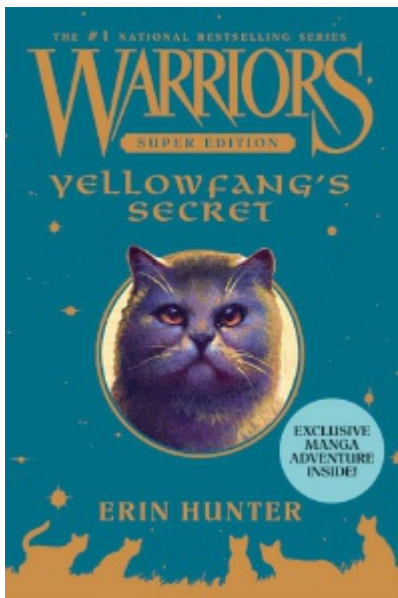
Fallen Leaves viewed her with somber blue eyes. “Rest,” he mewed. “That way your leg will heal faster. I’ll

see you again later.”

He padded away and Hollyleaf slumped down on the feathers. She willed her leg to get better soon. She'd wanted to escape from ThunderClan, but a life in the dark, dependent on another cat for food and water, was not what she had imagined.

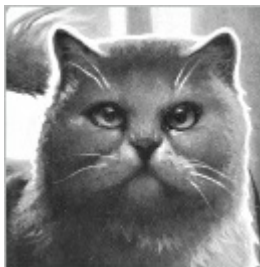
**KEEP READING FOR A
SNEAK PEEK AT**

SUPER EDITION
WARRIORS
**YELLOWFANG'S
SECRET**



Yellowfang has dedicated her life to ShadowClan. She is a loyal medicine cat, ready and willing to

do anything to protect her
Clanmates and keep them safe. But
a dark secret haunts her, threatening
her life and the lives of every cat
around her. . . .



Prologue

Starlight shone down into a large cavern through a ragged hole in the roof. The faint silver sheen was just enough to

show a tall rock jutting from the floor in the center of the cave, flanked by soaring rock walls, and at one side, the dark, gaping hole of a tunnel entrance. The shadows in the mouth of the tunnel thickened, and six cats emerged into the cavern. Their leader, a speckled gray tom with clumped, untidy fur, padded up to the rock and turned to face the others.

“Sagewhisker, Hawkheart, Milkfur,” he began, nodding to each cat as he named them, “we, the medicine cats of the four Clans, are here to carry out one of our most important ceremonies: the creation of a new medicine cat apprentice.”

Two more cats lingered by the tunnel

entrance, their eyes huge in the half-light. One of them shuffled his paws as if they had frozen to the cold stone.

“For StarClan’s sake, Goosefeather, get on with it,” Hawkheart muttered with an impatient twitch of his tail.

Goosefeather glared at him, then turned to the two young cats by the tunnel. “Featherpaw, are you ready?” he asked.

The bigger of the two, a silver-pelted tom, gave a nervous nod. “I guess so,” he mewed.

“Then come here and stand before the Moonstone,” Goosefeather directed. “Soon it will be time to share tongues with StarClan.”

Featherpaw hesitated. “But I . . . I don’t know what to say when I meet our ancestors.”

“You’ll know,” the other young cat told him. Her white pelt glimmered as she touched his shoulder with her muzzle. “It’ll be awesome, you’ll see. Just as it was when I became Milkfur’s apprentice!”

“Thanks, Bramblepaw,” Featherpaw murmured.

He padded up to Goosefeather, while Sagewhisker, Milkfur, and Hawkheart sat a couple of tail-lengths away. Bramblepaw took her place at her mentor’s side.

Suddenly the moon appeared through

the hole in the roof, shedding a dazzling white light into the cave. Featherpaw halted and blinked in astonishment as the Moonstone woke into glittering life, blazing with silver.

Goosefeather stepped forward to stand over him. "Featherpaw," he meowed, "is it your wish to share the deepest knowledge of StarClan as a ThunderClan medicine cat?"

Featherpaw nodded. "Yes," he replied, his voice coming out as a breathless croak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "It is."

"Then follow me."

Goosefeather turned, beckoning with his tail, and took the few paces that

brought him close to the Moonstone. His pale blue eyes shone like twin moons as he spoke. “Warriors of StarClan, I present to you this apprentice. He has chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant him your wisdom and insight so that he may understand your ways and heal his Clan in accordance with your will.” Flicking his tail at Featherpaw, he whispered, “Lie down here, and press your nose against the stone.”

Quickly Featherpaw obeyed, settling himself close to the stone and reaching out to touch its glimmering surface with his nose. The other medicine cats moved up beside him, taking similar positions all around the stone. In the silence and

the brilliant light, the new medicine cat apprentice closed his eyes.

Featherpaw's eyes blinked open and he sprang to his paws. He was standing chest-deep in lush grass, in a clearing of a sunlit forest. Above his head, the trees rustled in the warm breeze. The air was laden with the scent of prey and damp fern.

“Hi, Featherpaw!”

The young tom spun around. Approaching him through the grass was a tabby-and-white she-cat with blue eyes; she gave him a friendly flick with her tail as she drew closer.

Featherpaw stared at her. “M-

Mallowfur!" he gasped. "I've missed you so much!"

"I may be a warrior of StarClan now, but I am always with you, my dear," Mallowfur purred. "It's good to see you here, Featherpaw. I hope it's the first time of many."

"I hope so, too," Featherpaw responded.

Mallowfur kept walking, brushing through the grass until she joined a ginger tom at the edge of the trees; together the two StarClan cats vanished into the undergrowth. Close to the spot where they had disappeared, another StarClan warrior crouched beside a small pool, lapping at the water.

Heartbeats later, a squirrel dashed across the clearing and swarmed up the trunk of an oak tree, with two more of Featherpaw's starry ancestors hard on its tail.

Featherpaw heard his name being called again. "Hey, Featherpaw! Over here!"

Featherpaw glanced around the clearing. His gaze fell on a black tom, almost hidden in the shadows under a holly bush. He was small and skinny, his muzzle gray with age.

The dark-furred cat beckoned with his tail. "Over here!" he repeated, his voice low and urgent. "Are your paws stuck to the ground?"

Featherpaw shouldered his way through the long grasses until he stood in front of the tom. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“My name is Molepelt,” the cat replied. “I have a message for you.”

Featherpaw’s eyes stretched wide. “A message from StarClan, my first time here?” he breathed. “Wow, that’s so great.”

Molepelt let out an irritable grunt. “You might not think so, when you’ve heard what it is.”

“Go on.”

Molepelt fixed him with an icy green gaze. “A dark force is on its way,” he rasped, “with the power to pierce deep

into the heart of ThunderClan. And it will be brought by a ShadowClan medicine cat.”

“What?” Featherpaw’s voice rose to a high-pitched squeak. “That can’t be right. Medicine cats have no enemies, and they don’t cause trouble for other Clans.”

Molepelt ignored his protest. “A long time ago, I was the ShadowClan medicine cat,” he went on. “My Clanmates and I did a great wrong to another Clan—a Clan that belonged in the forest as much as any of us, but was driven out through our selfishness and hard-heartedness. I knew then that what we did was wrong, and I have waited,

my heart filled with dread, for the Clans to be punished.”

“Punished? How?” Featherpaw asked hoarsely.

“The time has come!” Molepelt’s green eyes were wide, and he seemed to be gazing into the far distance. “A poison will spring from the heart of ShadowClan, and spread to all the other Clans.” His voice became a soft, eerie wailing. “A storm of blood and fire will sweep the forest!”

Featherpaw gazed at the old cat in horror. Before he could speak, a powerful black-and-white tom pushed his way through a clump of ferns and padded up to the holly bush.

“Molepelt, what are you doing?” he demanded. “Why are you spilling all this to a ThunderClan apprentice? You don’t know that this is the time!”

Molepelt snorted. “You were once my apprentice, Hollowbelly, and don’t you forget it! I *know* I’m right.”

Hollowbelly glanced at Featherpaw, then back at Molepelt. “Things are different now,” he meowed.

“What do you mean? What’s going to happen?” Featherpaw asked, his voice shaking.

Hollowbelly ignored him. “There’s no reason to punish ShadowClan,” he continued. “What happened was too long ago. The medicine cat code will keep

the Clans safe.”

“You’re a fool, Hollowbelly,” Molepelt growled. “The medicine cat code can do *nothing* to save the Clans.”

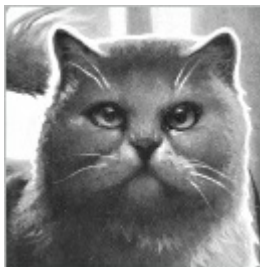
“You don’t know that for sure!” When Molepelt did not respond, Hollowbelly turned to Featherpaw. “Please, say nothing about this,” he meowed. “There is no need to spread alarm, not when the future is lost in mist even to StarClan. Promise me that you won’t tell any of your Clanmates. Promise on the lives of your ancestors!”

Featherpaw blinked. “I promise,” he whispered.

Hollowbelly nodded. “Thank you, Featherpaw. Go well.” Nudging

Molepelt to his paws, he led the old medicine cat away into the trees.

Featherpaw gazed after them. After a few heartbeats he scrambled out from underneath the holly bush and staggered into the sunlit clearing. “Even if Molepelt was telling the truth, it makes no sense!” he meowed out loud. “How can ThunderClan be threatened by a ShadowClan medicine cat?”



Chapter 1

“ShadowClan warriors, attack!”

Yellowkit burst out of the nursery and hurtled across the ShadowClan camp.

Her littermates, Nutkit and Rowankit, scurried after her.

Nutkit pounced on a pinecone that lay at the foot of one of the pine trees overhanging the clearing. “It’s a WindClan warrior!” he squealed, batting at it with tiny brown paws. “Get out of our territory!”

“Rabbit-chasers!” Rowankit flexed her claws, growling. “Prey-stealers!”

Yellowkit leaped at a straying tendril from the brambles that encircled the camp; her paws got tangled in it and she lost her balance, rolling over in a flurry of legs and tail. Scrambling to her feet, she crouched in front of the bramble, her teeth bared in a growl. “Trip me up,

would you?” she squeaked, raking her claws across its leaves. “Take that!”

Nutkit began to scan the clearing, peering around with narrowed amber eyes. “Can you see any more WindClan warriors on our territory?” he asked.

Yellowkit spotted a group of elders sharing tongues in a shaft of sunlight. “Yes! Over there!” she yowled.

Nutkit and Rowankit followed her as she raced across the hard brown earth and skidded to a halt in front of the elders.

“WindClan warriors!” Yellowkit began, trying to sound as dignified as her Clan leader, Cedarstar. “Do you agree that ShadowClan is the best of all the

Clans? Or do you need to feel our claws in your fur to persuade you?"

Littlebird, her ginger pelt glowing in the warm light, sat up, giving the other elders an amused glance. "No, you're far too fierce for us," she meowed. "We don't want to fight."

"Do you promise to let our warriors cross your territory whenever they want?" Rowankit growled.

"We promise." Silverflame, the mother of Yellowkit's mother, Brightflower, flattened herself to the ground and blinked fearfully up at the kits.

Lizardfang cringed away from the three kits, shuffling his skinny brown

limbs. “ShadowClan is much stronger than us.”

“Yes!” Yellowkit bounced up in the air. “ShadowClan is the best!” In her excitement she leaped on top of Nutkit, rolling over and over with him in a knot of gray and brown fur.

I’m going to be the best warrior in the best Clan in the forest! she thought with glee.

She broke away from Nutkit and scrambled to her paws. “You be a WindClan warrior now,” she urged. “I know some awesome battle moves!”

“Battle moves?” a scornful voice broke in. “You? You’re only a kit!”

Yellowkit spun around to see

Raggedkit and his littermate, Scorchkit, standing a couple of tail-lengths away.

“And what are you?” she demanded, facing up to the big dark tabby tom. “You and Scorchkit were still kits, last time I looked.”

“But we’ll be apprentices soon,” Raggedkit retorted. “It’ll be moons and moons before you start training.”

“Yeah.” Scorchkit licked one ginger paw and drew it over his ear. “We’ll be *warriors* by then.”

“In your dreams!” Rowankit bounded up to stand next to Yellowkit, while Nutkit flanked her on her other side. “There are *rabbits* who’d make better warriors than you two.”

Scorchkit crouched down, his muscles tensed to leap at them, but Raggedkit blocked him with his tail. “They’re not worth it,” he mewed loftily. “Come on, runts, watch us and we’ll show you some *real* battle moves.”

“You’re not our mentors!” Nutkit snapped. “All you know how to do is mess up our game.”

“Your game!” Raggedkit rolled his eyes. “Like you wouldn’t go squealing into the nursery if WindClan really attacked our camp.”

“Would not!” Rowankit exclaimed.

Raggedkit and Scorchkit ignored her, turning their backs on the younger kits. “You attack me first,” Scorchkit ordered.

Raggedkit dashed past his littermate, aiming a blow at Scorchkit's ear. Scorchkit swung away and pounced on Raggedkit's tail. Raggedkit rolled over onto his back, all four paws ready to defend himself.

Annoyed as she was, Yellowkit couldn't help admiring the older toms. Her paws itched to practice their battle moves, but she knew that she and her littermates would only get sneered at if they tried.

"Come on!" Nutkit nudged her. "Let's go and see if there are any mice in the brambles."

"You won't catch any, even if there are," Raggedkit meowed, rising to his

paws and shaking debris from his fur.

“I wasn’t talking to you.” Nutkit’s fur bristled and he bared tiny, needle-sharp teeth. “Kittypet!”

For a moment all five kittens froze. Yellowkit could feel her heart pounding. Like her littermates, she had heard the elders gossiping, wondering who had fathered Raggedkit and Scorchkit, asking one another if it could be true that Featherstorm’s mate had been a kittypet. The young she-cat had often strayed into Twolegplace, and she’d never been obviously close to any of the toms in the Clan. But Yellowkit knew that it was something you should never, never say out loud.

Raggedkit took a pace closer to Nutkit, stiff-legged with fury. “*What* did you call me?” he snarled, his voice dangerously quiet.

Nutkit’s eyes were wide and scared, but he didn’t back down. “Kittypet!” he repeated.

A low growl came from Raggedkit’s throat. Scorchkit’s gaze darkened and he flexed his claws. Neither of them looked one bit like a soft, fluffy kittypet. Yellowkit braced herself to defend her littermate.

“Nutkit!”

Yellowkit turned at the sound of her mother’s voice. Brightflower was standing beside the thornbush that

shielded the nursery hollow. Her orange tabby tail was twitching in annoyance.

“Nutkit, if you can’t play sensibly, then you’d better come back here. You too, Yellowkit and Rowankit. I won’t have you fighting.”

“Not fair,” Nutkit muttered as all three littermates began trailing toward the nursery. He scuffed his paws through the pine needles on the ground. “They started it.”

“They’re just stupid kittypets,” Rowankit whispered.

Yellowkit couldn’t resist glancing over her shoulder as she reached the thornbush. Raggedkit and Scorchkit stood in the middle of the clearing,

glaring after them. The force of Raggedkit's anger scared her and fascinated her at the same time. Behind it she could sense something else: a black space that echoed with fearful questioning. She thought of her own father, Brackenfoot, who told stories of patrols and hunting and Gatherings at Fourtrees, who let his kits scramble all over him and pretended to be a fox so they could attack him. Yellowkit loved him and wanted to be like him.

What must it be like, not to know who your father is? Especially if every cat thinks he was a kittypet?

Then Yellowkit realized that Raggedkit's gaze had locked with hers.

With a squeak of alarm she ducked underneath the branches and tumbled down into the nursery after her littermates.

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 Seekers and Survivors series.

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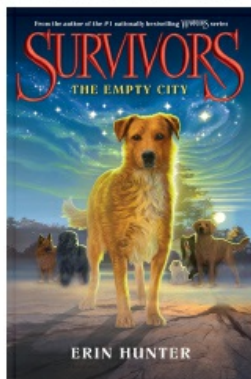
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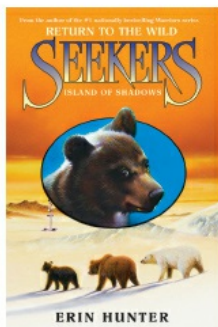
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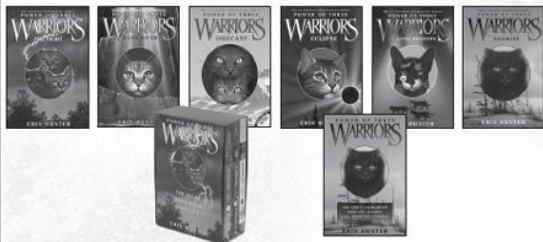
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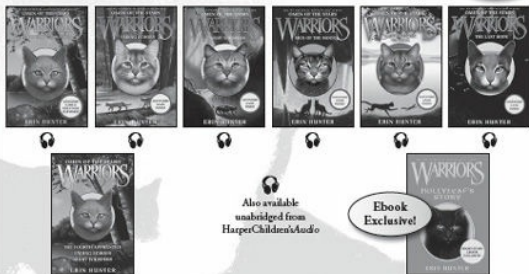
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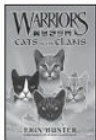


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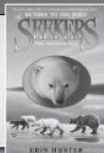


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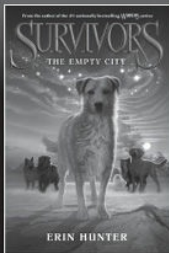
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