

A FEAR OF FIRE

Bright orange flames flickered at the edges of the camp, and Tigerclaw's mouth filled with bitter smoke. He tried to run to the tunnel that led out of the hollow but his fur was caught by brambles. He was trapped! Tigerclaw struggled desperately, listening to the flames roaring and crackling as they raced nearer.

"Help me!" he yowled.

"Tigerclaw! Wake up!"

There was a dig in his ribs and the dark brown tom sat up with a jerk. A narrow tabby face was peering anxiously at him. "I think you were having a bad dream."

Tigerclaw scowled. "No need to jab me like that, Runningwind. I knew I was only dreaming." He jumped out of his nest, shaking his fur to get rid of scraps of leaf and moss.

Outside the warriors' den, the air already felt heavy and warm. Only a moon into greenleaf and it was hotter than any cat could remember.

Redtail was arranging the dawn patrols. "Tigerclaw, you and Ravenpaw can join Lionheart and Graypaw along the Twolegplace border. Kittypet scent has been stronger than usual there recently."

Tigerclaw nodded and padded over to the golden tabby tom and his thick-furred apprentice. Ravenpaw came scampering out of the apprentices' den, a twist of moss clinging to one ear and his fur still ruffled from sleep. Tigerclaw would usually growl at him for being late, but his head was too full of flames and smoke from his dream, so the little black tom fell in behind the rest of the patrol and

followed them out of the tunnel.

Lionheart led the way along the high wooden fence that separated the red stone Twoleg dens from the forest. Tigerclaw hung back, carefully sniffing each bush and clump of grass, searching for signs that kittypets had crossed the boundary. What was that? The stench of kittypet slop, a scrap of fur that was too soft to cope with brambles, a puny scratch mark on a fallen branch.

Tigerclaw felt the hackles rise on his neck. He crept toward a tree that overhung the wooden fence. The scents grew stronger, and he knew that a kittypet had been sitting here last night. Flexing his haunches, he sprang up the tree and onto the top of the fence where he balanced for a moment, looking down at the clipped green grass and bright coloured flowers on the other side. To his horror, the air was tainted with something else: the smell of burning. His ears filled with the crackle of flames, and he felt his fur scorch and shrivel.

Fire!

A voice whispered inside his head: *Run, Tigerclaw! Run for your life! This fire will destroy you!*

Tigerclaw leaped back down the tree, screeching to his patrol. “Run! Twolegplace is on fire! Tell the Clan to get to the river as fast as they can!”

Paws thundered along the fence, and Lionheart and the apprentices skidded to a halt beside him. “Where is it?” Lionheart panted.

Tigerclaw jerked his chin toward the Twoleg den. “In there. Come on, we have to clear the hollow!”

Graypaw sniffed the air. "I don't smell anything."

Lionheart started to scramble up the tree. Tigerclaw stared at him. "Where are you going? Are you mad? That's where the fire is!"

Lionheart looked down at him from the top of the fence. "There's nothing here, Tigerclaw. I think you were mistaken."

Tigerclaw gritted his teeth. "I know what fire smells like," he growled.

"Perhaps it was a monster," Ravenpaw offered. "They have a terrible stench when they wake up."

He had the decency to flinch when Tigerclaw turned an icy gaze upon him. "Twolegplace is on fire," he hissed. But as he spoke, he was aware that the smell of smoke had faded, and he could no longer hear the hungry rattle of flames.

Lionheart was still looking down at the Twoleg den. "Honestly, Tigerheart, there's nothing here. Just a little ginger kittypet asleep under a bush. And I don't think he's anything to worry about!"