

# THE CLANS DECIDE

*This story is an alternate universe where the Clans must choose one leader to guide them through leaf-bare.*

Firestar stopped with one front paw raised above the frozen ground and pricked his ears. Was that the rustle of prey in a frost-burned clump of bracken? Scent lingering around the dead ferns warned Firestar that he was right on the border with ShadowClan, but if they prey ran toward him, onto ThunderClan territory, it would make a welcome addition to his Clan's fresh-kill pile.

The noise came again, a faint crackle followed by a muffled hiss. Firestar peered through the broken brown stems. There was a flash of orange beside a dark unmoving lump. He lowered his paw and crept forward, sinking his weight onto his haunches, ready to spring as soon as the creature moved. He opened his mouth, trying to identify the scent of the soon-to-be fresh-kill. *Squirrel? Rabbit?*

*RiverClan!*

His jaw snapped shut and he leaped through the bracken, crushing the soggy stalks until he stood on the very edge of the border. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Huge eyes stared up at him. "Help us, please," rasped a ginger-and-white tom. His fur was stained red with blood, and his tail lay awkwardly beside him as if it had been cracked like a twig.

"Pouncetail!" Firestar gasped. "What in the name of StarClan has happened?"

The RiverClan warrior struggled to sit up. "We . . . we were in ShadowClan's territory and they attacked us. Our patrol was split up, and we were chased all the way to your border."

Firestar narrowed his eyes. "So you were trespassing to begin with?" Then something occurred to him. "What do you mean, *we*? Are there more of you?"

Pouncetail shifted sideways, revealing more of the dark brown shape behind him. To Firestar's horror, he realized it was another cat, slumped on the cold earth, hardly breathing. He ran forward and pressed his nose against the cat's fur. There was a faint throb beneath the skin, enough to confirm she was alive, but she wouldn't last much longer without a medicine cat.

"It's Otterheart," Pouncetail mewed behind him. "Is . . . is she okay?"

"No—but she is alive," Firestar replied. "Come on, we have to get her to Leafpool." He pushed his shoulder underneath Otterheart's flank, trying to coax her to her paws. She opened her mouth in a faint protest, and a pool of blood dripped out. Firestar could feel her bones through her ragged pelt, and her fur smelled sour, as if she hadn't washed in moons. It had been a hard leaf-bare, for sure, but this cat had been more dead than alive before she set foot on ShadowClan territory.

There was no way Otterheart was strong enough to walk, so Firestar let her flop back down on the ground before reaching over and sinking his teeth into the scruff of her neck. She was light enough

to carry like a kit.

"Stop right there!" came a snarl.

Firestar spun around to see Russetfur, the ShadowClan deputy, baring her teeth at him.

"ThunderClan as well? Any cat would think we were hosting a Gathering!" she hissed.

"Don't be such a mouse-brain," Firestar snapped. "Since when has ShadowClan felt threatened by two injured cats?"

"Since an entire RiverClan patrol deliberately crossed our border to steal prey! Stop poking your muzzle in where it's not wanted, Firestar, and let us deal with these trespassers."

Firestar let the fur stand up along his spine. "You're not coming anywhere near these cats," he growled. "You've punished them enough already."

Rowanclaw and Smokefoot appeared alongside Russetfur with their ears flattened and their tails kinked high over their backs. "We'll decide how much they should be punished," snarled Rowanclaw.

"No!" Firestar spat. "There has been too much fighting this leaf-bare. We are destroying ourselves faster than the hunger and the cold. I will summon all the Clans to a Gathering, before the next full moon. We must find a way to stop these endless battles, and save our strength for survival." He nodded to Pouncetail. "Get to the other side of that bracken, quickly."

Looking puzzled, Pouncetail jumped through the dead ferns,

landing with a grunt of pain. Firestar picked up Otterheart again and started dragging her toward the bracken. Even though she was hardly more than skin and bone, her legs splayed awkwardly and kept tripping Firestar up.

"Wait!" Russetfur commanded. "These cats are our prisoners! You can't take them away!"

Firestar stopped on the far side of the bracken and let Otterheart collapse on the ground. He stood for a moment, panting and feeling the muscles in his neck protest. "Actually, they are my prisoners now. We're on ThunderClan territory." He twitched his tail toward the scent marks left by his Clanmates on either side of the clump of ferns. "Take one step closer, Russetfur, and I'll have a patrol of warriors here to claw the fur from your ears."

The dark-ginger she-cat curled her lip. "You're welcome to them," she hissed. "They know what will happen if they set paw back on our territory."

Pouncetail let out a whimper. The ShadowClan warriors looked scornfully at him before turning and vanishing into the bushes.

Firestar let out a long breath and looked down at Otterheart, who had closed her eyes. "Right," he muttered. "Let's get you back to the hollow."

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It was strange, crossing the fallen tree to the island with clouds covering the sky. It was so dark that it was impossible to tell where the water stopped and the pebbled shore began. Firestar could tell

that his warriors were uneasy from the way they padded in silence beside him, wary and jumping at shadows. He led the way across the tree, springing down when he felt the trunk split into roots. His paws crunched on the stones and somewhere in the bushes up ahead he heard a cat hiss in alarm.

"It's Firestar, here with ThunderClan!" he called.

"Some Gathering this is going to be, if we can't see each other," came the reply. It was Onestar of WindClan. "What's so important that it couldn't wait until the full moon?"

Firestar pushed his way through the undergrowth until the tangled branches stopped flickering against his face. The darkness was even thicker around the edge of the clearing; it was impossible to see how many cats were there, but he picked up the scents of WindClan and RiverClan. "Leopardstar, are you here?" he meowed.

There was a rustle as the RiverClan leader stepped forward. "Where are my injured warriors?" she demanded.

"They are here," Firestar promised. He felt Pouncetail and Otterheart brush past him; the she-cat was still limping, but Leafpool had managed to stave off any infection in her wounds.

"Oh, thank StarClan you are alive," he heard their Clanmate Pinefur murmur.

"Actually, thank Leafpool," Pouncetail replied. "And Firestar, for giving us shelter when ShadowClan warriors were on our tail."

"With good reason," snarled a voice beside Firestar, and he jumped when he realized that Smokefoot had arrived, along with the

rest of the ShadowClan patrol. Blackstar's white pelt glowed in the darkness as he shouldered his way through his Clanmates and put his muzzle close to Firestar's ear.

"We have come, as you asked," he growled, "but it had better be worthwhile." His breath smelled bitter, a sure sign that he had barely eaten for days, and there was a faint tremble in his shoulders.

"Leaders, warriors, gather close around," Firestar meowed, raising his voice. "There's no point in the leaders climbing the tree. You wouldn't be able to see us."

"Not to mention the fact that this isn't a true Gathering," muttered Russetfur. "Seeing as there's no full moon. What if StarClan are angry that we are meeting out of turn?"

"How can they angry with us for trying to find a way to survive this leafbare?" Firestar argued, feeling his neck fur rise. He shook himself to flatten it, conscious of needing to stay calm when there was nothing to prevent any of the other cats from breaking the fragile peace. "Because that's why I asked you to come here tonight. We are all suffering from the cold and the lack of prey. If we keep attacking each other, we make ourselves weaker. The hostility, the trespassing, trying to steal another Clan's prey: It all has to stop!"

"Why, because you say so?" sneered Tornear from WindClan. "Why put you in charge? If we can catch prey by crossing borders, then that's what we'll do. It's not our problem if you can't protect your territory."

"It'll be your problem when we invade WindClan to teach you

a lesson," snarled Blackclaw of RiverClan.

"And which of your warriors are going to do that?" Nightcloud put in. "The ones that were flattened by ShadowClan, or the ones that were too weak to leave the camp to help them?"

In the shadows, it was impossible to tell where each cat was, but Firestar could feel them shifting and bristling around him. "This is not what I wanted to happen!" he hissed.

"Did you really expect anything different?" Sandstorm murmured in his ear. "These cats are scared and starving, just like us. Peace will catch no prey."

"Nor will this endless fighting!" Firestar retorted. He spun around, almost knocking Sandstorm off her paws because he couldn't see where she was standing. "There's no point in staying if all we're going to do is quarrel. ThunderClan, follow me." He stalked back toward the bushes, following the scent of the fallen tree and the shore.

There were a few shocked mutters behind him, and hiss from a ShadowClan cat that sounded like, "Cowards!"

The ThunderClan cats bunched around him protectively, but Firestar shook them off and hung back to let them go first.

"Firestar, wait!" Rapid pawsteps exploded behind him, and he felt the warmth of a cat close to his flank. RiverClan scent flooded his mouth. "You can't leave now!" Mossbelt begged. "Come back, make them see sense. Not all of us want to keep on living like this, killing ourselves for the last piece of prey."

Firestar turned to face her, although her tortoiseshell pelt kept her hidden against the dense branches. "They don't have any reason to listen to me. And I'm not saying that I have all the answers. I'm as powerless against the cold and the hunger as any cat."

"But you brought us here because you believe we can work together. We did it before, didn't we? For the Great Journey? Will you give up so quickly this time?"

Firestar pricked his ears toward the clearing. A snarl echoed around the trees, and the thud of paws on the frozen ground as two cats sprang forward. It sounded as if a battle was going to break out. If any cats were wounded tonight, it would be his fault for summoning the four Clans to a Gathering without a full moon. He couldn't turn his back on them now.

"I'll come back," he told Mossbelt.

Sandstorm had headed back from the shore to find him. "I'll fetch the others," she meowed.

Firestar pushed his way through the bushes. Above his head, the tree tops rattled in a breeze that had sprung up from the lake. By the time Firestar reached the clearing, the clouds were being chased away like torn cobweb across a dusty silver sky. The moon was still hidden, but the cloudy light of thousands of stars washed the island with a watery gleam. Now Firestar could see the oak tree where the Clan leaders usually sat, and the pine trees that protectively circled the clearing. And emerging from the shadows, their fur tipped with a gray glow, were cats from all four Clans.



In the center, Tornear and Blackclaw crouched opposite each other, their lips drawn back to show their teeth and their ears flat against their necks.

"Your Clan is full of weaklings, and it always has been!" Blackclaw snarled.

Tornear sprang at the RiverClan warrior with a hiss and pinned him to the ground with his claws grazing the black tom's cheek. "Does this feel weak?" he challenged.

Blackclaw flipped himself over, pushing Tornear off with his hindpaws, and leaped at him with his front paws stretched out. He caught the WindClan warrior with a sharp blow to his left ear, and when Tornear shook his head, drops of blood scattered onto the ground. Blackclaw landed and spun around from another strike. His eyes shone with hunger for battle, and saliva dripped from his jaws.

Firestar hurled himself between the two cats. "Stop!" he ordered. "This doesn't help!"

Tornear hissed and dodged sideways to aim a blow at Blackclaw's haunches. Firestar saw what he was planning by the flicker of his eyes, and leaped the same way. He deflected the blow with his shoulder, then spun around and clapped his front paw, with claws sheathed, against the side of Tornear's head. The WindClan warrior staggered back with a grunt.

"I said, that's enough!" Firestar spat. "I won't let you kill each other just because there is no full moon."

"But look!" Otterheart whispered. She was staring up at the

sparkling sky. "StarClan has come!" One by one, the cats followed her gaze. "They are watching us!"

"They must approve of this Gathering!"

Firestar caught Sandstorm's gaze; the ginger she-cat gave a tiny nod and he knew she was urging him to seize the moment and try again. "Cats of the Clans!" he called. "We have one thing in common: We are all watching our Clanmates die from cold and hunger. The warrior code tells us to help kits from any Clan that are in danger. Do we need the code to tell us to help each other, as well?"

Blackstar stepped forward, his massive shoulders braced under fluffed-up fur. "We don't have enough food to feed ourselves. Do you expect us to give up our fresh-kill to our neighbors?"

Firestar shook his head. "Of course not. But if one Clan has a good catch, would it be so terrible to share the leftovers? We're quick enough to cross our borders to take food; what if we crossed those borders to bring food, instead?"

Leopardstar padded out of the shadows, her black spots outlined sharply against the paler fur in between. "And who's going to judge if there is leftover prey? Will you be patrolling our fresh-kill piles, Firestar, dividing up the skin and bone?"

Barkface, the WindClan medicine cat, spoke up unexpectedly. "I think Firestar is trying to appeal to our consciences, Leopardstar. We know when we have eaten enough to survive."

"Should our consciences not be allied with loyalty to our Clan?" Snaketail from ShadowClan put in. "A full-fed Clan is a strong

Clan, and I have no interest in giving a battle advantage to any Clan but my own."

"Stop thinking about battles, for once in your life!" snapped Graymist of RiverClan. "If we could agree to stop attacking each other for as long as we are hungry, it would give each of us a decent chance to survive."

Russetfur stalked into the center and stared around. "I see four leaders here, not one. And one of them wasn't even born in the forest. Are we going to listen to a kittypet now?"

Inwardly, Firestar let out a sigh. He had lived with housefolk for less than six moons, and countless seasons in the forest. He didn't have time to prove himself all over again -- and he didn't see why he should have to.

"Well, he's speaking the most sense!" Squirrelflight retorted.

There was the soft pad of paws on the frosty earth, and Jayfeather joined Squirrelflight in front of the ThunderClan cats. His sightless blue eyes reflected the stars. "We could have a vote," he meowed quietly. "Let each cat decide their own future."

Leopardstar tipped her head on one side. "What do you mean?"

"A vote," Jayfeather repeated, sounding more confident. "I... I have seen it done in the dreams I have shared with StarClan."

Firestar stared at his daughter's kit. Who knew where this blind cat walked in his dreams? Of all the medicine cats Firestar had known, none had frightened him. But sometimes, Jayfeather did.

"How does it work?" There was a sneer in Blackstar's voice, but he stayed where he was rather than turning away, perhaps out of curiosity.

"Each cat has a chance to place a stone in a pile to show their choice," Jayfeather explained. "One pile will represent cats who wish to follow Firestar, the other will be for cats who wish to follow their own leaders."

*Hold on*, Firestar thought. I didn't set out to lead all the Clans.

Sandstorm seemed to guess what he was thinking. She padded over to him and murmured, "If the cats choose your pile, you will be able to maintain peace for as long as the cold lasts."

*Will I?* Firestar wondered.

Onestar stepped forward. "I am willing to vote," he announced. Watching him, Firestar tried to guess which pile the WindClan leader would choose. Long ago, they had been good friends, but that had changed when Tallstar made Onestar his deputy and almost at once, the leader of WindClan. Would Onestar vote to prove his independence from any old alliance with ThunderClan?

"I'll vote, too," growled Russetfur. There was no mystery as to which choice the ShadowClan deputy would make.

One by one, all the leaders and deputies agreed to vote. The medicine cats hung back; their private code set them outside Clan rivalries, so they had already made their decision to help all cats, regardless of their Clan. The warriors looked expectantly at Jayfeather, waiting for him to explain what happened next.

Jayfeather picked up a piece of wood and laid on the ground in the center of the clearing. The stick sparkled with frost, and his breath hung in clouds above it. "Those who want Firestar to take charge, for the sake of our survival, should put their stone on this side," he instructed, tapping his front paw beside the stick where Firestar stood. "If you wish to follow your Clan leader alone, put your stone over here." He turned and touched the other side of the stick. "Firestar, you should vote, too."

For a moment, Firestar wondered if he dared vote against himself. How had this meeting turned into a decision to lead all four Clans? *StarClan, help them make the right choice*, he prayed. Right now, he didn't know what that choice would be.

The other three leaders took their cats through the bushes to collect pebbles from the shore. Firestar went last of all, with his warriors crowding at his heels. No cat spoke; they were tense, expectant, but giving nothing away about which side of the stick they would place their stone.

Back in the clearing, Jayfeather and the other medicine cats stood by the piece of wood. The starlight cast their shadows across the ground, outlined with the glint of frost. The cats bunched together beside the bushes, their stones in the mouths and their tails twitching anxiously.

Jayfeather nodded to Blackstar. "You go first," he meowed.

The ShadowClan leader stalked forward and placed his stone with deliberate care on the side of the stick that represented

individual Clan leaders. In spite of his uncertainty, Firestar couldn't help wincing as the first vote was cast against him. The rest of the ShadowClan cats followed; all added their stone to Blackstar's, until Rowanclaw reached the stick. Tawnypelt's mate turned to look at Firestar, then placed his stone on the other side.

There was a gasp from his Clanmates, but Snowbird stepped up beside him. "I vote for Firestar, too," she declared, putting her stone beside Rowanclaw's.

Tawnypelt followed and laid her pebble on Firestar's pile without speaking.

Blackstar narrowed his eyes, but said nothing. Leopardstar hung back to let her Clanmates go first. Now more stones joined Firestar's pile: Mistyfoot, Otterheart, Pouncetail, and Mossbelt were unsurprisingly in favor of the ThunderClan leader, but more unexpected were votes from Mintfur and Reedwhisker.

The thin black tom looked back at Firestar and mewed, "You saved my life once before, in the flood. I believe you can do it again."

Leopardstar voted last of her Clan. She walked up to the stick and stood exactly level with it. Her warriors had voted unanimously for Firestar; Leopardstar looked at the pile of stones and sadly shook her head. Then she put her stone on the other side of the stick. "Is this how you thank me for all the moons I have been your leader?" she asked her Clanmates.

Mistyfoot stepped forward. "No!" she cried, sounding dismayed. "You have done nothing wrong. But we want peace

between all the Clans, like Firestar says, to give us a chance to recover."

Leopardstar looked at her deputy. "You will have to prove to me that you can be loyal to two leaders," she mewed softly.

Onestar walked into the center of the clearing. He stopped in front of Firestar and let his stone fall beside his front paws. "I will not apologize for my warriors crossing the border that separates our Clans. But if you can find a way to keep us alive without stealing prey, I will listen. For the sake of old times." He blinked his calm blue eyes, then picked up his stone and carried it over to Firestar's pile.

"Thank you, old friend," Firestar murmured. He knew from the flick of Onestar's ears that the WindClan leader had heard.

Not every WindClan cat followed Onestar's example. Tornear, Nightcloud, and Ashfoot dropped their pebbles onto the other pile with a clatter that pierced the heavy silence like a claw.

Ashfoot looked at Onestar as her stone rolled to a halt at the bottom of the pile. "I have faith in you to lead us through this leaf-bare," she meowed quietly.

Now it was ThunderClan's turn.

Sandstorm pressed her shoulder against Firestar's and put her mouth close to his ear. "Don't you dare vote against yourself!" she whispered. "If you lose, it must not be because you didn't believe you could do this." Stepping in front of him, she put her stone deliberately onto his side of the stick.

Firestar followed her, feeling the eyes of every cat burning his

pelt. Then Squirrelflight voted, also for her father, and then Brambleclaw, his deputy. Firestar looked at the two piles. It cast a fatter, longer shadow, even though some of the stones had rolled quite far away from the rest.

Dustpelt was next. He looked at Firestar before putting his stone on the other pile. "You are this Clan's leader, and no other's," he growled.

Firestar nodded, knowing this was nothing more than a show of loyalty from a cat who had not always been his biggest supporter.

Brigheart, Cloudtail, and Thornclaw agreed with Dustpelt—or perhaps doubted his ability to take charge of all four Clans—and the shadow from the stones on the other side of the stick stretched further until it was level with its partner.

There were no cats left to vote. Firestar looked at the stones. What did they say? What had the cats decided?

Jayfeather, Littlecloud, Mothwing, and Barkface started to line up the stones side by side, in two long rows. The other cats huddled at the edge of the clearing, shivering and craning their necks to see which row stretched farthest. It was impossible to see; they were both so close, each pair of medicine cats adding another stone in unison.

Then they stopped, and Jayfeather lifted his head. "The vote has been cast," he declared. "The cats have chosen to follow Firestar."

*Great StarClan! Is that really what you want?* Firestar felt the ground shift beneath his paws, and he must have staggered because Sandstorm kinked her tail around his.



"Are you all right?" she murmured.

Firestar nodded. He had won. Enough cats from the other Clans had decided to listen to him above their leaders. *Please let me guide them wisely*, he prayed.

"Th-thank you," he meowed out loud. Bracing his shoulders, he went on more strongly. "I promise I will be guided by the warrior code, and most of all, by StarClan's wish that there should be four Clans. If that means sharing our fresh-kill, so be it. We will do what we have to in order to survive—just as we have always done."

Several cats raised their voices in support, but there were dark glances between the others, and Firestar felt his pelt stand on end at the thought of what lay before him. The only cat that had tried to take over all four Clans before now was Tigerstar, and he had paid the highest price for his ambition. Firestar needed these cats on his side, not just those that had voted for him, but their leaders and the others as well.

"We will meet here at every quarter moon, and bring any leftover prey for others to share. There will be no patrols between the Clans. If you don't take exactly what you need, or if you save your leftover fresh-kill for your own Clanmates, StarClan will be your judge, not I."

He saw expressions of relief and understanding flash in Leopardstar and Blackstar's eyes. They could respect their warrior ancestors without bowing down to a kittypet leader.

"And when the first green bud appears on the trees in

ThunderClan," Firestar went on, "there will be four Clan leaders again. Leaf-bare will be over, and our prey will be our own." He looked at the other leaders, making sure he caught their gaze before moving on. "Together, we journeyed to find our new homes. Together, we will survive this hunger. There will always be four Clans beside the lake."