

THE DISAPPEARING HERBS

Brightpaw slid out of her nest and padded to the entrance of the apprentices' den. Leaf-bare was clinging to the forest after a spell of unusually sunny weather when it seemed as if newleaf had come early. The cats of ThunderClan had grown used to warm days and dawns that brightened quickly through the mist. Now the rain had come back and it was impossible to go anywhere in the forest without getting drenched fur and muddy paws.

On the other side of the clearing, Brightpaw's sister Cinderpaw was standing outside the thicket of brambles that housed the nursery. In the still dawn air, queens and their kits could be heard coughing. Brightpaw watched Cinderpaw poke her head in to talk to one of the queens. Perhaps she was checking that their mother Frostfur wasn't showing any signs of the whitecough that had plagued the nursery for the past moon.

Thornpaw brushed against Brightpaw's flank as he squeezed out of their den. "Are you stuck on a bramble?" he puffed.

"I'm watching Cinderpaw," Brightpaw replied. "It's weird that she's training to be medicine cat now!"

Cinderpaw seemed happy, but Brightpaw couldn't help remembering all the nights they had stayed awake whispering about what it would be like when they were warriors together. Thornpaw followed Brightpaw's gaze. "She and Yellowfang are really busy with this whitecough. I bet Yellowfang will ask us to fetch more herbs

today instead of going on patrol. You know she's convinced ShadowClan is sending cats into the territory to steal our tansy and catmint?"

Sure enough, when Brightpaw joined her mentor Whitestorm for the morning patrol, Yellowfang was standing with him. Brightpaw could hear the breath wheezing in her chest, and she hoped the old she-cat hadn't caught the sickness from the nursery.

"Whitestorm, I need you to fetch more herbs for me," Yellowfang rasped. "The best place to find them at this time of year is at Snakerocks, but I swear there are fewer herbs than there were last moon. Cats from another Clan must be stealing them!"

Bluestar, leader of ThunderClan, overheard. "That's a grave accusation, Yellowfang," she growled. "What evidence do you have?"

The tip of Yellowfang's matted gray tail twitched. "I know where my herbs should grow," she meowed. "ShadowClan warriors will steal herbs if they have to, and they've been in this territory enough times to know where to find them."

"We have more enemies than just ShadowClan," Whitestorm rumbled. "Snakerocks is near enough to Twolegplace that kittypets might have helped themselves."

Bluestar's eyes darkened. "Perhaps Yellowfang is right, and we need to start patrolling our herbs. Whitestorm, you and Longtail take your apprentices to Snakerocks and look for any signs of invasion. Bring back what herbs you can, too."

Brightpaw exchanged an excited glance with Longtail's

apprentice Swiftpaw. This was more exciting than a boring old border patrol! Secretly she hoped they would catch the herb thieves in action—whatever they were.

The following section was written by Bryce Waterfeather, who won the competition for the 13 years and older category.

Brightpaw peered over Whitestorm's shoulder at Snakerocks. "Can you see anyone?" she chirped.

"Calm down, Brightpaw," Whitestorm said, his gravelly voice low. "A warrior must be patient to catch a mouse."

Brightpaw respectfully dipped her head. Beside Longtail, Swiftpaw shot her a sympathetic glance. The patrol waited, but no herb thieves appeared.

Swiftpaw yawned. "This is boring," he complained. "We should be hunting for the Clan, not watching herbs for a cat who can't be bothered to lick her own fur!"

Longtail flicked him on the ear approvingly.

"Quiet!" Whitestorm hissed. The ferns on the opposite edge of the clearing were rustling. Heartbeats later, two cats padded into the open.

"ShadowClan!" Longtail growled. "What are they doing on *our* territory?"

The ShadowClan cats glanced around nervously as they padded

closer to the dangerous rocks.

"Let's just get the herbs and get out of here," the scraggly gray tom mewed quietly. "Runningnose needs these as soon as possible."

"This clearing reeks of ThunderClan," his companion, a tortoiseshell she-cat, mewed. Lifting her muzzle, she tasted the air. "Ugh."

The two trespassers approached the catmint growing near the base of a boulder. The tom lowered his head and snipped off several of the stalks.

"That's it," Longtail growled, his eyes narrowing. Rise to his paws, he sprang out of their hiding place. Whitestorm sighed and beckoned Brightpaw and Swiftpaw to follow him. "Those are ThunderClan herbs, fox-breath!" Longtail yowled.

The tom froze, his eyes widening at the sight of ThunderClan.

"Yeah, well, we'd got them first," the tortoiseshell hissed, leaping in front of the tom.

Longtail snarled and prepared to pounce, but Whitestorm intervened. "Easy there," he meowed calmly. "You two are trespassing on ThunderClan territory. You have no right to be here. Now, give us our herbs and go back to your own territory."

"But you don't understand! We have sick cats in our camp," the tom mewed anxiously.

Swiftpaw darted forward. "That's your own problem," he hissed. "Find your own catmint."

"Whitestorm?" Brightpaw mewed hesitantly. "Surely we can let them take a few herbs?"

"ThunderClan needs them too, Brightpaw. It's leaf-bare, and we can't afford to waste even a single leaf," Whitestorm replied.

Stepping forward, Longtail curled his lip. "So get lost."

The trespassers slowly backed away from the catmint. "Please!" the tortoiseshell begged. "My sister—"

"Go away!" Longtail hissed, snatching up the catmint.

Suddenly, the two ShadowClan cats began to shimmer. Their pelts became smooth and untangled. Their eyes were brighter, and when Brightpaw looked at their fur more closely, she saw tiny stars twinkling at her.

"StarClan..." Whitestorm whispered.

The tortoiseshell stood up straight. "The Clans will never survive if you carry on like this," she mewed regally.

"The Clans must learn to think about others, not only themselves," the gray tom added. "For only then, will there be peace."

Brightpaw looked amazed. "Is...is that a prophecy?" she mewed questioningly.

"No, just common sense, mouse-brained!" the she-cat snapped. And with that, the two StarClan cats faded away.

The following section was written by Catriona, who won the competition for the 13 years and older category.

Brightpaw trotted after Whitestorm and Longtail as they made their way to Snakerocks.

"Do you think we'll catch the herb stealer?" whispered Swiftpaw. "Maybe if we catch them, Bluestar will announce it at the next Gathering in front of the other three Clans!"

Brightpaw's whiskers were quivering with excitement at the thought of the other Clans cheering her name as they did when she became an apprentice.

"Wait," Whitestorm called back. "I smell other cats."

Brightpaw took a breath and realized her mentor was right. There were other cats here! They crouched under the bushes and peeked out to see three cats: a large dark gray tabby tom, an old light gray tom, and a dark brown tabby she-cat. They were picking herbs.

"Those are ThunderClan's herbs!" Longtail hissed as he leapt out of the bushes.

The three unfamiliar cats turned in surprise at the warriors. "It isn't what it looks like!" the dark gray tabby said hastily. "You see, I'm Owl and this is my sister Thorn, and our friend here is Hawk. We're taking these herbs because my kits are sick!"

Whitestorm dipped his head to Owl. "I understand. You can take those herbs home, but you will need to find another place to pick them after this because these herbs belong to ThunderClan. We need them."

"Of course," Owl purred. "Come on you two."

As the three rogues disappeared, Longtail growled. "I don't trust them. I think we should follow them."

Swiftpaw nodded and Brightpaw murmured her agreement.

Whitestorm sighed. "Very well."

The warriors soon caught the rogues' scent and found them by a river. Owl said a few words to the others and they all dropped the herbs into the river.

"They were lying!" Brightpaw gasped.

Swiftpaw burst out of the bushes yowling, "how dare you do that? Why would you waste such precious herbs?"

Owl swung his head around in surprise. "Well, isn't it obvious? If you don't have herbs, you'll get sick. If you get sick, you'll be weak. And if you are weak, it'll be easier to take your territory."

Whitestorm growled. "Right now, you're outnumbered, and this isn't even everyone. You should run while you still can."

The rogues seemed to just realize that now, and they casted nervous glances at each other and fled.

Brightpaw purred. "We did it!"

Swiftpaw growled. "Those fox-hearts had better not set their paws here again."

Longtail nodded. "We won't have any herbs to bring back, but we will have some good news."

The patrol purred as they strode into their territory. Brightpaw thought of Cinderpaw. *Just wait until she hears this story!*