

THE LONGEST NIGHT

Graystripe reached up and hooked another pinecone onto the side of the elders' den.

Millie nudged him. "Move it a bit higher."

"I can't reach any higher," Graystripe puffed, his hind legs trembling.

ThunderClan were decorating the camp for the Longest Night celebrations. Larkkit and Leafkit were charging through the bracken at the edge of the camp, their pelts prickling with excitement. Honeykit sat beside Squirrelflight as the ThunderClan deputy poked a piece of holly above the entrance to the warriors' den. The white she-kit held a pinecone between her paws. "Can I hang this one up?" she asked shyly.

"Of course." Squirrelflight ducked down. "Climb onto my shoulders. Try to hook it next to the holly."

As Honeykit scrambled onto Squirrelflight's back, Lilyheart purred fondly. The queen was standing beside Millie. "I'm going to tuck a mouse for them each under the nest while they're sleeping," she confided.

Graystripe dropped onto all fours. "I've made a new moss ball for them," he whispered, one eye on the kits. "Jayfeather let me hide a few sprigs of catmint in it to make it more fun to play with."

Lilyheart blinked at him fondly. "Thanks, Graystripe. They'll love it."

As he spoke, Bramblestar called from Highledge. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather to hear my words." He eyed the kits sternly as they followed their Clanmates hopefully toward the clearing. "Not you. This news is for warriors' ears only."

As Graystripe followed his Clanmates toward the clearing to hear Bramblestar's words, he blinked sympathetically at Larkkit, Leafkit and Honeykit. Lilyheart was shooing them into the nursery. It

had been many moons since his own mother had hurried him away from Clan meetings. That was when Bluestar had been leader. Before Firestar had joined the Clan. Sadness pricked his heart as he thought of his old friend.

As Graystripe reached the shadow of Highledge, he sighed. The Longest Night wouldn't be the same without Firestar. When he and Firestar had been younger, they'd left gifts of shrews and voles outside the elders' den after the Clan was asleep. *Now I'm an elder.* He sat down behind Whitewing and Poppyfrost and wondered hopefully if any of the younger cats would leave gifts for him.

Millie nosed past Molewhisker and Berrynose and settled beside him. She glanced anxiously up at Bramblestar. "He looks worried."

Graystripe followed her gaze. The ThunderClan leader was pacing Highledge as the Clan gathered beneath.

Lilyheart squeezed in beside him. She glanced toward the nursery. "The kits are so excited about the Longest Day. I hope they keep quiet during the meeting." As she spoke, squeaks sounded from the bramble den.

"It's not fair," Leafkit complained.

"Why can't we listen?" Larkkit chimed.

"Hush!" Honeykit mewed anxiously. "Lilyheart said StarClan won't send us gifts if we're too noisy."

Lilyheart's pelt rippled self-consciously as Whitewing and Poppyfrost turned to glance at her sympathetically. "If only they didn't mew so loudly," she fretted.

"They're only kits," Graystripe reassured her. He could smell fresh mouse on her breath. His belly rumbled and he leaned closer to Millie. "I hope whatever is worrying Bramblestar doesn't take too long. I'm hungry." He eyed the prey pile longingly. There was only a skinny thrush left. The Clan was in the deepest part of leafbare. But tomorrow, the days would begin to lengthen and prey would start to return to the forest.

Bramblestar interrupted Graystripe's thoughts. He stared down from Highledge, anxiety glittering in his gaze. "StarClan has spoken to Jayfeather."

Graystripe turned to look at the ThunderClan medicine cat, who sat at the entrance to his den, his blind blue gaze unreadable as Bramblestar went on.

"Clear Sky warned that the Longest Night may never end."

Mews rippled uneasily through the Clan. A squeak of alarm sounded from the nursery. Leafkit was peering out. "Does that mean we won't get any gifts?"

Bramblestar's gaze flashed toward the kit. "I wish that's all it meant," he growled darkly.

Graystripe's belly tightened. *The Longest Night may never end.* What could StarClan mean? He looked at the sky. Thick snow clouds were gathering over the hollow.

Millie shifted closer, her soft fur brushing his, and called up to Bramblestar. "Did StarClan tell us what we should do?"

Bramblestar stared at her blankly. "They say that dawn will only return when we have found the star."

Graystripe struggled through the thick snow that swamped the clearing. The trenches, which ThunderClan had dug yesterday, were already filled with fresh snow so deep his paws couldn't reach the frozen earth beneath.

He shivered as ice-cold air pieced his pelt. The snow was still falling, the sky as dark as it had been since the Longest Night. Blizzards had ravaged the forest for three days. At least the wind had dropped this morning and, through the eerie silence, Graystripe could hear branches creak and snap under the weight of snow.

"I'm starving." Honeykit's plaintive mew sounded through the snow-blasted nursery wall.

"We'll be able to hunt soon," Lilyheart promised.

Graystripe hoped the queen was right. His own belly was

hollow with hunger. The blizzard had made hunting impossible.

A clump of snow landed beside him. He looked up. Bramblestar was gazing down from Highledge. "The blizzard's stopped," Graystripe observed hopefully. "Perhaps the Longest Night is finally over."

"We haven't found the star yet," Bramblestar growled darkly.

Graystripe's belly tightened as he remembered StarClan's prophecy. *The Longest Night will not end until you have found the star.*

The ThunderClan leader glanced at the sky. Darker clouds were moving in. "It looks like another blizzard is on the way."

"We should hunt while we can," Graystripe advised.

"I've already sent out two patrols." Bramblestar nodded toward the entrance where the snow had been churned by paws.

"I'll go and help them." Graystripe couldn't stay in his den while his Clanmates were starving.

"It's too cold," Bramblestar warned. "Your pelt's not as thick as it used to be. You should stay with Millie."

Graystripe glared at him. "My pelt is thick enough," he growled. "And in snow like this, prey will be hard to find. I want to help my Clan."

Bramblestar nodded. "Then I'll come with you." He scrambled down the rock tumble, spraying snow over Graystripe.

Graystripe shook it from his pelt. He scented an iron tang in the hardening wind. The fresh blizzard was closing in fast. "We don't have long."

Bramblestar caught his eye, fear glittering in the amber depths. "Let's hurry."

Together, they headed for the entrance.

Wind scoured snow from the branches as Graystripe and Bramblestar pushed through the strengthening wind.

Bramblestar slowed. "We should head back to camp."

“We haven’t caught any prey.” Graystripe shook out his pelt. Snow clung to his fur, frozen at the tips. His paws stung in the icy cold. “Lilyheart’s kits are starving.”

“We won’t help them by freezing to death in this storm.” Bramblestar gazed at him solemnly.

Graystripe pushed on through the snow. “There’s a mouse nest ahead. I found it moons ago. It was always a good place to hunt in leafbare.” He glanced over his shoulder at Bramblestar. “You head back.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“You need to check the other patrols got home safely. They’re more important to the Clan than me.” Graystripe saw hesitation flash in the ThunderClan leader’s eyes and knew he’d hit a nerve. “The Clan needs you. I can take care of myself,” he pressed. “The nest is only a few tail-lengths ahead. I’ll check it and head back to the hollow.”

“Ok,” Bramblestar conceded. “But don’t be long.” He dipped his head, then turned toward camp.

The wind roared now and rocked the trees. Snow whipped between the trunks. Graystripe narrowed his eyes as flakes stung his face. As he headed for a tall oak, memories flooded him. He’d hunted with Firestar on a day almost as snowy as this. They had both been ‘paws, in the days before they’d come to the lake, and had competed to see who could take the fattest mouse home to the prey pile.

Hunger growled in his belly, jerking him from his thoughts. Was the mouse nest still here? Would he find it if he dug deep enough?

A flash of fire caught his eye. Stiffening, he stared between the trees. Through the haze of swirling snow, he could see an orange pelt. A tom! What was another cat doing out here? Had a kittypet got lost in the storm?

The tom’s pelt seemed to sparkle as though stars were caught in his fur. Graystripe caught his breath as an old, familiar scent touched his nose. Two green eyes flashed as the tom turned to look at

him.

Graystripe's heart leapt. "Firestar!" He heaved himself through the thickening snow.

Firestar blinked as he saw him. "Graystripe? Is that you?"

"Of course it's me!" Graystripe reached his old friend, joy flooding his chest. "What are you doing in the forest?"

Firestar stared at him bleakly "I miss my old Clanmates."

"But you have StarClan now." Graystripe stared in surprise. Who would want to leave the sunny meadows of endless hunting to come here?

Firestar didn't seem to hear him. Affection shone in his round green eyes. "It's so good to see you. How's ThunderClan? How was the Longest Night? Did you leave treats for the elders?"

Graystripe touched his nose gently to Firestar's cheek. "I'm an elder now, remember?"

"You?" Firestar blinked at him.

"You must know that," Graystripe mewed softly.

Firestar closed his eyes as though covering grief.

Graystripe pressed against him. "It's good to see you too, old friend. But you can't stay here. Go back to StarClan. ThunderClan is never far away. We keep you in our hearts and always will."

The stars in Firestar's pelt seemed to sparkle more fiercely as the storm whipped around them. "But I miss you."

"You have to go back." The prophecy flashed in Graystripe's thoughts. The Longest Night will not end until you have found the star. "StarClan need you. We have Bramblestar now. He's a great leader. You chose well when you made him deputy. ThunderClan are safe with him."

"I know." Firestar touched his muzzle to Graystripe's cheek. "But it's hard to leave."

"I miss you," Graystripe breathed. "But I'll be with you soon

enough.” As he spoke, Firestar’s fiery pelt began to fade. The stars in his fur dimmed and blinked out. He grew pale until only pawmarks showed where he’d stood.

“Goodbye.” Grief swamped Graystripe as the wind snatched Firestar’s lingering scent. Suddenly, the snow ceased. The wind eased and the trees grew still. Silence gripped the forest. “I found the star.” The blizzard was over. The Longest Night had ended at last. Graystripe’s heart lifted as he heard the sound of prey scrabbling beneath the snow. Mice! Lilyheart’s kits would eat today. The memory of Firestar burned bright in his thoughts as he began to dig eagerly toward the mouse nest.