

# WARRIORS

SUPER EDITION

## IVYPOOL'S HEART



ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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HUNTER

**HARPER**

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# Dedication

*For Roberta*

## Allegiances

### **THUNDERCLAN**

#### LEADER

**SQUIRRELSTAR**—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes and one white paw

#### DEPUTY

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

#### MEDICINE CATS

**JAYFEATHER**—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

**ALDERHEART**—dark ginger tom with amber eyes

#### WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

**WHITEWING**—white she-cat with green eyes

**BIRCHFALL**—light brown tabby tom

**SUNBEAM**—brown-and-white tabby she-cat

**MOUSEWHISKER**—gray-and-white tom

**BAYSHINE**—golden tabby tom

**APPRENTICE, BRISTLEPAW** (orange-and-white tabby she-cat)

**POPPYFROST**—pale tortoiseshell-



and-white she-cat

**LILYHEART**—small, dark tabby she-cat with white patches and blue eyes

**NIGHTHEART**—black tom

**APPRENTICE, WAFFLEPAW** (gray-and-brown tom)

**BUMBLESTRIPE**—very pale gray tom with black stripes

**CHERRYFALL**—ginger she-cat

**MOLEWHISKER**—brown-and-cream tom

**APPRENTICE, STEMPAW** (orange tabby tom)

**CINDERHEART**—gray tabby she-cat

**FINCHLIGHT**—tortoiseshell she-cat

**APPRENTICE, GRAYPAW** (white tom with gray spots)

**BLOSSOMFALL**—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with petal-shaped white patches

**EAGLEWING**—ginger she-cat

**MYRTLEBLOOM**—pale brown she-cat

**DEWNOSE**—gray-and-white tom  
**THRIFTEAR**—dark gray she-cat  
**STORMCLOUD**—gray tabby tom  
**HOLLYTUFT**—black she-cat  
**FERNSONG**—yellow tabby tom  
**HONEYFUR**—white she-cat with  
yellow splotches  
**SPARKPELT**—orange tabby she-cat  
**SORRELSTRIPE**—dark brown she-  
cat  
**TWIGBRANCH**—gray she-cat with  
green eyes  
**FINLEAP**—brown tom  
**SHELLFUR**—tortoiseshell tom  
**FERNSTRIPE**—gray tabby she-cat  
**PLUMSTONE**—black-and-ginger  
she-cat  
**FLIPCLAW**—brown tabby tom  
**LEAFSHADE**—tortoiseshell she-cat  
**LIONBLAZE**—golden tabby tom  
with amber eyes  
**SPOTFUR**—spotted tabby she-cat

## QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing

kits)

**DAISY**—cream long-furred cat  
from the horseplace

## ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now  
retired)

**BRAMBLECLAW**—dark brown tabby  
tom with amber eyes

**THORNCLAW**—golden-brown tabby  
tom

**CLOUDTAIL**—long-haired white  
tom with blue eyes

**BRIGHTHEART**—white she-cat with  
ginger patches

**BRACKENFUR**—golden-brown  
tabby tom

## **SHADOWCLAN**

### LEADER

**TIGERSTAR**—dark brown tabby tom

### DEPUTY

**CLOVERFOOT**—gray tabby she-cat

### MEDICINE CATS

**PUDDLESHINE**—brown tom with  
white splotches

**SHADOWSIGHT**—gray tabby tom

## WARRIORS

**TAWNYPELT**—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

**STONEWING**—white tom

**SCORCHFUR**—dark gray tom with slashed ears

**FLAXFOOT**—brown tabby tom

**SNOWBIRD**—pure white she-cat with green eyes

**YARROWLEAF**—ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

**GRASSHEART**—pale brown tabby she-cat

**WHORLPELT**—gray-and-white tom

**HOPWHISKER**—calico she-cat

**BLAZEFIRE**—white-and-ginger tom

**FLOWERSTEM**—silver she-cat

**SNAKETooth**—honey-colored tabby she-cat

**SLATEFUR**—sleek gray tom

**APPRENTICE, BIRCHPAW** (light brown tom)

**POUNCESTEP**—gray tabby she-cat

**LIGHTLEAP**—brown tabby she-cat

**GULLSWOOP**—white she-cat

**SPIRECLAW**—black-and-white tom

**FRINGEWHISKER**—white she-cat  
with brown splotches

**DOVEWING**—pale gray she-cat with  
green eyes

## QUEENS

**CINNAMONTAIL**—brown tabby she-cat with white paws (mother to Firkit, a brown tabby tom; Streamkit, a gray tabby she-kit; Bloomkit, a black she-kit; and Whisperkit, a gray tom)

## ELDERS

**OAKFUR**—small brown tom

## **SKYCLAN**

## LEADER

**LEAFSTAR**—brown-and-cream  
tabby she-cat with amber eyes

## DEPUTY

**HAWKWING**—dark gray tom with  
yellow eyes

## MEDICINE CATS

**FRECKLEWISH**—mottled light  
brown tabby she-cat with spotted  
legs

**FIDGETFLAKE**—black-and-white tom

MEDIATOR **TREE**—yellow tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS **SPARROWPELT**—dark brown tabby tom

**MACGYVER**—black-and-white tom

**DEWSPRING**—sturdy gray tom

**ROOTSPRING**—yellow tom

**NEEDLECLAW**—black-and-white she-cat

**PLUMWILLOW**—dark gray she-cat

**SAGENOSE**—pale gray tom

**KITESCRATCH**—reddish-brown tom

**HARRYBROOK**—gray tom

**CHERRYTAIL**—fluffy tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

**CLOUDMIST**—white she-cat with yellow eyes

**TURTLECRAWL**—tortoiseshell she-cat

**RABBITLEAP**—brown tom

**WRENFLIGHT**—golden tabby she-cat

**REEDCLAW**—small pale tabby she-cat

**APPRENTICE, BEETLEPAW** (white-and-black tabby tom)

**MINTFUR**—gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

**NETTLEPLASH**—pale brown tom

**TINYCLOUD**—small white she-cat

**PALESKY**—black-and-white she-cat

**VIOLETSKIN**—black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

**BELLALFANG**—pale orange she-cat with green eyes

**QUAILFEATHER**—white tom with crow-black ears

**PIGEONFOOT**—gray-and-white she-cat

**GRAVELNOSE**—tan tom

**SUNNYPELT**—ginger she-cat

**APPRENTICE, BEEPAW** (white-and-tabby she-cat)

**NECTARSONG**—brown she-cat

## QUEENS

**BLOSSOMHEART**—ginger-and-white

she-cat (mother to Ridgekit, a reddish she-kit with a white nose, and Duskit, a white tom with brown paws and ears)

ELDERS

**FALLOWFERN**—pale brown she-cat who has lost her hearing

**WINDCLAN**

LEADER

**HARESTAR**—brown-and-white tom

DEPUTY

**CROWFEATHER**—dark gray tom

MEDICINE  
CATS

**KESTRELFIGHT**—mottled gray tom with white splotches like kestrel feathers

**APPRENTICE, WHISTLEPAW** (gray tabby she-cat)

WARRIORS

**NIGHTCLOUD**—black she-cat

**BRINDLEWING**—mottled brown she-cat

**APPLESHINE**—yellow tabby she-cat

**LEAFTAIL**—dark tabby tom with amber eyes

**WOODSONG**—brown she-cat



**EMBERFOOT**—gray tom with two dark paws

**BREEZEPILT**—black tom with amber eyes

**HEATHERTAIL**—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

**CROUCHFOOT**—ginger tom

**SONGLEAP**—tortoiseshell she-cat

**SEDGEWHISKER**—light brown tabby she-cat

**FLUTTERFOOT**—brown-and-white tom

**SLIGHTFOOT**—black tom with white flash on his chest

**OATCLAW**—pale brown tabby tom

**HOOTWHISKER**—dark gray tom

## QUEENS

**LARKWING**—pale brown tabby she-cat (mother to Stripekit, a gray tabby tom, and Brookkit, a black-and-white tom)

**FEATHERPELT**—gray tabby she-cat (mother to Leafkit, a white she-kit with gray spots; Branchkit, a white

tomkit; and Grasskit, an auburn she-kit)

ELDERS

**WHISKERNOSE**—light brown tom

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

**RIVERCLAN**

LEADER

**SPLASHTAIL**—brown tabby tom

DEPUTY

**BERRYHEART**—black-and-white she-cat

MEDICINE  
CATS

**MOTHWING**—dappled golden she-cat

**PODLIGHT**—gray-and-white tom

WARRIORS

**DUSKFUR**—brown tabby she-cat

**HOLLOWSPRING**—black tom

**SPARROWTAIL**—large brown tabby tom

**MINNOWTAIL**—dark gray-and-white she-cat

**MALLOWNOSE**—light brown tabby tom

**SHIMMERPELT**—silver she-cat

**LIZARDTAIL**—light brown tom

**SNEEZECLOUD**—gray-and-white  
tom

**BRACKENPELT**—tortoiseshell she-  
cat

**FOGNOSE**—gray-and-white she-cat

**ICEWING**—white she-cat with blue  
eyes

**APPRENTICE, MISTPAW**

(tortoiseshell-and-white tabby  
she-cat)

**OWLNOSE**—brown tabby tom

**HOLLOWSRING**—black tom

**GORSECLAW**—white tom with gray  
ears

**SPARROWTAIL**—large brown tabby  
tom

**NIGHTSKY**—dark gray she-cat with  
blue eyes

**BREEZEHEART**—brown-and-white  
she-cat

**APPRENTICE, GRAYPAW** (silver tabby  
tom)

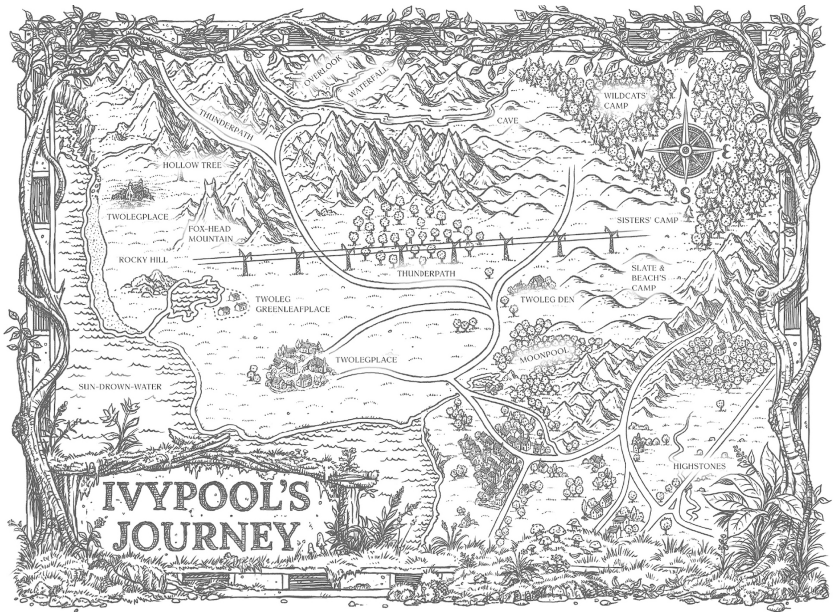
QUEENS

**HAVENPELT**—black-and-white she-cat (mother to Floatkit, a tawny she-kit; Rapidkit, a gray-and-white she-kit; and Troutkit, a brown-and-white spotted tom)

ELDERS

**MOSSPELT**—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

## Map



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## Prologue



*A stiff wind was blowing, making Whistlepaw's eyes water and flattening her fur against her sides. She stood on a rocky ridge, digging her claws hard into the scanty soil as she struggled to keep her balance. From the dizzy height, she stared out across an endless stretch of water, so huge that she couldn't see the other side.*

*Is this what Crowfeather calls the sun-drown-place?* she asked herself, remembering the stories the WindClan deputy told about his journey so many seasons before. Then recognition swept over her. *This again . . . I've had this dream before.*

The surface of the water was continually shifting, glittering in the sunlight. For a few heartbeats Whistlepaw gazed out across it, drinking in its beauty. But when she looked down to where the cliff fell away beneath her paws, she saw sharp rocks poking out of the water, with the waves churning around them, tossing spray high into the air.

Struggling against panic, Whistlepaw dug her claws in even harder, imagining herself swept from her precarious paw hold, flailing helplessly in the air before being dashed against the rocks and overwhelmed by the battering waves.

Then another sound pierced Whistlepaw's ears: the voices of kits, crying plaintively as if they were begging for help. Their cries were distorted, mingled with the noise of wind and water and echoing all along the ridge.

Whistlepaw felt her heart overwhelmed with pity. *Where are they?* she wondered, gazing all around her but seeing nothing except the cliff and the fearsome expanse of water.

Before she could begin to search, a crushing sensation swept over her. She felt as though she were being buried under a massive weight of earth, cut off forever from light and warmth. It was guilt, as though she were responsible for the danger and terror of the kits.

*But it's not my fault!* she wailed silently. *I would never hurt them!*

Fighting against the sensation, Whistlepaw was still trying to work out where the kits' cries were coming from when a shadow fell over her. She looked up to see thick clouds surging across the sky, so fast that the sunlight was cut off in heartbeats. Thunder rumbled above her head, and the wind buffeted her with fierce gusts. A torrent of rain fell from the sky, soaking Whistlepaw's fur between one breath and the next.

Then she saw him: a brown tabby tom, desperately trying to keep his balance on a narrow ledge halfway up the cliff. He whipped his head around, trying to follow the direction of the kits' cries, and Whistlepaw realized that the suffocating sense of guilt was coming from him.

*But who is he?*

Suddenly the tabby tom stopped searching and gazed at her directly, a solemn purpose in his eyes. "You must make it right," he told her, his voice rising above the clamor of the storm. "Or they are lost forever."

*Lost forever?* Whistlepaw wondered. *Make what right? I've never seen these cats before!*

As he finished speaking, a loud yowl rose from somewhere in the distance. "Come down! Come down!"

Looking beyond the tabby tom, Whistlepaw spotted a group of about ten cats standing on a stretch of pebbly ground farther along the water's edge. It looked like the end of a trail that turned away from the water, through a gap in the cliff. Behind the cats a range of hills led to the foot of a tall mountain. Looking up, Whistlepaw could see a bald rocky top in the shape of a fox's head.

"The storm is getting worse!" another of the group caterwauled. "It's now or never! Stay, and we all die."

"We can come back for them!" a third cat screeched. "But we have to go *now!*"

Once again Whistlepaw heard the plaintive voices of the kits. They sounded closer now; she spotted a cave opening in the cliff face only a tail-length below where she was standing. Were they trapped? A horrible feeling came over her; she remembered when Leafkit had recently gotten trapped in the nursery by a falling log. There was nothing worse than the cry of a scared, trapped kit.

"They're here! Right here! *I'm coming!*" she yowled, struggling to climb down, her claws seeking the tiniest cracks in the rock.

But when she reached the cave, Whistlepaw saw that it was empty, only stretching back a couple of tail-lengths. And now the pitiful mewling seemed to come from somewhere even lower, below a sheer slab of rock that offered no paw holds at all.

The storm still surged around her, the wind whipping at her pelt. The rain had soaked her to the skin, and her waterlogged fur weighed on her and made it harder to move. She felt that at any moment a gust of wind might lift her away from the narrow crack where she clung and drive her down into the churning water.

Looking up, Whistlepaw saw the group of cats leaving. They had emerged on top of the cliffs and were following a trail that led into the hills, in the direction of the fox-head mountain. The tabby tom, who brought up the rear, paused and looked back over his shoulder, fixing Whistlepaw with a mournful gaze. The kits were still wailing, and in spite of the danger, Whistlepaw was astonished that the full-grown cats were leaving them behind.

While Whistlepaw watched the departing cats, the clouds above them seemed to peel back. In the stretch of clear sky, she saw a tangle of curving vines that appeared to enclose a cloud split by a claw of lightning. It didn't look real at all, much simpler than real clouds or vines. Whistlepaw was reminded of the odd marks that Twolegs left here and there around the lake territories.

Silence had fallen while Whistlepaw gazed at the strange symbol, but now the wailing of the kits broke out again, this time seeming to come from just above her head. "I'm coming!" Whistlepaw yowled, desperately scrambling upward.

But before she could reach the spot where she thought she heard the cries, her paws lost their grip on the slick rock. Letting out a screech of terror, Whistlepaw felt the wind snatch her into the air. She caught a glimpse of the spiky rocks as she fell . . .

. . . and landed lightly on her paws on the moss-covered ground of a forest. Her pelt was dry; the blustering of the storm, the kits' plaintive cries, had sunk into silence.

*Where am I now?* In front of Whistlepaw stood a tree, strangely hollowed out, as if it had been burned from the inside. She stared at it for several moments, then padded softly toward it. The outer shell seemed to wrap around her, and suddenly she was inside it, standing in thick darkness.

When she had experienced the dream before, it had always ended here. But this time it continued. Gradually the darkness lifted; Whistlepaw could feel cool air moving around her and hear the gentle lapping of waves. As the light strengthened, she realized that she was standing on her own familiar lakeshore, with her back to the water and RiverClan's territory stretching out in front of her. She waited, all her senses alert for what the dream was trying to tell her.

A sudden yowl startled her, and suddenly she saw Mistystar, the deceased RiverClan leader, lunging toward her out of a clump of fern. Her jaws were wide with anguish. "The debt must be paid, or . . ."

Whistlepaw realized that Mistystar wasn't looking at her. Instead, her gaze was fixed at something over Whistlepaw's shoulder.

Whirling around, panic spiking all along her spine, Whistlepaw saw the stream that bordered the RiverClan camp. But instead of the gentle ripple of water, the current was sluggish, and a harsh tang caught the back of Whistlepaw's throat.

The stream was flowing with blood.



## Chapter I



*The night was still dark, though above WindClan's moor the sky was growing pale with the first hint of dawn. Ivypool let out a sigh as she watched the reflections of the stars glinting on the surface of the lake.*

*So many warrior spirits, but never the one I long to see.*

The cat crouching beside her stirred a little. "Whenever I come here," he began, "I remember the first time I saw Bristlefrost. The time when I'd fallen through the ice, and she rescued me. She was so brave!"

"You're right, Rootspring," Ivypool responded. "She was one of the bravest cats I've ever known. I would say that even if she hadn't been my kit. My life seems . . . hollow, without her. I know I've said that before," she added. "I just can't seem to move on. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for. I know exactly what you mean," Rootspring agreed. "Just like I keep thinking about how, before she died, I'd decided to leave my Clan so I could be with her. We would have been mates—we *should* have been mates. We should have had kits, and lived out our lives as warriors until we joined the elders together."

"You would have had beautiful kits," Ivypool murmured. "I can see them now. Brave little ThunderClan warriors, with SkyClan's talent for leaping and climbing. Gray and yellow fur mingling, and Bristlefrost's blue-green eyes." After a moment's pause, she added, "Rootspring, I want you to know that it helps me so much, meeting you here to talk about Bristlefrost. I don't think any cat but you understands the way I feel, not even her father."

"It helps me, too," Rootspring mewed. "I don't know what our Clans would think if they knew we get together like this, and to be honest, I don't much care." He hunched his shoulders, glaring defiantly ahead as if he were confronting an accuser.

"I feel the same," Ivypool told him, her heart swelling with affection for the younger cat. "I know I should be ashamed to say it, but somehow my Clan doesn't seem important anymore. When I was younger, I really longed to be an important cat, serving ThunderClan. But now that Squirrelstar has chosen me to be her deputy, I can't feel excited about it. It's as if some cat gave me a juicy piece of fresh-kill, but when I bite into it, it tastes like dead leaves. Everything seems meaningless after what happened to Bristlefrost."

"I understand." Rootspring's voice was full of sympathy as he turned to gaze into Ivypool's eyes. "There's a SkyClan she-cat, Wrenflight, who seems to like me, but the

thought of taking a mate who isn't Bristlefrost just seems ridiculous. Somehow I can't move on." He let out a deep sigh. "Ivypool, will we always feel like this?"

"I think it's so hard to shake our grief because Bristlefrost died in the Dark Forest," Ivypool replied, her chest aching with sorrow. "That means she's gone—gone forever. We can't even look forward to seeing her spirit in StarClan."

Ivypool felt a sad silence envelop her and Rootspring. As she sat remembering her daughter—her beauty, her grace, her courage and determination—she gradually became aware of Rootspring's sturdy figure emerging from the darkness, and when she looked out over the lake, she saw the surface of the water warming to a golden sheen. Across the lake, a blaze of light above the moor told her that the sun was about to rise.

"Mouse dung!" she gasped, springing to her paws. "I'm late! Rootspring, I've got to go."

She heard Rootspring call out a farewell behind her as she took off through the forest. Her paws barely touched the ground as she raced between the trees, dodging around bramble thickets and clumps of dried stems.

When she reached the ThunderClan camp, Ivypool slid in through the dirtplace tunnel, hoping that her absence hadn't been noticed. It was a vain hope. It looked as if most of the Clan was standing around in the middle of the stone hollow, their paws shifting impatiently as they waited for her to assign patrols.

"Sorry," she panted as she skidded to a halt. "I think I must have eaten a piece of crow-food. My stomach has been bothering me all night."

None of her Clanmates looked particularly impressed by her excuse. Ivypool couldn't blame them. If she'd really had stomach troubles, she would have gone to Jayfeather or Alderheart and asked for a bit of chervil root or a juniper berry. Besides, this wasn't the first time she had been late for her duties because of meeting Rootspring to talk about Bristlefrost and grieve together.

"Right," she meowed, trying to sound efficient. "Dawn patrol: Birchfall, you lead it, and take Lilyheart and Bumblestripe. Lionblaze, take a hunting patrol with Stormclowd and Sorrelstripe, and Sparkpelt, you lead another with Twigbranch and Shellfur."

As the cats she had named began to move off, Ivypool hoped for a moment to catch her breath, only to brace herself as she spotted Squirrelstar padding across the camp toward her.

*Oh, StarClan, I'm in trouble now!*

But when Squirrelstar reached Ivypool's side, she said nothing about the late patrols. There was a troubled expression in her Clan leader's green eyes, and her fur looked as if she had missed her morning grooming.

"Are you okay?" Ivypool asked.

"I hardly slept at all last night," the Clan leader replied. "I'm worried about Nightheart, Sunbeam, and Frostpaw. You know they went to RiverClan to spy on

Splashtail last night—well, they're not back. I don't know where they are."

Anxiety gathered deep in Ivypool's belly. Even though Splashtail had named himself leader of RiverClan, Frostpaw, the RiverClan medicine cat apprentice, had accused him of trying to murder her. Not every cat believed that StarClan had given him nine lives. *I certainly don't*. There wouldn't be much hope for Frostpaw and the others if Splashtail had caught them on RiverClan territory. "What do you think we should do?" she asked.

"I don't know," Squirrelstar replied. "I *want* to go to RiverClan and tear that mange-pelt Splashtail apart with my own claws. But that's probably not the wisest plan."

"No," Ivypool agreed. She had known Squirrelstar for a long time, and was well aware that the new ThunderClan leader was always eager to speak up or take action for what she thought was right. Now that Squirrelstar had been named Clan leader, she needed to learn how to temper her emotions, however difficult she might find it. "But all three cats are clever and resourceful," she continued, "and Frostpaw knows RiverClan well. I think it would be best to wait, rather than going after them and maybe giving them away. Who knows what Splashtail would do if he found them? Things are tense enough between the Clans already."

Squirrelstar nodded, flexing her claws as if despite her agreement she was still impatient to take action. She opened her jaws, but before she could speak there was a warning yowl from Thriftfear, who was on guard at the entrance to the thorn tunnel.

Ivypool turned toward the sound in time to see Hootwhisker of WindClan emerge into the camp, followed by Heathertail and the WindClan medicine cat, Kestrelflight. Stormcloud brought up the rear, escorting the newcomers.

"Squirrelstar!" Hootwhisker exclaimed, bounding across the camp to the Clan leader's side. "Thank StarClan you're awake!" He gave a quick nod of respect. "We're here on urgent business."

"We found them waiting by the border stream," Stormcloud meowed, padding up to join his leader. "They said they had to see you."

"It's important," Kestrelflight added with a polite dip of his head.

Squirrelstar let her glance flick to Ivypool and then back to the medicine cat. "Okay, spit it out," she mewled.

"Whistlepaw has had a disturbing vision," Kestrelflight began. "At the end of it she found herself standing on the lakeshore on RiverClan territory. One of the streams there was running with blood."

"It wasn't just a bad dream?" Ivypool asked. StarClan knew, she'd had plenty of bad dreams since Bristlefrost's tragic death. And Whistlepaw had been injured recently. *Perhaps that has caused strange dreams?*

But Kestrelflight shook his head. "I know Whistlepaw is only my apprentice, but she can tell a true vision from a dream."

Ivypool could see the growing concern in Squirrelstar's eyes, and wondered whether a river of blood in RiverClan might mean that something terrible had happened to the three missing cats. Or perhaps she was remembering a long-ago prophecy, "Before there is peace, blood will spill blood, and the lake will run red." That prophecy, too, had centered on RiverClan, and had been fulfilled by Bramblestar killing his brother Hawkfrost and spilling his blood into the lake. A wail of dismay rose in Ivypool's throat, but she choked it down, unwilling to show the slightest sign of weakness before cats from another Clan.

"So what do you want us to do?" Squirrelstar asked Kestrelflight.

"I'm calling an emergency medicine-cat meeting at the Moonpool tonight," the WindClan medicine cat explained. "Please could you let Jayfeather and Alderheart know?"

"Do you need to speak to them?" Squirrelstar asked.

Kestrelflight shook his head. "No, I'm in a hurry to visit the other Clans. Just pass on the message, please."

"I will." Squirrelstar gave a brisk nod. "They'll certainly be there."

The WindClan cats made their farewells, and Stormcloud escorted them out of the camp. Squirrelstar watched them go, letting out a sigh, half exasperated, half anxious.

"What do you think this means?" she asked. "It's terrible timing. The Clans are already in so much trouble over Splashtail."

"Perhaps this is *about* Splashtail," Ivypool suggested, suppressing a shiver of fear for the cats who had not returned. "Maybe Whistlepaw's vision will lead us to some sort of plan for dealing with him. She saw a river of blood in RiverClan, after all. You can't get much clearer than that."

"I hope you're right." Squirrelstar didn't sound hopeful. "But I'm not holding my breath."

That night, Ivypool shifted uneasily in her nest. All around her she could hear the soft breath of sleeping cats; her mate, Fernsong, was curled up next to her, his tail resting on her shoulder. Deep peace filled the warriors' den.

Ivypool's bedding was thick, soft with moss and bracken, but she might as well have been trying to sleep in a bramble thicket for all the rest she was getting. In the end she gave up, eased away from Fernsong, and slipped out through the outer branches of the warriors' den to gaze up at the stars.

She wondered what it would be like to know that a cat you had loved and lost was up there in the sky. Ivypool had never lost a cat like that. Her mother and father were still alive; so was her mate and her sister, Dovewing—even though she had gone to ShadowClan to be with Tigerstar—and her mentor, Cinderheart. She wasn't sure whether she was grieving so desperately for Bristlefrost because of the way she died, lost forever in the Dark Forest, or whether loss always felt like that. But if that was



the case, how did cats ever get over it? Would you be able to sense which one of the glittering points of lights was the spirit of the one you mourned?

*That would be comforting, but there's no comfort for me. Bristlefrost isn't up there. She isn't anywhere.*

In her mind Ivypool could imagine her brilliant kit, always so brave, so loyal, so ready to give herself to her Clan. Why hadn't Ivypool stopped her from going into the Dark Forest to fight the impostor, Ashfur? Now she shuddered, remembering her own time there in the Place of No Stars, spying for her Clan. She had known how dangerous it was.

The memory of a wiry brown tom rose up in front of her, accusation in his amber eyes. Antpelt. She had woken him from dreaming when he had been severely wounded by Thistleclaw, in the hope that he could be healed in the living world. But his wounds grew infected, and he returned to the Dark Forest as a spirit. There Ivypool had been forced to kill him to prove her loyalty, and that must mean that he was lost forever, too. Sometimes she still thought she could scent his blood on her paws.

*And I sent Bristlefrost there! How could I have been so stupid?*

As the bitter memory surged over her, Ivypool heard a stir of movement behind her and turned in time to see her mate, Fernsong, emerging from the den, his yellow pelt pale in the moonlight. He padded over to her side and gave her ear a lick.

"Have the medicine cats returned yet?" he asked.

Ivypool shook her head. "Not yet."

"I wonder what Whistlepaw's vision means," Fernsong mused. "A river of blood . . . That must have something to do with RiverClan. There's already been more than enough blood shed over there."

"Maybe." Shocking herself, Ivypool realized that she wasn't all that worried about Whistlepaw's dream. It didn't seem to have much to do with her. All her anxiety was for her Clanmates and Frostpaw, who still hadn't returned.

Fernsong stood silently by her side while Ivypool raised her head again to look at the stars. "Are you thinking about Bristlefrost?" he asked after a while.

"I'm always thinking about Bristlefrost," Ivypool replied.

Fernsong hesitated for a moment. "I often think of her, too," he mewed at last. "But Ivypool, I'm worried about you. You're so eaten up by grief that somehow you're not . . . not really here in the life of the Clan anymore."

Sheer fury gripped Ivypool like a claw. How could Fernsong expect her to put aside her grief for Bristlefrost so easily? Had *he*? It took all her self-control not to fling herself at her mate, snarling and slashing. "You don't understand!" she spat at him.

Fernsong gave her a long look, blinking compassionately. In spite of her angry response, there was only love in his eyes. "Perhaps I don't. I know how much I miss Bristlefrost. But I don't know how it feels for you." He paused, tilting his head. "Does Rootspring understand?" he asked eventually.

At his words, Ivypool's anger drained away like water into dry ground. *He knows about Rootspring?* She had never told Fernsong that she was slipping away at night to meet Bristlefoot's would-be mate. Shock kept her silent, and she stared at Fernsong with her jaws gaping.

"I've noticed you several times sneaking out of camp just before dawn," her mate went on, his gaze calm. "So one night I followed you. I know that you're meeting with Rootspring to talk about your grief."

Ivypool swallowed, finding her voice. "Are you angry with me?"

"No." Fernsong's voice was soft and loving. "I trust you, Ivypool. But I wish you had trusted me enough to tell me. And . . . I don't mind that you're talking to another cat about your grief, but I'm not sure it's helping either of you let go."

"Let go?" Ivypool repeated, her anger surging over her again. "Have you let go, Fernsong? Because if you have, it shows that you don't care enough about Bristlefoot!"

"Remember that I helped look after Bristlefoot in the nursery when she was a tiny kit." Fernsong's voice was measured and even. "I loved her very much. I remember every hair on her pelt, every paw step. I remember how she loved to play moss ball, and how proud she was when she caught her first mouse. I miss her more than I can say. But she's gone, and we have to find a way to live in the present."

Ivypool didn't know how to respond. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to claw Fernsong's ears or press herself against him, wailing like a lost kit.

Before she could say anything, she spotted movement at the mouth of the thorn tunnel, and Alderheart emerged into the camp, with Jayfeather padding just behind him. Their shoulders were slumped and their tails trailing in the dust of the camp floor, as if they were utterly exhausted.

Squirrelstar must have been watching from the Highledge, because as soon as the medicine cats appeared, she came leaping down the tumbled rocks to meet them in the middle of the camp. Though they were too far away for Ivypool to hear what was said, it was clear that the Clan leader was eagerly questioning the medicine cats.

Ivypool cast a last, uncertain glance at Fernsong, who nodded gently, his gaze full of love and understanding. Then she padded over to join the group.

When she reached their side, questions were still pouring from Squirrelstar like a stream in flood. "What was the meeting about? What did Whistlepaw see, exactly? And how serious is it?"

Ivypool thought she could see defeat in the medicine cats' drooping heads and whiskers, in every hair of their pelts.

"It's serious," Alderheart replied. "Serious enough to tear the Clans apart if we don't do something."



## Chapter 2



*The moon was bright when Squirrelstar* led the way across WindClan territory en route to the Gathering island. The two medicine cats followed her, and Ivypool brought up the rear. The air was still; moonlight traced a glimmering path across the lake, and the warriors of StarClan were reflected fitfully in the shifting surface of the water. Ivypool felt it was a night to find a comfortable spot to sit and drink in the quiet beauty, not to meet to discuss the meaning of a vision of blood.

*But Harestar has called an emergency Gathering, she thought apprehensively, so we have to be there. Maybe now we'll find out what is really going on.*

When Alderheart and Jayfeather had returned from the Moonpool the night before, Squirrelstar had taken them up into her den. Ivypool had felt frustrated that she hadn't been asked to join them; she had returned to her nest with Fernsong and finally managed to get a short snatch of troubled sleep.

The following morning, Squirrelstar had explained to her how much she and the medicine cats understood.

"It's something to do with cats who have been forgotten and disappeared from StarClan," the Clan leader had meowed. "Alderheart and Jayfeather both think that it's linked with danger to the Clans, and we have to do something about it right away."

Ivypool didn't understand. It all sounded very vague; if the cats had been forgotten and disappeared, how was it possible to know anything about them? She knew that if the medicine cats were worried, then she should be worried too, but these days she found it hard to think very much about StarClan or the Dark Forest, except for the terrible way in which Bristlefrost had died.

As the ThunderClan cats passed the horseplace, Ivypool spotted the WindClan cats ahead of them. Harestar was leading the way across the tree-bridge, followed by Kestrelflight and Whistlepaw. The WindClan deputy, Crowfeather, his dark gray pelt barely visible in the darkness, waited at the end of the bridge, scanning the thickly growing bushes of RiverClan territory, until his Clanmates were safely across; then he bounded lightly after them.

Harestar and Squirrelstar had barely had time to leap into the Great Oak when there was rustling in the bushes that surrounded the clearing and Tigerstar pushed his way through. Cloverfoot, the ShadowClan deputy, followed him, along with the medicine cats Puddleshine and Shadowsight. Ivypool blinked in surprise to see that another cat was with them: Tigerstar's mate, Dovewing, Ivypool's own sister, who had left ThunderClan to be with Tigerstar.

*It's good to see her. Maybe we can talk later.*

"This had better be worth our time," Tigerstar growled as he sprang into the tree.

"Believe me, it will be," Harestar responded, a grim twist to his mouth.

SkyClan followed hard on the paws of the ShadowClan cats, and Ivypool saw that Leafstar too had brought extra cats with her: Rootspring and the young warrior Wrenflight, a graceful gray-and-white she-cat. She settled down close to Rootspring; Ivypool couldn't help noticing her besotted look, and remembered what Rootspring had told her beside the lake. A pang of sympathy gripped her briefly for Wrenflight, in love with a cat who could never return her feelings.

Leafstar leaped up to join the other leaders, while her deputy, Hawkwing, took his place on the oak roots, along with Crowfeather and Cloverfoot. Ivypool padded across and found a place beside the others. Frecklewish and Fidgetflake from SkyClan sat nearby with the other medicine cats.

Ivypool could see several cats exchanging confused glances, and she heard annoyed muttering. "Why are we doing this when we still have the mess with Splashtail to deal with?" Crowfeather asked, loud enough for the leaders to hear. Several cats turned toward him, to take in his bristling fur and annoyed expression, but no cat responded.

"I have called this Gathering because of a vision Whistlepaw had," Harestar announced, opening the proceedings.

"Just a moment," Leafstar interrupted. "Shouldn't we wait for RiverClan?"

Tigerstar lashed his tail. "For StarClan's sake!"

"I don't think RiverClan will come," Alderheart pointed out from where he sat with the other medicine cats. "Mothwing and Podlight weren't at the medicine-cat meeting last night."

"Whatever is going on in RiverClan," Frecklewish added, "it seems as if Splashtail is pulling them away from the rest of us."

Harestar nodded agreement with a frustrated twitch of his tail. "When I sent cats to invite RiverClan to this Gathering, they came back convinced that Splashstar wasn't going to send any cat."

Ivypool cringed to hear Harestar referring to Splashtail as if he were a real leader approved by StarClan, but she had to remind herself that some cats accepted him; Harestar wouldn't want to let the meeting dissolve into wrangling.

"Then we have a problem," Jayfeather snapped. "What Kestrelflight is going to tell us affects every Clan."

"Then Kestrelflight had better speak," Tigerstar growled.

Kestrelflight rose to his paws from where he sat among the other medicine cats. "This isn't my story to tell," he meowed. "My apprentice, Whistlepaw, has had the same dream for several nights now, and a couple of nights ago it contained what seemed like a warning to the Clans. Whistlepaw, tell every cat what you dreamed."

The apprentice rose; she was a bit hunched, her fur still smeared with poultices and cobweb from the injuries she'd gotten trying to rescue a kit during a recent storm. Her tabby fur was bristling slightly with tension. Ivypool thought that she looked thoroughly overwhelmed to find herself addressing so many important cats.

"I dreamed I was standing on the top of a cliff during a storm," she began. "At the bottom there was a huge stretch of water—I guessed it was the sun-drown-water—churning around spiky rocks. I could hear kits wailing for help, but I couldn't find them. The sound seemed to be coming from different directions. I felt so terribly guilty."

"Why would kits be out in a storm?" Cloverfoot asked, her eyes wide with pity. "Where was their mother?"

"I don't know," Whistlepaw replied. "But there was another cat—a tom—trying to climb the cliff and look for them, and I realized it was his guilt that I was feeling. Then some other cats at the foot of the cliff called him back, and they all went away. They were heading for a mountain with a top like a fox's head."

"I know that mountain!" Tigerstar exclaimed, fixing a wondering gaze on Whistlepaw. "On a clear day you can see it from here. Dovewing and I passed it when we came back from the big Twolegplace where our kits were born."

Dovewing nodded. "I remember."

"As the cats were leaving, I saw a strange image in the sky," Whistlepaw continued. "It was like a cloud with—"

"Draw it on the ground," Puddleshine interrupted. "Like you did for us at the Moonpool."

Whistlepaw padded into the center of the clearing until she found a stretch of bare earth. Ivypool drew closer to see as the apprentice quickly sketched on the ground with her claws. *A cloud with lightning and some vines*, she thought. *Weird...*

"What in the name of StarClan is that?" Tigerstar asked. "It's like the signs Twolegs put up sometimes. Cats don't do that."

"Because we have better signs than that," Crowfeather pointed out, an edge to his voice. "Scent. Paw prints."

"Right. It's not our way at all," Rootspring agreed. "So what can it have to do with the Clans?"

"The dream didn't finish there," Whistlepaw replied. "The wind blew me off the cliff—oh, I was so terrified!—but instead of falling into the water, I landed in a forest. There was a huge tree that looked as if it had been burned out from the center. I found myself inside it, and then I was here, on the edge of the lake, in RiverClan territory."

"Then I saw Mistystar's spirit." She paused as a gasp went up from the assembled cats. "She yowled, 'The debt must be paid, or...'"

"Or what?" Squirrelstar asked.

Whistlepaw shook her head. "That was all she said. And that was when I saw the stream running with blood."

"I don't like that," Alderheart mewed, blinking worriedly. "It's clearly a warning."

"And with everything that's happening," Tigerstar added, his claws flexing as if he longed for action, "maybe it's hinting that it will all end badly for the Clans."

Ivypool looked around at the assembled cats as a hush fell over the crowd. Some cats hung their heads, and several exchanged worried expressions with their Clanmates. Ivypool's shoulders tensed as she wondered what "end badly" could mean. *What could be worse than what's already happened in RiverClan?*

"I was concerned too," Kestrelflight admitted, "and that's why I called the emergency medicine-cat meeting last night. We were all there, except for Mothwing and Podlight, and we had a shared vision of StarClan. They told us that they didn't send the vision to Whistlepaw."

"They didn't?" Leafstar spoke sharply. "Then where did it come from?"

"No cat knows," Kestrelflight replied. "Not even StarClan. They were as confused as we were that a vision could come from somewhere else. And once Whistlepaw described her dream, they grew worried that there was some kind of threat facing the Clans, but they couldn't understand it because they didn't send it."

"Just imagine—StarClan faced with a vision they couldn't understand." Jayfeather's voice had an edge of sarcasm. "Maybe now they'll know how we feel."

Ivypool had to suppress an amused snort; Jayfeather was right that the Clans had been mystified for season upon season by obscure prophecies from StarClan.

"This sounds more dangerous with every word you say," mewed Hawkwing, the SkyClan deputy, paying no attention to Jayfeather.

"It gets worse," Kestrelflight responded. "Some of the older warrior spirits told us that there was something familiar about Whistlepaw's dream, though they couldn't recall the details. And they recognized the symbol she drew. It gave them a terrible feeling, though they couldn't explain why."

"But *why* couldn't they?" Tigerstar was digging his claws into the branch where he crouched; Ivypool thought he looked almost at the end of his patience.

"Tallstar reminded us that not every Clan cat remains part of StarClan," Kestrelflight went on. "Only those who are remembered by the living cats. No cat is sure what happens to the others. Tallstar suggested that the symbol, and the vision, might refer to something that none of the existing StarClan cats can remember. He suspected, because of the crying kits and the sense of guilt Whistlepaw felt, that it may be something they have chosen to forget. Some kind of grievous wrong that has to be set right."

Leafstar nodded slowly, as if she was beginning to understand. "That happened once before," she pointed out. "When SkyClan was forced out of the old forest. The four remaining Clans felt so guilty that they didn't even want to think about what they had done."

"You're right, Leafstar," Squirrelstar agreed. "But this isn't quite the same. Firestar went on his quest to revive SkyClan, but the forest Clans were never

threatened."

"And now they are," Kestrelflight continued. "Windstar met with us, and she thought that the river of blood could be a warning of what will happen if we ignore the message. Cats from all the Clans recognized the symbol, and the StarClan spirits believe that all the Clans are needed to right the wrong."

Silence gathered over the assembled cats as Kestrelflight sat down, his report finished. Ivypool could see that many of them had the same baffled expression on their faces, as if they were asking whether the leaders were supposed to send cats out—but where, and what were they supposed to do? *Should we look for the place in Whistlepaw's dream?* she asked herself. *Or draw the symbol for every cat we see, and hope some cat recognizes it?*

"Well, Harestar," Squirrelstar meowed eventually, "what is your plan for coping with this?"

"I've been thinking about it ever since Whistlepaw reported her vision," the WindClan leader replied. "And I think that she should be part of a small group that goes to investigate, to try to find the place she saw in her vision."

Several cats let out yowls of shock and disbelief.

"That's crazy!" Hawkwing exclaimed. "They wouldn't even know what they were looking for."

But Ivypool felt her pads suddenly tingle with excitement. *A quest to undiscovered territories . . . far from the lake and all we know . . . that would be such an adventure!*

"Are these even Clan cats?" Tigerstar asked. "That symbol could mean anything."

"As if we don't have enough problems of our own right now," Crowfeather muttered.

"Perhaps we should wait until Whistlepaw's visions become clearer," Cloverfoot suggested.

"I've been having these visions for a while." Whistlepaw sounded much more confident now. "I'm sure some cat is sending them to me. And with the warning—the stream running with blood—they're seeming more urgent than ever. Maybe if I can find the place, everything will become clear." Her eyes widened, shining with wonder. "Maybe cats who have been long forgotten can be remembered again?"

Ivypool drew in a sharp breath, her heart quickening at Whistlepaw's words. *Stupid furball!* she scolded herself a heartbeat later. Bristlefrost wasn't *forgotten*. If only that were the problem. No, Bristlefrost was simply gone.

All the same, what Whistlepaw had said gave Ivypool a feeling of lightness in her chest. It felt strange, and she realized she was experiencing something she hadn't felt in moons: hope.

If cats who had been forgotten could be brought back to StarClan, who knew what else was possible? *Maybe we don't understand everything there is to know about the Dark Forest. . . .*



"That's what StarClan said last night," Jayfeather meowed. "I can assure all you leaders: This is real. Even though the StarClan warriors couldn't remember what the symbol means, or who these cats were, they were quite certain that they *should* remember. That's what we would be sending cats to do: find out what happened and return the memory to StarClan."

"Do you mean return the cats who experienced this—the tom and his companions—to StarClan?" Leafstar asked.

Jayfeather nodded. "That would work, too. What's clear is that we have to *do something*."

"Or what?" Hawkwing asked.

"Or the river runs with blood," Jayfeather snapped back at him. "Great StarClan, have you got thistle-fluff in your ears? Maybe there won't really be blood in the stream, but do you want to chance finding out what the sign means?"

Hawkwing said nothing more, but let out a growl from deep in his chest.

"It isn't exactly hard to imagine blood being shed over a river," Cloverfoot pointed out; her tone was calm and practical after the irritation of the toms. "Not the way things are now among the Clans."

*Splashtail*, Ivypool thought, sliding out her claws.

"It's clear to me what the threat means," Cloverfoot continued. "If we don't get to the bottom of what happened to these kits, and what debt the Clans owe . . . then it seems like things will get much worse for us before they get better. Perhaps there won't even *be* five Clans to argue about things like this anymore."

Cloverfoot's words were greeted by a thoughtful silence, no cat making any more objections. Ivypool tried to imagine what it would be like without five Clans beside the lake, and couldn't do it. It seemed such a long time since SkyClan came to join them. The problems their arrival had caused had all been solved by now, and they truly belonged.

The silence stretched out until at last Shadowsight spoke. "Warnings from StarClan—or wherever Whistlepaw's vision is coming from," he mewed gently, "rarely come at *good* times. But that doesn't mean they shouldn't be taken seriously."

"Shadowsight is right," Harestar declared. "I suggest that we send one cat from each Clan to find the place Whistlepaw is dreaming about. And since the mission seems to mean restoring the memory of forgotten cats, it might be good for each of the cats we choose to have experience of StarClan's hunting grounds or the Dark Forest."

A murmur of agreement spread throughout the assembled cats. "Why not send the Lights in the Mist?" Hawkwing suggested.

As soon as he spoke, Dovewing stepped forward, standing in front of Shadowsight and shielding him. "I will *never* agree to that," she declared firmly, staring up at Tigerstar.

"I'm a fully grown, fully trained medicine cat," Shadowsight pointed out. "I'm not a kit."

"You'll always be my kit," Dovewing mewed, an edge to her voice. "I won't hear of you going, and that's that. It was a miracle that you got out of the Dark Forest, and I am *not* taking the chance of losing another of my kits."

She glanced around as if daring any cat to challenge her, and her gaze met Ivypool's. Ivypool wanted to signal her compassion, knowing that her sister must be thinking of Rowankit, so recently dead of sickness, but as well as grief she could see anxiety in Dovewing's eyes.

*I'm a mother who lost a kit too. Dovewing must be afraid that she's reminded me of Bristlefrost.*

Ivypool wished she could tell her sister that she didn't need reminding. There was never a time when she wasn't thinking of Bristlefrost. *It's okay*, she thought, giving Dovewing a tiny nod.

Dovewing dipped her head in return, then turned back to the Gathering. "If you need a cat from ShadowClan, Tigerstar, send me. Birchkit is weaned; I can leave him safely. And I fought against the first Tigerstar and the Dark Forest cats in the Great Battle."

"I'm not sure about this whole expedition," Tigerstar growled; his amber eyes glared at his mate. "Much less about sending you."

"Would you want the other Clans to say that ShadowClan refused to join in?" Dovewing flashed back at him. "Or that the ShadowClan leader uses his power to protect his kin?"

*Only Tigerstar's mate would dare talk to him like that*, Ivypool thought.

The ShadowClan leader hesitated for only a moment longer. "Very well," he grumbled. "You'll give me no peace until I give in."

Dovewing sat down with a satisfied whisk of her tail.

Still thinking about what the medicine cats had said about restoring forgotten cats, and the tiny kindling of her hope for Bristlefrost, Ivypool found her voice. "Squirrelstar is one of the Lights in the Mist, too, but she has too much responsibility as ThunderClan leader. I'm her deputy, so I should be sent in my leader's place. Besides," she added, feeling once again that faint tingle of excitement, "I trained in the Dark Forest. If we happen to end up there, I know exactly what it's like."

*And maybe*, she thought to herself, *being in the Dark Forest again, I might feel closer to Bristlefrost. If it comes to that.*

"You're right, Ivypool," Squirrelstar meowed, looking down from her branch with an approving expression. "Thank you. You may represent ThunderClan."

Ivypool was pleased by her Clan leader's agreement. And while she hadn't thought beyond the Clans' immediate need when she volunteered, now she realized that the quest was exactly what *she* needed: the chance to get away from home for a

while, put the ghosts of the past behind her, and prove her courage and commitment to her Clan.

*And perhaps I can learn something that will help me accept what happened to Bristlefrost.*

"I want to go," Rootspring declared, rising to his paws and dipping his head to Leafstar where she sat on her branch above him. "I'm the best choice from SkyClan. I've experienced the Dark Forest, too, and sometimes I can see the spirits of cats whose paws haven't led them to StarClan. That could be useful."

"That's true. You have permission," Leafstar responded.

A warm glow woke deep inside Ivypool at the thought that Rootspring, the cat who understood so much of what she was feeling, would be part of the expedition. She would be with her sister, too; they had so little time to be together now that they were in different Clans. At last there was something she could look forward to. Besides, on this quest she might finally be able to let go of the ghosts of the past, and prove herself all over again to her Clan.

Meanwhile, Crowfeather rose briefly from where he sat on the oak root. "I would be up for it," he meowed, "but WindClan already has a representative. Whistlepaw has to go." He gave the young medicine cat a nod of respect and sat down again.

Whistlepaw returned the nod. "Of course I will represent WindClan," she declared. "But there's one thing that's still worrying me. To change the future where the river runs with blood, I'm sure there need to be *five* cats, one from each Clan. That's what StarClan believes."

"I could be the fifth cat!" Wrenflight exclaimed brightly, casting an adoring glance at Rootspring. "The two of us would make a great team!"

Rootspring winced, while Ivypool rolled her eyes. *What part of "one cat from each Clan" do you not understand?*

"Thank you for the offer, Wrenflight," Harestar responded, sounding as if it was hard for him to stay polite, "but the fifth cat must come from RiverClan."

Wrenflight subsided, looking crushed.

"I will travel to RiverClan myself," the WindClan leader continued, "and try to convince Splashstar. But if I can't, we'll just have to hope that we can manage without RiverClan."

*And if we can't?* Ivypool wondered but didn't say aloud.

"So we have four cats," Squirrelstar announced. "Ivypool from ThunderClan, Rootspring from SkyClan, Whistlepaw from WindClan, and Dovewing from ShadowClan. You will leave tomorrow. And may StarClan light your path."

"You should meet at the Moonpool," Tigerstar advised. "If it is the same mountain, you'll already be part of the way along your journey."

When Harestar had declared the Gathering at an end, Ivypool padded across to Dovewing. "I'm glad you're going," she mewed.

Dovewing touched noses with her. "I'm glad, too. Goodbye for now, and I'll see you soon."

"Thank you for volunteering." Squirrelstar slackened her pace to walk beside Ivypool as they made their way along the lakeshore, back to ThunderClan territory.

"I'm happy to represent ThunderClan," Ivypool responded.

Privately she was thinking that she could use some time for herself, away from her Clan. And maybe in trying to find out more about these forgotten cats, she could get closer to the memory of the cat she would never forget: Bristlefrost.



## Chapter 3



*The sky was paling toward dawn* when Ivypool emerged from the warriors' den and stood, shaking debris from her nest out of her pelt. The air was crisp, the chill reminding her that leafbare was upon them. Now that the moment had come, her paws itched to be on their way.

Ivypool turned at the sound of rustling behind her to see Thriftear and Flipclaw—her kits and Bristlefrost's littermates—pushing their way out of the den.

"You're really leaving?" Thriftear asked, her anxiety clear in her wide eyes.

"I have to," Ivypool replied, touching her nose to Flipclaw's ear and then to Thriftear's. "The Clans need me."

"But we need you," Flipclaw objected. "It's dangerous out there. It's not so long since we lost Bristlefrost. We can't bear the thought of losing you, too."

"I can look after myself," Ivypool reassured them, forcing confidence into her voice. The deep pang she felt at leaving her remaining kits was harder to bear than worry about any danger she would meet on her travels. "And Fernsong has looked after you since you were kits. You'll be fine until I get back."

Thriftear and Flipclaw exchanged a glance, clearly unwilling to believe her. "We'll miss you so much," Thriftear mewed.

"I'll miss you, too," Ivypool responded. "But what you need to do is be the best warriors you can be. Support your Clan, and I'll be back before you know it."

Flipclaw nodded. "We will. We promise."

Fernsong's scent drifted to Ivypool's nose as he too emerged from the warriors' den. "Ivypool is right," he told his kits. "Once your mother has left, we'll all three go out to hunt. We'll see if we can catch some really good prey for our Clanmates."

To Ivypool's relief, the suggestion seemed to help the young cats cheer up. "I know they'll be fine with you," she told Fernsong. "You're a great father."

Fernsong let out a brief loving purr. "Be careful on your journey," he meowed. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

Ivypool sensed that her mate was not just talking about the symbol and the wailing kits from Whistlepaw's vision. He was telling her that he wanted her to find a way to deal with her grief for Bristlefrost so that it didn't overwhelm her.

*He cares for me. And he understands.*

Ivypool twined her tail with Fernsong's. "I love you," she murmured. "And I'll try."

With a last farewell to all three cats, Ivypool turned away to see Squirrelstar beckoning to her from where she stood near the medicine cats' den. Cinderheart was

standing beside her with an odd look on her face, half uncertain, half determined.

"Ivypool," Squirrelstar began as she padded up to join her Clan leader, "I've asked Cinderheart to be my temporary deputy while you're away. I thought the two of you ought to have a talk about what the duties are."

Ivypool wasn't sure what she thought about that. It made sense that Squirrelstar would need another cat to act as deputy, especially when she had no idea how long she would be away, but she felt suddenly sick at the thought of any cat moving into her paw steps. And how strange to be instructing her old mentor on how to be deputy!

"I'm sure Cinderheart knows the duties already," she meowed; then, aware of how sour she sounded, she struggled to be generous and added, "She'll be a great deputy."

"Thanks, Ivypool." Cinderheart gave her chest fur an embarrassed lick. "I guess the main thing is the morning and evening patrols."

"Yes, and hunting patrols at the same time." Ivypool winced inwardly at the memory of how many times recently she had been late. "And keep an eye on the fresh-kill pile, in case you need more hunting patrols throughout the day."

"And do you check on the dens?" Cinderheart asked. "I know the apprentices are responsible for bedding, and their mentors tell them to do it, but do you make sure they keep up with it?"

Ivypool tried to remember the last time she had checked on any den but her own. "Yes, from time to time," she replied. "The other thing, of course, is to do whatever Squirrelstar asks you to do, and take charge of the camp if she has to be away. And support her in difficult times. It looks like we're living through one of those right now," she added.

Cinderheart nodded firmly. "I'll do my best."

*I'm sure you will, Ivypool thought. You seem more motivated to be deputy than I've been lately.*

She fought with the horrible thought that Squirrelstar might prefer to keep Cinderheart as her deputy even when she returned from her quest, but she made herself push the idea away. *I have to concentrate on the task I've been given.*

"Then that's settled," Squirrelstar meowed, satisfaction in her voice. "I'm sure you'll do a good job of it, Cinderheart, and you can always ask me if you're not sure about anything."

As the Clan leader was speaking, Alderheart appeared from behind the brambles that screened the medicine cats' den, a leaf wrap in his jaws.

"Traveling herbs," he announced, setting down the leaf wrap in front of Ivypool. "You're going to need them."

"Thank you," Ivypool responded, stooping to lick up the leaves. She grimaced at the bitter taste, but she knew how grateful she would be for the added strength the herbs would give her. "That will really help."

"Sorrel, daisy, and burnet, if you need to find more on the way," Alderheart told her.

Ivypool thanked him again, though she wasn't sure she would remember, or even be able to recognize the different leaves. Then she remembered that she wouldn't need to, as a medicine cat was coming with them.

Dipping her head in farewell, she headed toward the thorn tunnel. Squirrelstar had padded over there and was waiting for her.

"Ivypool, there's something I need to say to you before you go," the Clan leader began. "I chose you to be deputy because I was impressed with you: your leadership qualities, your motivation, your courage. But lately you haven't seemed like yourself, and to be honest, you haven't done a great job of supporting me though all this trouble with Splashtail."

"I'm sorry—" Ivypool began.

"I understand your grief," Squirrelstar went on, as if Ivypool hadn't interrupted. "But as Clan deputy you can't afford to give in to it. I hope you'll use this time to rethink, and to work out how you can put the past behind you."

Every hair on Ivypool's pelt felt hot with embarrassment. She hadn't realized how clearly Squirrelstar had seen the way she had let her duties slide, or how her mind hadn't been focused on her Clan and its troubles.

"I'm sorry, Squirrelstar," she mewed humbly. "I promise I'll try."

"I know you will," her Clan leader told her briskly. "And I'll be rooting for you. May StarClan light your path. And come home safely."

Ivypool stood at the foot of the rocky slope that led up to the Moonpool. She had left Clan territories behind and trudged across the open moor; by now sunhigh was not far off. A stiff breeze sent puffs of white cloud scudding across the blue sky. In spite of the long trek, and the dry moorland grass that was hard on her pads, Ivypool felt energy coursing through her from ears to tail-tip; she was ready for whatever their venture would bring.

Mingled cat scents reached her from the top of the slope, and Ivypool realized that her fellow travelers were already waiting for her. She sprang upward from rock to rock until she arrived outside the row of bushes that concealed the hollow of the Moonpool.

Whistlepaw and Dovewing were sitting together in the shelter of the bushes, while Rootspring paced impatiently. He halted when he saw Ivypool.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "Now we can get going."

"No RiverClan cat?" Ivypool asked, dismayed, though she wasn't surprised that Splashtail hadn't sent a representative.

Whistlepaw shook her head sadly. "Splashtail wouldn't even allow Harestar onto RiverClan territory," she explained. "And I'm not sure that our mission can succeed



with only the four of us. StarClan seemed to think that the debt the Clans owe can only be repaid by all the Clans working together.”

“It would be easier if we knew what the debt is,” Rootspring pointed out. “What could our Clans owe the cats in your vision, Whistlepaw?”

“I don’t know.” Whistlepaw lashed her tail in frustration. “I’ve never seen those cats before.”

“Maybe the Clans once did something bad to the cats in the vision,” Ivypool suggested. “Maybe we’re somehow responsible for the kits being left behind.”

Whistlepaw blinked, her eyes full of trouble. “I’d hate to think that was true,” she murmured. “I’d love to know more.”

Dovewing brushed her tail sympathetically down Whistlepaw’s side. “Anyway, we don’t have a choice but to leave with only four Clans represented,” she pointed out. “It’s not as if we can kidnap a RiverClan cat.”

“I know.” Whistlepaw’s ears drooped dejectedly. “I just wish I understood more about what we’re trying to do. Whoever is sending this vision, they’re just as vague as StarClan!”

Ivypool stepped forward and touched her nose to Whistlepaw’s. “I’m sure you’ll find out more in time,” she reassured the apprentice. “You’ve got a great connection to StarClan!”

“Yes, you’re doing your best,” Dovewing added. “It will all work out.”

Ivypool met Dovewing’s eyes as her sister finished speaking. *We’re both mothers; it seems so natural to comfort a young cat.*

“Then let’s get going,” Rootspring pointed with his tail. “Dovewing, is that the mountain Tigerstar was talking about?”

Looking in the direction he was pointing, Ivypool could see the mountain; it was so far away beyond the rolling moorland that it seemed tiny, but it was outlined clearly above the horizon. Its summit did look like the head of a fox.

“That’s it,” Dovewing mewed. “I remember it from when we traveled back from the big Twolegplace.”

“And it *does* look like the mountain in my vision.” Whistlepaw sounded more optimistic. “I never thought I’d be able to see it so soon!”

Dovewing led the way down the rocky slope and headed across the moor toward the mountain. Although they soon lost sight of it in the folds of moorland, Dovewing kept going confidently, and it was easy to check their direction by the sun. Ivypool began to enjoy the freedom of the open spaces and the sensation of wind in her fur. Even better was the knowledge that she was doing something for her Clan, and perhaps for all the Clans, now and in the future.

They hadn’t gone very far from the Moonpool when Rootspring suddenly halted. “Listen!” he hissed.

Ivypool pricked her ears, but she could hear nothing apart from the wind and the song of a lark high above their heads.

"What did you think you heard?" Dovewing asked.

"Something—some creature—brushing through reeds," Rootspring replied. "It's stopped now."

Gazing around, Ivypool could see countless clumps of reeds where tiny streams veined the moor or where pools collected in hollows. The breeze made the tops rattle together; that might have been what Rootspring had heard. If there really was some kind of creature, it could be anywhere.

*Maybe it's a cat*, she thought, suppressing a shiver as she realized there might be cats who would try to stop them. *Is Splashtail angry that we're going on this quest?* She would believe him capable of any kind of violence if he wanted the quest to fail.

She opened her jaws to taste the air, but at once Rootspring shook his head. "It was behind us," he meowed. "Downwind."

"Well, maybe it's gone now," Dovewing meowed. "Let's get going."

She took the lead again as they headed onward, but now every cat's senses were alert, ready for the tiniest trace of an unfamiliar scent, or the faintest sound that might betray their pursuer. Not many moments had passed before Ivypool heard the clink of a small pebble, as if a paw had dislodged it as the creature followed them. Her companions heard it too.

"There *is* something!" Whistlepaw exclaimed.

Dovewing narrowed her eyes as she gazed around. "There are foxes on this moor," she remarked.

"Surely we would smell a fox, even downwind," Rootspring responded. "Those creatures stink!"

"A cat, then—maybe a rogue?" Ivypool suggested. "Whatever it is, it's stalking us. We'll have to deal with it."

Dovewing turned to face the direction the sound had come from. "Rootspring, Ivypool, come and stand by me. Whistlepaw, stay back. Give the warriors space."

Whistlepaw let out a murmur of protest but withdrew a few paces. The other three cats stood close together, facing the way they had come.

Flexing her claws, Ivypool braced herself for a fight. She had no idea what might be lurking on this moor, so far away from Clan territory. They couldn't even be certain there was only one creature. While she readied herself to spring into her battle moves, she had a sudden vision of herself and her companions stretched out on the rough moorland grass, their blood flowing bright onto the ground.

*If even one of us is badly injured, we'll have to go back*, she thought, suppressing a shudder. *Our quest will be ruined.*

Ivypool's heart was thrumming in her chest. Now she could definitely hear the sound of hurrying paw steps. She spotted a flash of white through the twisted branches of a thornbush. Then a wiry white she-cat with a sharp, pointed face and

brilliant blue eyes emerged into the open. Ivypool let out a *mrrow* of sheer relief; gasps of shock came from the cats beside her, and a squeal of delight from Whistlepaw.

"Icewing!" Ivypool exclaimed.

The RiverClan warrior bounded up and halted in front of them. "I've caught you at last!" she panted.

Rootspring stepped forward and looked Icewing up and down. "What in StarClan is going on?" he demanded. "Did Splashtail send you?"

Icewing's fur bristled with indignation. "That mange-pelt? No, he did *not*!"

Ivypool gave the SkyClan tom a nudge. "Rootspring! Do you have bees in your brain? Icewing has never supported Splashtail."

Rootspring hunched his shoulders. "Sorry."

Meanwhile Whistlepaw scampered up and touched noses with the newcomer. "Now we're five!" she mewled joyfully. "One from each Clan!"

"But how did you . . . ?" Dovewing began.

"Give me a moment." Icewing sat down and made herself comfortable with her paws tucked under her. "Now," she continued when she had her breath back, "you need to know that Mothwing, Duskfur, and I have been living in exile for days. Splashtail is getting more and more violent; we were seriously alarmed by the way he was behaving, and so one night we fled from the RiverClan camp."

Ivypool exchanged a shocked glance with Dovewing. "You left your Clan? But you've always been so loyal to RiverClan! I'm stunned."

Icewing shook her head sadly. "None of us wanted to leave. It hurt, believe me. But Splashtail's RiverClan isn't my Clan anymore. And the three of us have put ourselves in danger by trying to speak out against him. In fact Sunbeam, Nightheart, and Frostpaw told us that Splashtail has ordered his followers to kill us on sight."

"You've seen Nightheart and the others, then?" Ivypool asked; in her eagerness for news she could hardly get the words out. "Are they okay?"

"Yes," Icewing replied. "They're helping keep us safe. That's how I knew about your mission."

"What happened?" Rootspring asked, stretching his neck out eagerly as if that would help him to hear better.

"They brought us to ShadowClan when Mothwing needed treatment for an infection." Somehow the bare statement made Ivypool realize even more clearly how hard life must have been for the three she-cats. "Tigerstar told us about the quest, and that a RiverClan cat was needed. I decided I would come join you."

"But how did you know where to find us?" Dovewing asked.

"Tigerstar mentioned you were meeting at the Moonpool," Icewing explained. "But when I got there, you had already left, so I had to follow your scent. And here I

am.”

“Thank you so much!” Whistlepaw exclaimed. “We’re really grateful, especially when things are so terrible in your Clan.”

Icewing let out a small purr, dipping her head to the young medicine cat. “I felt it was important,” she responded. “It means RiverClan can take its place with the other Clans, in spite of all Splashtail might do.” Her voice hardened. “He *will not* destroy us!”

Ivypool felt a renewed sense of optimism as the five cats set out again. Now that Icewing was with them, they were finally following StarClan’s instructions. They might not know yet what it was they were meant to do, but at least their paws were leading them along the right path.

The day remained clear, and when they reached the top of each moorland slope they could still see the tiny outline of the fox-head mountain, dark against the blue sky. It didn’t seem to be drawing any closer, but it reared up unmistakable above the horizon.

After a while Dovewing let Rootspring take the lead and fell back to pad along beside Ivypool. “You know I’m so sorry about what happened to Bristlefrost,” she mewed. “How do you feel? It’s been a while, but we’ve never really had a chance to talk about it.”

*How do you think I feel?* Ivypool bit back the savage words. “I don’t want to talk about her,” she managed to reply. “I’m sorry.”

“But it might help you.” Dovewing’s voice was full of sympathy. “Keeping it all inside yourself can’t be good for you.” When Ivypool still didn’t respond, she added, “I know how much it hurts, losing a kit.”

Ivypool winced, struggling not to let out a wail of mingled anger and sorrow. “I’m sorry you lost Rowankit.” Every word had to be forced out. “It wasn’t very long ago, so it still must be so raw for you. How do *you* feel?”

“I dream about him every night,” Dovewing confessed. “And I feel there must have been *something* I could have done to keep him alive. It really helps, coming away on this quest. It gives me something else to think about.”

Ivypool nodded. Dovewing’s experience sounded a lot like hers . . . with one notable difference. Dovewing knew she would see Rowankit again in StarClan. “True,” she said mildly. *Now can we drop the subject, please?*

But Dovewing didn’t seem to understand. “Tell me . . . what are you thinking?” she urged Ivypool, her eyes brimming with concern. “Can you relate to what I said? How do you *really* feel?”

*Okay, you asked for it.* Ivypool took a deep breath and said, “Dovewing, I’m truly sorry that Rowankit died. But losing a sickly kit—a kit you’ll be reunited with in

StarClan one day—is different from losing a full-grown cat who was just coming into her own as a warrior. A cat who doesn't exist anywhere—who is just *gone*."

As soon as the words left her mouth, Ivypool felt pain and regret gripping her like a massive claw. *Even if it's true—what an insensitive thing to say to a grieving mother! Dovewing will be furious with me, and I'll deserve it.*

But Dovewing's voice was calm. "You're probably right," she mewed, touching Ivypool's ear with her nose. "It *is* different. We've both suffered a terrible loss, but maybe I don't really understand what you're going through. I can't, unless you'll talk to me."

"I'm sorry, but I can't," Ivypool sighed. "I know you're trying to help. But I can't talk about her with you. Not yet."

Dovewing touched her ear once more. "When you're ready, I'll be here," she promised.

Ivypool's heart was full of love for her sister, but she was still relieved when Dovewing picked up the pace to join Rootspring, who turned to her with a welcoming *mrrow*.

"I noticed how quickly Wrenflight volunteered to join this mission." Dovewing's tone was teasing now. "And I saw how she looks at you. At a guess, I'd say she's padding after you."

Ivypool could almost feel Rootspring's embarrassment. *Dovewing's not being too tactful today, is she?*

"Is she? I hadn't noticed," the SkyClan tom grunted.

Ivypool twitched her whiskers in amusement. Rootspring had mentioned Wrenflight's crush to her the other day; now he was obviously trying to put Dovewing off. But she had to admit to herself that she was relieved he wasn't interested in the young she-cat. If he ever changed his mind, she wasn't sure if she could be happy for him, or whether she would feel that he had betrayed Bristlefrost.

As the cats traveled on, the moorland gave way to steeper hills leading up to the fox-head mountain. Ivypool thought that at last the mountain was growing a little bigger.

But as the day passed, clouds began to gather, covering the sun and obscuring their view. The leafbare landscape was barren, and there were few landmarks they could use to guide their paw steps. Even a Twoleg den or two would have been helpful, but there was no sign of Twolegs at all.

Rootspring kept on doggedly leading the way uphill, but as he dropped down into a shallow gorge with a stream chattering along the bottom, Icewing halted.

"The stream is veering that way," she pointed out, angling her ears, "but shouldn't we be going straight?"

"I'm heading for that clump of trees just ahead," Rootspring told her. "We saw them in the distance before the cloud came down."

"Are you sure?" Dovewing asked. "Those are beech trees, but I thought the others were pines."

Rootspring let out a gusty sigh. "Honestly, I'm not sure," he admitted.

"Then we should stop before we get completely lost," Icewing mewed.

"This isn't a bad place to pause," Ivypool declared, gazing around. There were bushes clustering thickly alongside the stream, rocks for shelter, and even some dried ferns they could use for bedding. "Why don't we make camp here? We all need to eat and rest, and it will be dark soon anyway."

"Good idea," Icewing agreed. "My paws feel like they're falling off."

"Okay, that's what we'll do," Dovewing decided. "Rootspring, you and I will hunt. Ivypool, you and Icewing can find a good place to camp, and Whistlepaw, you can start collecting bedding."

"And let's hope the sky is clear tomorrow," Rootspring added.

Even though her companions had agreed to stop, Ivypool could sense a buried annoyance, a restlessness to get on with their quest.

*But I don't mind, she thought as she nosed among the bushes for a good place to make a temporary den. The longer this quest takes, the more time I'll have to set myself straight . . . and try to figure out how to move on in a world without Bristlefrost.*



## Chapter 4



*Ivypool poked her head out from the den under the elder bush and looked up at the sky. Gray cloud covered it, just like the day before, and the day before that. She and her companions had been stuck in their camp beside the stream for three sunrises now, and there still seemed to be no hope of continuing. The fox-head mountain remained hidden, the clouds so low that they covered the peak.*

Cold rain from the elder branches splattered onto Ivypool's pelt as she pushed her way into the open, and she paused to give herself a thorough shake. It didn't help. Ivypool couldn't remember the last time her pelt had felt really dry.

A few paw steps away, at the edge of the stream, Rootspring was crouched, pressing himself to the ground. He was so still that for a heart-stopping moment Ivypool thought he might be dead, until she saw the rise and fall of his chest, and the occasional twitch of his tail.

She padded over to his side. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Rootspring sighed and sat up. "I was trying to connect with the earth, the way the Sisters taught me," he explained. "I thought that might give us some idea of which way we should go." He let out another sigh. "But it's not working."

Ivypool reflected that as much as she liked and admired Rootspring, he had some very weird habits, inherited from his even weirder father, Tree, the SkyClan mediator. Tree had been born in a group of cats called the Sisters before joining SkyClan to be with his mate, Violetshine. All females, the Sisters believed that they communicated with the spirits of dead cats, and that males related to them could communicate with the earth. Both Tree and Rootspring had used their powers to help the Clans in the past; Ivypool understood that Rootspring was trying to help them now.

And they needed help. At first she hadn't minded that they'd had to stop, but now the enforced idleness was straining her patience. Every cat was feeling frustrated and restless. Even though Ivypool wasn't quite sure what Rootspring had tried to do, she was sorry he had failed.

"At least you gave it a shot," she mewed.

She was staring up into the clouds, willing them to break up and reveal a clear sky, when she realized that Dovewing had emerged from the den and was gazing at her intently. "Is something on your mind?" Ivypool asked.

"Can we speak privately?" Dovewing asked.

Ivypool widened her eyes, but nodded and followed her sister a few paces away, where Rootspring couldn't hear. Dovewing turned and looked at her with concern, then shook her head. "I know you say you're not ready to talk about Bristlefrost, but over the past few days I've seen that you're not yourself," she mewed gently. "You're usually such a leader, trying to solve every problem that comes up, but now you seem



so quiet and disengaged. Sometimes it's like you don't even want to speak to us. Take last night. You were lounging under that tree over there while the rest of us were discussing what to do. Are you sure you don't want to talk?"

Ivypool winced, aware of the truth in what her sister was saying. Sometimes, despite her best efforts, Ivypool could feel her mind descending into thoughts of Bristlefrost and how she died. Once it started, it was hard to stop, and these thoughts made it hard to concentrate on whatever was happening in the camp. She was sure it must seem to the others like she wasn't interested, or thought herself superior to the conversation.

Still, it felt impossible to say that to Dovewing. Admitting that she still got lost in thoughts of Bristlefrost meant that they would have to talk about Bristlefrost, and she just . . . *couldn't*. "Did I miss something?" she asked. "I'm sorry. It's not that I didn't want to help. It's just . . . I'm upset about this awful weather. I just want to complete this quest and go home."

Dovewing gave her a doubtful look. "If you're that impatient to complete the quest, you wouldn't seem so indifferent when some cat suggests we get going again. Come on, Ivypool, you can't hide it from me. There are things on your mind, and I don't want to push you, but we both know the only way you can get past them is to talk about them."

*This really isn't fair!* Ivypool struggled between sorrow and fury. *I told her I wasn't ready . . . and I was fine until we got stuck here. Now that there's nothing to do but wait, all the thoughts I've been trying to avoid have caught up with me.*

She hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to reply, or whether she wanted to reply at all. Discussing her lost kit, she felt, would only let all the pain bubble up again, until she couldn't think about anything else. At the same time, she couldn't lie to her littermate.

"Okay. Okay. It's true—I can't stop thinking about Bristlefrost," she confessed, wincing at the sharp pain that pierced her chest at the mention of her lost daughter. "I know I must—I know I have to grieve for her and let go, or I'll never be able to move on. But how can I let go of my grief for a cat who doesn't exist anymore?"

To Ivypool's relief, Dovewing didn't try to answer her appeal, only gave a sympathetic murmur and let her tail-tip rest on Ivypool's shoulder. *Good—I don't need platitudes.*

"It makes me so angry," Ivypool went on, "because Bristlefrost was so young. There was so much life she should have had in front of her." She hesitated, and then continued. "Part of me worries that if I stop grieving for Bristlefrost, it'll be like she's forgotten, just like these cats whose memory we're trying to restore to StarClan." She had to strive to stop her voice from shaking. "Suppose that seasons from now Bristlefrost's memory is reduced to a dream a medicine cat has about drowning, or a symbol scratched in the earth?"

"I know I'll never forget Rowankit. And no cat will ever forget Bristlefrost," Dovewing insisted, drawing closer to her sister and pressing comfortingly against her side. "She was a special cat, one of the bravest cats the Clans have ever known, so her memory will never be lost."

With a massive surge of guilt, Ivypool realized that of course Dovewing understood her fears—all too well. Her sister had also lost a kit. And all at once Ivypool realized how little she'd done to make sure her sister was okay. "I'm sorry," she mewed. "I don't mean to make this all about me. I know you must be grieving for Rowankit. And yet it feels like you're coping so much better. I admire you deeply—you're so practical, so focused on what we have to do, while I feel as if I'm falling apart."

Her sister lightly touched Ivypool's ear with her nose. "I've said before, focusing on our quest helps me stay out of the dark places in my mind," she murmured. "Yes, I'm grieving for Rowankit, but losing him doesn't overwhelm me when I have other duties to take care of."

"Maybe I should get more involved," Ivypool responded, thinking of what Squirrelstar had said to her before she set out from the ThunderClan camp. "But oh, Dovewing, it's so hard! I miss Bristlefrost so much, and I'm afraid if I concentrate on other things, I'll start to forget her."

"The way Bristlefrost died doesn't mean you'll ever forget her, Ivypool," a new voice meowed. "Trust me, it's almost impossible."

Ivypool turned to see that Icewing had just emerged from the den and was gazing at her with mingled sorrow and understanding.

A prickle of guilt touched Ivypool's heart as she remembered another terrible time in the Dark Forest, seasons ago when she was spying for the Clans. Icewing's son Beetlewhisker had died under the claws of Brokenstar. Just like Bristlefrost, his spirit was lost, never able to go to StarClan.

"Icewing, how did you get past Beetlewhisker's death?" Ivypool asked.

Icewing blinked thoughtfully. "I'm not sure I ever really did," she admitted. "I had lost kits before, so the pain was intense. It still hurts to think that I'll never see Beetlewhisker again, not even when my paws take the path to StarClan. But I know that I won't honor his memory by not living my life. The more I do for my Clan and my Clanmates, the more I achieve as a warrior, the more I ensure that Beetlewhisker's memory will never be lost. Raising my kits was the best thing I've ever done, and each one of them will always be a part of me. That means Beetlewhisker will live on, in a way."

There was a moment's silence. Icewing ducked her head, looking suddenly embarrassed. "That's what works for me, anyway," she added.

Ivypool took a pace that brought her close to Icewing and laid her paw over the RiverClan she-cat's. "Thank you for telling me," she murmured. "I see now that we

have a lot in common, and I'm sorry I didn't ask you about all this earlier. I was so deep in my own grief. . . ."

"Don't worry," Icewing told her. "That's what grief is: It seems like a dark hole you fall into, and you feel alone in there. It's hard to see the others around you."

Ivypool nodded; she felt as though her insides had been taken out, given a good shake, and stuffed back in again. It was painful, but it was a good feeling. "It still hurts," she murmured. "But I see you now, Icewing . . . and you, Dovewing."

The three cats shared a glance, warmth and companionship in their gaze. Ivypool's heart still ached for Bristlefrost, but she felt as though she wasn't alone anymore.

"This is *awful!*" Whistlepaw clawed frustratedly at the grass on the edge of the stream. "How much longer are we going to be sitting here? We aren't getting any closer to the cats in my vision."

"Don't worry," Ivypool meowed, padding up to settle down beside the young medicine cat. "StarClan didn't give you a time limit, did they?"

Whistlepaw shook her head, seeming slightly reassured. And Ivypool noticed how much healthier the medicine cat apprentice was looking; a few days of rest had certainly helped to heal her wounds. But privately Ivypool wondered what would happen if they didn't reach those cats—or the mountain they had been heading for—before long. Generally visions were warnings of *urgent* problems.

*But maybe this vision is different. None of us is completely clear about what we're supposed to do.*

Ivypool's belly rumbled, reminding her how scarce the prey was around here. The cold, damp weather meant that prey wasn't running well; she and her companions had caught a couple of birds and a few scrawny mice, but that was all. Icewing had tried fishing in the stream but hadn't spotted so much as a minnow. She was trying again now, a few tail-lengths downstream, staring into the water. She was so still she looked like a cat-shaped rock.

*But she can't catch fish that aren't there,* Ivypool thought.

She looked up to see Rootspring and Dovewing appear over the lip of the gorge and come racing along the water's edge. Dovewing's eyes were shining with excitement as she halted in front of her sister.

"Guess what we found!"

"Not fresh-kill, obviously," Ivypool responded sourly; neither cat was carrying any prey.

"No, but we know where we can get some," Dovewing told her.

"We went farther than usual today," Rootspring explained, "and we came across a little Twolegplace. Just on the edge of it is a barn."

"Shelter?" Icewing called from her place downstream, rising and stretching cramped limbs. "Please tell me there's somewhere we can get out of this StarClan-

cursed wet."

"Sorry, I don't think we should," Dovewing meowed. "There was a faint scent of dog, so there could be trouble if we tried sleeping there. But I'm sure that as soon as it gets dark, the place will be *crawling* with mice!"

"We thought that we'd go back at dusk and see what we can catch," Rootspring added.

Ivypool remembered Daisy's stories of the barn at the horseplace, where she had grown up, and the plump mice she had occasionally hunted there. "Brilliant idea." She swiped her tongue around her jaws. "I'll come with you."

As the daylight faded, Rootspring led the way uphill and across the next ridge. From here Ivypool could see a small cluster of Twoleg dens with a narrow Thunderpath looping around them. Rootspring pointed with his tail to a stone den with a red roof standing a little way away from the rest of them. "That's the barn."

"We need to wait until we're sure it's quiet," Dovewing mewled.

As she spoke, a Twoleg emerged from the barn, carrying a bundle wrapped in a brown pelt on his back. He headed into one of the other dens, and after a moment a light went on inside. After a few moments more a sprinkling of other lights appeared, like glowworms in the dark, but there was no sign of other Twolegs.

"I think it's safe," Dovewing whispered.

She took the lead as the three cats padded silently through the darkness until they reached the barn. The Twoleg had left the door ajar; Dovewing poked her head around it, then beckoned with her tail. "Come on!"

Rootspring slid inside, but Ivypool hesitated for a moment, tasting the air. She picked up the scent of dog that Dovewing had mentioned before, but it was faint and stale, maybe from the day before. She could discern the scent of Twolegs, and the acrid tang of a monster, and there was cat-scent, too. Ivypool felt a flicker of anxiety before shrugging her shoulders.

*If there are kittypets or barn cats around, how dangerous can they be?*

Almost overwhelming all the other scents was the delicious odor of mice. Ivypool felt her jaws begin to water as she slipped inside the barn after her Clanmates.

In front of her Ivypool could see the dark gleam of huge Twoleg things that looked as if they might be different kinds of monsters, and piles of square wooden objects stacked against the walls. But in the center of the barn were heaps of sweet-smelling hay; tiny movements disturbed the dried stalks as, with the Twolegs gone, the mice began to sneak out of hiding.

As Ivypool watched, Rootspring made a pounce. A thin shriek cut off as his paws slammed down, and he stood up with a mouse dangling from his jaws. "Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," he mumbled around his mouthful.

Meanwhile Dovewing was creeping up on one of the mounds and suddenly leaped into the middle of it. Briefly she disappeared; then her head popped up, seeds and dust clinging to her pelt and another mouse in her jaws.

Ivypool spotted a mouse nibbling on a seed, half hidden by the stems of hay. She flattened herself to the stone floor of the barn and eased herself forward, imagining

how it would feel to sink her teeth into the juicy prey. A moment after pushing off with her powerful hind legs, she closed her claws on the mouse and bit down on its neck.

But before Ivypool could straighten up with her catch, she felt a massive blow strike her on her side. She caught a glimpse of something large and furry before her paws skidded out from under her and she fell among the hay.

"I'll take that," a rough voice announced.

Scrambling up, still gripping her mouse, Ivypool found herself facing a huge tom. In spite of his well-muscled body and bold gaze, his scent and his long, glossy fur told her this was a kittypet.

Glancing aside, Ivypool saw that a fluffy orange kittypet had tackled Rootspring, who was fighting back with skillful warrior moves. Dovewing had backed a brown tabby she-cat into a corner and held her there, holding on to her mouse and hissing wildly.

Ivypool dropped into a crouch, ready to hurl herself at the huge tom and give him a few swift blows around his ears.

But to her surprise the tom took a pace back. "Hold on," he meowed. "Knock it off, you two. Maybe no cat needs to get hurt."

"No cat will, if you keep your paws to yourself," Ivypool snapped back, dropping her mouse but gripping it with one forepaw.

The other two kittypets lowered their paws, while Dovewing and Rootspring exchanged a glance and relaxed their fighting stance, though they still eyed the kittypets warily.

"My name is Zeke," the big tom announced. "Over there is Pumpernickel—he pointed with his tail at the orange tom who had been fighting with Rootspring—"and the she-cat in the corner is Curry. This barn is our hunting territory."

"What do you mean, 'hunting territory'?" Ivypool asked. "All three of you stink of Twolegs, and you're obviously kittypets. Why should you need to hunt?"

"Because we're good at it," Zeke replied.

Ivypool heard a snort of laughter from Rootspring. "Killing mice in a barn doesn't exactly take *skill*," she pointed out. "Why don't you go home and eat some kittypet food, and leave the fresh-kill for warriors who deserve it?"

Zeke's eyes suddenly widened, gleaming with interest. "You're *warriors*?" Without waiting for a reply, he continued, "Hey, Pumpernickel, these are some of the warrior cats you ran into."

Ivypool exchanged a puzzled glance with her sister. "You met warriors?" she asked. "Have you been to the lake?"

The orange tom looked equally puzzled. "No, this was by a river, where my housefolk lived in their previous den. I met some warrior cats, and some of them had housefolk, too!"

At first Ivypool thought he must be referring to SkyClan's daylight warriors, who had joined the Clan during the day and returned to their Twolegs at night. But that was seasons ago, when SkyClan still lived in the gorge.

"When was this?" she asked.

"Oh, not long ago," Pumpernickel replied. "My housefolk only moved last season."

"Then I don't know where you could have met warriors with housefolk," Rootspring mewed. "Are you sure you're not making it up?"

"No, they obviously know about warriors," Dovewing pointed out.

Suddenly Ivypool remembered what Graystripe had told her when he'd returned from his wanderings while Ashfur was trying to destroy the forest.

"I know what they're talking about!" she exclaimed. "WarriorClan! When Graystripe journeyed back to the old forest, he found some kittypets pretending to be warriors, and he set them up as a proper Clan with some other kittypets he rescued from an old, sick Twoleg."

"Of course," Dovewing purred. "That's a great story!"

"But those cats are *different*," Ivypool continued. "They have housefolk, and they're not exactly full warriors. Not like us and our Clans by the lake."

The brown tabby she-cat, Curry, narrowed her eyes and glared at Ivypool. "Are you implying that cats with housefolk can't be tough?" she growled.

Ivypool wasn't sure how to answer that question. "No," she meowed at last. "I'm not implying it. I'm saying it outright."

Curry let out a furious snarl and leaped at her. Ivypool went down under her fierce assault, lying on her back among the hay with Curry on top of her, the she-cat's claws fastened in her shoulders. Close by she could hear the skirmish start up again among the other cats.

*Great StarClan! Do we have to fight for our fresh-kill now?*

All the same, Ivypool thought as she brought up her hind paws to batter at Curry's belly, she liked the sensation as energy flowed through her limbs and she could feel her whole body moving smoothly into her warrior battle moves. After the frustrating days holed up beside the stream, this at least was action.

She caught a glimpse of Rootspring locked together with Zeke, overwhelming the big tom with a rain of blows around his head. A snarl from somewhere near the barn door told her that Dovewing was fighting with Pumpernickel.

Ivypool threw Curry off and sprang to her paws. "Had enough?" she demanded.

Curry lay on her side; she looked battered, her fur clumped and her chest heaving. "Never!" she gasped.

*Stupid, but brave*, Ivypool thought. Doing her best not to hurt the tabby she-cat, she leaped on top of her and pinned her down with all four paws. "How about now?" she asked.

At the same moment, Zeke let out a high-pitched, drawn-out yowl. *What's that about?* Ivypool wondered. *That's not the sort of sound you'd make in anger, or because you got hurt. It's weird. . . .*

She looked around to see Dovewing holding down a writhing Pumpernickel with a paw across his throat, while Rootspring, who was much smaller than the huge Zeke, was lying splayed out on top of him with a mouthful of his shoulder fur in his jaws.

"Go back to your housefolk," Ivypool meowed, rising to let Curry get up. "Never threaten true warriors again. I hope you've learned your lesson."

Before any cat could reply, loud barking sounded from outside the barn. Ivypool stiffened. "Dogs!" she hissed.

As Rootspring rolled off him, Zeke rose to his paws and shook out his pelt. "I yowled to signal the dogs," he explained with a smirk. "We have a sort of arrangement with them. They finish off any cats who don't respect our hunting territory!"

Ivypool gazed at her companions and saw panic in their eyes. These kittypets were no real threat, but dogs were another matter. If the dogs were big enough, they could tear Ivypool and her companions apart. The barking was getting closer. There was plenty she wanted to say to these treacherous cats, but there was no time.

*"Run!"* Dovewing yowled.

She grabbed the mouse she had caught and raced for the door. Ivypool caught up her own prey and followed hard on her paws, while Rootspring snatched up a third mouse and dashed after them.

As they pelted out of the barn, Ivypool spotted two dogs bounding up to intercept them. In the lead was a huge brindled creature; its jaws were open to show a fearsome set of fangs, and its tongue was lolling out. Behind it was a smaller white dog, letting out a flurry of high-pitched yaps.

*We could take that white one in a pinch . . . but the brindled one is a serious threat!* Terror gave speed to Ivypool's paws. She could imagine the stink of the dogs' breath and the pain of those great teeth meeting in her hindquarters.

*Great StarClan, they're fast!*

Ivypool was afraid that even if they managed to outpace the dogs, the vicious brutes could follow their scent back to camp. Then Whistlepaw and Icewing would be in danger too.

Suddenly Dovewing yowled, "This way!"

She veered aside and began racing along the edge of the small Thunderpath. Ahead of them loomed a fence, a solid barrier made of thin strips of wood interlaced with each other. Ivypool and Rootspring followed.

Ivypool risked a glance over her shoulder and saw that the dogs were gaining, their paws eating up the ground, their tails and floppy ears flying. She forced every last scrap of speed out of her muscles, but the gap between her and the fence seemed to close so slowly. She could hear the panting of the leader, and the yapping of the smaller dog seemed to sound right on her tail.

Then Dovewing, just ahead, reached the fence and hurled herself upward. Rootspring followed and Ivypool scrambled after them to a precarious paw hold at

the top.

Looking back, she saw the dogs halt at the bottom of the fence, whining in frustration that their prey had escaped. The bigger dog slammed its paws against the wooden lattice, making it shake so much that Ivypool was afraid she would lose her balance.

Careful not to drop her mouse, she snarled, "Get lost, flea-pelts!" and then let herself fall onto the other side of the fence, landing in a bush with strange-smelling leaves.

For a moment, all she could do was pant. When she had her breath back, she fought her way out of the bush and looked around to see that she was in a Twoleg garden. More bushes surrounded a small patch of grass stretching up to the Twoleg den. Everything was quiet except for the whining of the dogs on the other side of the fence.

Rootspring emerged out of a nearby bush. "That was close!" he panted, dropping his mouse. "Can you believe those kittypets? Making a deal with dogs?"

"Mange-pelts," Ivypool responded. "There are enough mice in that barn for every cat."

Dovewing padded up to them from where she had been peering through the garden gate. "I don't think we should head farther into the Twolegplace," she meowed. "We'll just have to wait until the dogs give up and go home."

The whining and scrabbling on the other side of the fence seemed to go on for a long time, but finally it stopped and the reek of dog faded. Rootspring leaped up onto the fence again. "They're gone," he reported.

With Dovewing in the lead, the three cats ventured cautiously out of the garden and headed back toward their camp. Dovewing picked up the pace until they were racing across the hillside; Ivypool couldn't help glancing back now and again in case somehow the dogs had managed to follow them, but nothing moved in the land behind them.

When they reached the stream, Icewing and Whistlepaw were waiting for them; Icewing was pacing restlessly while Whistlepaw was crouching on a rock beside the stream, her wide-eyed gaze fixed on the hill. Both looked relieved to see Ivypool and the others sloshing through the stream.

"What happened?" Whistlepaw's voice shook. "We were worried about you."

As Ivypool dropped her prey, the whole experience suddenly struck her as funny. It had been dangerous too, of course, but now that they were safe in camp . . . She collapsed on her side, letting out *mrrows* of laughter. *Kittypets making a deal with dogs! It's absurd! Whatever next?*

Rootspring and Dovewing joined in, Rootspring lying on his back and waving his paws in the air. Icewing and Whistlepaw looked on, mystified.

"Do you all have bees in your brain?" Icewing asked.

"No." Ivypool sat up, forcing back the laughter that still bubbled up inside her. "We just met some nasty kittypets, that's all."

Icewing blinked in confusion. "How nasty can kittypets be?"



“Very nasty,” Ivypool replied.

For some reason that set her off, and, along with Rootspring and Dovewing, she collapsed into laughter again.

Ivypool caught her sister’s eye, and her giggles intensified until she could barely take a breath. It felt strange to be able to laugh again, but it was good, too. How long had it been since she and Dovewing had shared a moment like this? The laughter seemed to spread through her whole body, bringing strength and energy with it—and the memory, too, of happier times. *Maybe I’ll feel this way again. Maybe Fernsong and I will laugh together again one day.* But then a shiver of guilt crept through her pelt. *Cats in mourning don’t laugh,* she told herself. *What would Bristlefrost think if she could see me, chuckling away, with her dead and gone? Would she think I’m forgetting her?*

*Am I?*

Abruptly, Ivypool stopped laughing and straightened up. Dovewing and Rootspring soon recovered, too, and they turned their attention to the prey. Daylight was fading as they shared the three mice. Along the horizon the clouds were breaking up, letting a last gleam of sunlight cast long scarlet rays across the landscape.

“The sky is clearing,” Icewing pointed out. “Maybe we can be on our way tomorrow.”

*Yes, to continue the quest,* Ivypool mused as the light faded. *Maybe we’ll find out what we’re supposed to do. And maybe, once we know what that is, I can focus on the goal and get out of my own head.*



## Chapter 5



*But the following morning the clouds* rolled in again, bringing a thin, drizzling rain. The elder bush where they had made their den didn't offer much shelter, and rain trickled down through the leaves until their pelts and their bedding were soaked. It was so long since they had seen the fox-head mountain, it was almost as if it didn't exist.

Ivypool looked out of the bush on the day after that to see the rain still falling; a heavy weight of misery enveloped her like a smothering pelt. "We can't go on like this," she told her companions, drawing back into the bush. "Those mice from the barn are the only thing we've found to eat since we've been here, but until the clouds lift, we don't know where to go. What are we going to do?"

"We have to find prey somewhere," Rootspring responded. "My belly thinks my throat's clawed out."

Ivypool nodded. It seemed a long time since the mice they had shared. "The rain seems to be keeping the prey inside. Do you think we should go back to the barn?"

"Oh, sure." Dovewing flicked her tail dismissively. "You want to meet Zeke and his little friends again? Or the dogs? Go right ahead."

Ivypool shuddered at the thought. Their expedition had seemed funny once they were safely back in camp, but it had been terrifying at the time. "You're right; we can't," she told her sister. "But there's no prey around here. Where can we find some?"

"I know you won't like this, but . . .," Whistlepaw began, then let her voice die away.

"We don't have many choices," Icewing pointed out after a moment, when the WindClan cat said nothing more. "If you have an idea, tell us what it is."

"I thought . . ." Whistlepaw still sounded hesitant. "We could go into the Twolegplace and try to find some kittypet food."

"What?" Ivypool exclaimed. "We're warriors!"

"Yeah, we don't eat kittypet food," Rootspring agreed. "And what if the kittypets there are as bad as the ones we met in the barn?"

"They couldn't be!" Ivypool mewed. "And it doesn't matter if they are. Clan cats don't eat kittypet garbage."

"All the same, it would be better than starving," Icewing pointed out. "We don't know how long we'll be stuck here, and we have to find some way to survive."

The RiverClan cat's support seemed to give Whistlepaw more confidence. When she spoke again, there was the authority of a medicine cat in her voice. "Don't forget that we're on a quest from StarClan," she meowed. "Yes, taking food from Twolegs is bad, but wouldn't it be worse if we fail to complete our mission?"

"You have a point," Ivypool admitted. The three mice from the barn hadn't been much, shared among five of them, and that had been two days before. She was beginning to feel weak and sleepy, and she was afraid that if they didn't move soon, they wouldn't be able to move at all. "What do you think?" she asked the others.

There was a long pause, and then Dovewing nodded. "I think Whistlepaw is right. Sure, warriors don't eat kittypet food, but these are unusual circumstances. I don't think any cat would blame us, even if they found out—which they won't. Let's go for it."

Ivypool pushed down her feelings of guilt as all the cats left the camp and headed for the Twolegplace. Rootspring took the lead, choosing a different direction so that they could avoid the barn and the unfriendly kittypets. The land here was more broken up, with constant dips and hollows, and rocks poking up out of the turf. At least the rain had stopped, and the harder ground made the going easier.

The Twolegplace still wasn't in sight when there was the sound of thrumming paw steps up ahead, and a rabbit appeared over the next rise, racing straight at them.

"Catch it!" Dovewing meowed.

All five cats spread out across the hillside in case the rabbit changed course, and bounded upward ready to intercept it. Ivypool breathed in the rabbit's scent and could already imagine sinking her teeth into the juicy flesh.

But when the rabbit was almost underneath their paws, two more cats appeared over the brow of the hill, hard in pursuit of the fleeing prey.

*Oh, no, not the nasty kittypets again!* Ivypool thought.

Unable to stop herself, she barreled into the leading cat and collapsed on one side. The second one knocked Whistlepaw over, sending her flying in a tangle of paws and tail. Rootspring tripped over her, while Icewing made a wild swipe at the rabbit and missed. Dovewing dashed after it, but the rabbit dodged her outstretched paws and vanished into a narrow gap between two rocks.

"Fox dung!" Dovewing exclaimed.

Breathing hard, Ivypool sat up and looked around. Her companions were recovering, finding their paws and shaking out their pelts. The two strangers—not the barn cats after all—were surveying them curiously, seeming not at all dismayed to be faced with a group of unknown cats, or bothered that they had lost their prey.

They were both young toms, about the age of Clan apprentices. One was black and white, the other a dark tabby; their faces and wiry body shape were so alike that Ivypool guessed they must be littermates. They didn't smell or look like kittypets, unlike the cats they had met in the barn.

"Hi," the black-and-white tom meowed. "Sorry about that. I hope we didn't hurt you."

Ivypool admired his confidence: Given that they were so clearly outnumbered, he might have been worried that she and her friends would hurt *them*. “No, we’re fine,” she mewed.

“We haven’t seen you around here before,” the dark tabby tom remarked.

“No, we’re just passing through,” Rootspring responded. “We don’t want to bother any cat.”

“Oh, you won’t bother us,” the black-and-white tom assured them cheerfully. “We like making new friends. I’m Slate, and my brother here is Beach.”

“Greetings,” Icewing meowed, dipping her head. “I’m Icewing, this yellow tom is Rootspring, the gray she-cat is Dovewing, and the silver-and-white tabby is Ivypool. The little gray tabby is Whistlepaw.”

Dovewing, however, still had a suspicious look, in spite of the young toms’ friendliness. “You’re not more of that nasty kittypet gang, are you?” she asked.

Beach and Slate exchanged a confused look, as if they weren’t sure what Dovewing was talking about. “No,” Slate replied at last. “We don’t hang around with anyone else. We’re littermates, and we live alone. You know, two toms living our best life. Connecting with the earth.”

“Hunting. Chatting with she-cats,” Beach added. As he spoke, he cast an admiring glance at Dovewing.

“It’s no use looking like that at me,” Dovewing responded, relaxing a little, amusement replacing her suspicion. “I’m old enough to be your mother. Besides, I have a mate, and kits. The last thing I need is two more young cats to look after.” She gave her shoulder fur a quick lick. “Thanks, though. I’m flattered.”

Ivypool rolled her eyes. By the look of them, these toms were far too young to be padding after she-cats. “How old are you?” she asked. “Are you trained to hunt? Old enough to be out on your own? Does your mother know where you are?” She thought of her own kits when they had been apprentices. She would never have wanted them to stray out of the safety of the Clan.

“Oh, yes,” Beach replied. “Definitely old enough, and our mother told us it was time to come out here.”

“Yes,” Slate added. “You see, the group of cats we grew up with, they’re all she-cats. They connect to the spirit world, and the toms, they connect—”

“Great StarClan!” Rootspring interrupted. His eyes were wide with shock. “Are you from the *Sisters*?”

Slate nodded vigorously. “Yes.”

“You know about the Sisters?” Beach sounded surprised.

“I’m a descendant of them, too,” Rootspring explained. “My father, Tree, was Moonlight’s son. When he lived among the Sisters, his name was Earth.”

"Awesome! It's like we're kin, sort of," Beach meowed. "So how did you end up with these cats?"

He and Slate gathered together with Rootspring, who began explaining about the Clans and how his father had joined SkyClan.

Ivypool let their conversation flow over her. Despite the sunny attitude of the toms, she felt her fur rising with hostility against the queen who had let these young cats—her sons—out of her sight, to wander and take care of themselves. She noticed that Beach had a nasty cut on his flank that was oozing pus; the flesh around it looked puffy and red from infection.

*That could kill him if it's not treated!*

She had never been fond of the Sisters, especially since they'd helped Bristlefoot get into the Dark Forest, but now she felt her belly churning with anger. The picture of Flipclaw, her own tom-kit, rose into her mind. He hadn't been much older than these tomcats when he had been selected by Ashfur to train as a medicine cat, even though he had never had a vision and had no desire to heal. Ashfur merely wanted to have a medicine cat left in the Clan when he exiled Jayfeather and Alderheart for disagreeing with him. Poor Flipclaw had been out of his depth, desperately trying to help his Clanmates when he barely understood which herb was which. Ivypool hadn't been able to protect him from those struggles, but at least she had been there for him to vent to. At least she had *tried*. Because a mother would never stop trying for her kits—not even, she mused sadly, when they were gone.

*How dare the Sisters throw their kits away like this? Don't they know how precious kits are?*

Meanwhile, Dovewing had joined Rootspring and the two toms, and had begun to explain how they were on a quest to the fox-head mountain. "But this awful weather is holding us back," she told them. "We can't work out which direction we should be traveling."

"That's tough," Slate mewed sympathetically.

"We might be able to help," Beach suggested. "Why don't you come back to our camp? It's a bit sheltered from the rain, and we can share prey—well, we can when we catch it."

"Oh, we can help you with that," Dovewing put in. "We're trained to hunt—not that you could tell, by what happened with the rabbit."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Icewing added.

Slate shrugged. "There'll be others. And we can help you connect to the earth," he added.

"Yeah, that's our *thing*," Beach's eyes were lit with enthusiasm. "We might be able to figure out where you need to go."

Ivypool glanced over at Rootspring, remembering his own efforts to "connect to the earth." Rootspring twitched an ear and glanced away as if to say, *Let's see what happens. I withhold judgment*. Ivypool didn't have high hopes for these young toms'

guidance, but she was tempted by the idea of relaxing somewhere sheltered from the rain. Besides, going with the young toms would give Whistlepaw the chance to look at Beach's wound.

"I think we should go," she declared.

There was a murmur of agreement from her companions.

"Thank you," said Rootspring. "It's kind of you to take in so many visitors."

"Oh, it'll be amazing!" Beach replied, his eyes shining. "We've never had guests before! This is going to be a lot of fun!"

"Great!" Slate exclaimed. "Just follow us!"

The toms' camp was in a rocky hollow, their den sheltered by a thick clump of gorse bushes. There was a small pool at the bottom, and the sides were covered in dry grass and vines.

"This is a pretty good spot," Rootspring murmured as the Clan cats crossed the lip of the hollow and made their way downward.

Ivypool wrinkled her nose. The scents of crow-food and stale bedding rose up from the camp, and she could spot debris scattered around the pool. "We'll have to do something about this," she muttered to herself.

Slate and Beach obviously had no idea how to keep their surroundings clean, but she couldn't be too annoyed with them. She remembered too clearly when her own kits were the same age. Of course Bristlefrost had been frighteningly capable, even then, she remembered with a renewed pang of grief, but that was Bristlefrost. Flipclaw seemed to leave a path of chaos behind him wherever he went, and Thriftear preferred to only clean up when things had gotten truly unpleasant. Like all Clan apprentices, they had to be trained to keep the camp clean, especially the dens, or they would probably have been just as careless.

*And of course, Ivypool mused, there's no training happening here.* The toms were truly on their own.

"Welcome!" Beach meowed as the Clan cats reached the bottom of the hollow. "This is our camp. Isn't it great?"

"Very impressive," Dovewing responded, casting a dubious glance around at all the mess.

"Make yourselves at home," Beach invited. "We'll go and catch some prey for you." He and Slate raced off, leaving the Clan cats to sit beside the pool and wait.

"Do you think they really know how to hunt?" Icewing asked.

"They're very sweet, but they clearly don't know how to tidy up," Dovewing murmured.

"I think they do know how to hunt," Rootspring replied. "There's enough crow-food scattered around here, and they would probably have caught that rabbit if we hadn't gotten in the way."

Dovewing took a drink from the pool, then sat up, scattering water drops from her whiskers. "Well. They aren't Clan cats, and it seems they don't get much from the Sisters in the way of guidance. Do you think we should clean the place for them?"

"No." Ivypool knew exactly what they ought to do. The time for mothering these two young cats was over; what they needed now was to be treated like apprentices. "I think we should show them how to do it, and explain why it matters."

"Good idea," Dovewing agreed. "Let them learn, and then they can keep up with it."

"There's something I have to do," Whistlepaw began, her eyes full of anxiety. "That's a terrible wound on Beach's side. I need to go and look for some herbs to fight the infection. It's not too bad yet, but if he doesn't get help, then he'll start to feel sick, and sooner or later he'll die."

"Then he's lucky you're here, Whistlepaw," Icewing meowed. "But you're not going alone. We don't know what might be out there. I'll come with you."

Ivypool closed her eyes to rest, listening to Dovewing and Rootspring discussing their quest and wondering how they were going to find their way again if the rain didn't let up.

"I don't think these two cats are going to be able to help us find the fox-head mountain," Dovewing murmured. "I think their heads are full of thistle-fluff."

"I'm not sure," Rootspring responded. "They come from the Sisters, after all."

"So do you," Dovewing pointed out. "And it didn't work when you tried to connect."

Rootspring sighed, acknowledging that she was right. "I wish Tree were here," he mewed gloomily. "He's the expert, not me."

Not long after, Ivypool heard the sound of approaching paw steps and roused from her doze to see Whistlepaw padding down into the hollow with a bundle of horsetail in her jaws. Icewing followed, limping along on three paws, with the fourth paw carrying a massive wad of cobweb.

They barely had time to greet their companions when Beach and Slate returned, carrying a plump rabbit between them.

"Great catch!" Rootspring exclaimed, his eyes gleaming.

Slate dropped the rabbit beside the pool and gave his shoulder an embarrassed lick. "It's not hard, when you know where to look," he meowed. "Beach and I do all right for ourselves."

All seven cats gathered around to share the rabbit. Ivypool relished every mouthful; her belly hadn't felt full since the mice they had caught in the barn.

When every cat had eaten as much as they wanted, Beach shoved the scraps to one side and began to lap from the pool.

"What do you do with leftover prey?" Ivypool asked.

Both young toms stared at her as if they didn't understand the question.



"Not a lot, by the look of it," Dovewing meowed. "Look, leftovers you don't want should be carried out of camp and buried. If you don't do it, you're going to get rats and crows, and I don't think you want that."

"Huh. There was a rat nosing around the other day," Slate admitted.

"What did you do with it?" Dovewing asked.

Beach blinked. "We ate it. But *blech*—they're not as tasty as rabbits, are they?"

Ivypool rolled her eyes. "No, they're not tasty. And they spread disease, and they bite." She paused. "The first thing you need to do is make a fresh-kill pile," she explained. "Anything you catch goes on there, including any leftovers that will be good the next day. Since there's only two of you, the pile shouldn't be too big, or the prey will start rotting before you can eat it. Leftovers that aren't good, as well as bones, fur, and feathers, should be taken out and buried, like Dovewing said."

"Feathers you might use for bedding," Dovewing added. "If they're clean."

"And that's something else we need to talk about," Ivypool continued. "I can smell your den from here. When was the last time you changed your bedding?"

Beach and Slate froze and exchanged a guilty glance. "Not sure," Beach muttered.

"You should change it every half-moon *at least*," Dovewing told them. "More often if it starts to smell."

"We'll leave that now, because everything you could find for bedding will be wet," Ivypool meowed. "But you can clear up all this crow-food right now."

Once again the brothers exchanged a glance. "Do we have to?" Slate asked.

"No, you don't." Ivypool's voice was crisp. "We're not your mentors. But it will be better if you do it, and get into the habit, so that your camp is a nice place to be." *Some cat should have taught them this before they left the Sisters.* Ivypool didn't speak the thought aloud, because she didn't want to upset the young cats by criticizing their mother, but she felt angry once again that they had been sent away with only vague ideas of how to look after themselves. "Trust me," she went on, trying to sound more motherly. "It's not hard once you're used to it, and you will like your camp better, I promise."

"Plus," Dovewing put in, glancing from Beach to Slate, "any she-cats you bring here will be much more comfortable. You know what's attractive in a mate?"

Slate looked at her eagerly. "A very bushy tail?" he asked, twitching his actually rather bushy tail.

Ivypool could see her sister struggling to stifle a laugh. "No," Dovewing replied, "or, well, that isn't what I was getting at. I was going to say, it's very attractive when a tom can take care of himself—keep his nest tidy and such."

"Okay." Beach sprang to his paws. "Let's do it. Slate, you start over on that side, and I'll start here."

Ivypool suppressed a purr of amusement as they scampered off. *They would make good apprentices—they do pay attention when they're invested!*

When all the crow-food had been carried out of camp, Whistlepaw called Beach over to her. "That's a nasty wound you have," she began. "How did you get it?"

"We went too near the Twopaws' place," Beach told her. "And we had a fight with a dog."

*Could that have been one of the dogs that are teamed up with the kittypets?* Ivypool wondered. *Horrible brutes.*

"We chased it off, though," Slate put in, puffing out his chest proudly. "It went whimpering back to its Twopaws."

Whistlepaw nodded. "Like I said, nasty. And the wound's not healing, is it?"

For a moment Beach looked disconcerted. "No," he mewed, and then added, shrugging, "but it will. It's fine."

"No, it is *not* fine." For a moment Ivypool thought that Whistlepaw sounded like Jayfeather, the grouchy ThunderClan medicine cat. *I guess you don't argue with a medicine cat.* "It's infected, and it won't get better unless it's treated," Whistlepaw continued. "I'm a medicine cat. I can do that for you."

"What's a medicine cat?" Slate asked.

"A cat who knows about herbs and healing," Dovewing replied. "And they help their Clan to connect with StarClan—the spirit world, I mean."

"Cool!" Beach exclaimed, looking at Whistlepaw with new respect. "Okay, then. What are you going to do?"

"First I want you to give that wound a good lick," Whistlepaw instructed. "Get it as clean as you can. While you're doing that, I'm going to chew up this horsetail to make a poultice to fight the infection."

Obediently, Beach lay on his uninjured side and bent his head to give long, rhythmic licks over the red, puffy flesh.

"You could do this for yourselves, if you get injured again," Ivypool pointed out. "Horsetail is good for infections, and so is marigold." *The Sisters could have taught them that before they sent them away.*

When Whistlepaw had finished chewing up the horsetail, she patted it onto Beach's wound and fastened the poultice in place with the cobweb Icewing had brought.

"That should help," she meowed, sitting back with a look of satisfaction. "I'll change it tomorrow and see how the wound is doing."

*Tomorrow?* Ivypool was startled to think that they would be staying another day with the two young toms, until she realized that the daylight was already dying. *A night in that smelly den it is, then.*

"Thank you," Beach mewed, then continued, sounding a little embarrassed, "You know, Whistlepaw, you have beautiful fur. It's very . . . tabby."

"Well spotted," Rootspring muttered into Ivypool's ear, forcing her to stifle a snort of laughter.

"Great tail, too," Slate added, thumping his own bushy tail on the ground.

Whistlepaw's eyes were alight with amusement. "I'm sorry," she responded. "But like I told you, I'm a medicine cat. That means I can't take a mate. I have to be ready to care for all my Clanmates, and I can't do that and raise kits."

Beach's whiskers drooped. "Oh, mouse dung . . . I mean, of course . . . I understand."

"But, you know," Whistlepaw went on, "she-cats don't always like compliments about their fur and so on. Maybe when you get to know them, but not right at the beginning. Try to make friends first."

"She's right," Dovewing agreed. "If there's a she-cat you like, try to do things together. Ask her to go hunting with you, or do a patrol. Well, you don't go on patrol here, but you get the idea."

"And don't look at her as if she's a juicy bit of prey," Ivypool added. "That can make a she-cat very uncomfortable. A she-cat wants to be treated like the capable warrior—or any kind of cat—that she is."

"Ask yourself what sort of cat she might like." Icewing's gaze was full of experience. "And ask yourself, can you be that cat? If not, maybe she isn't the right mate for you."

The two young toms were silent for a moment, blinking thoughtfully. Ivypool realized how difficult it was for them to learn the right way to behave, when they were out here alone with no older cats to guide them. Her heart was suddenly flooded with tenderness for them.

"You could come with us," she suggested hesitantly, "and when we go home, you could join a Clan. You'd be apprentices and learn lots."

"And there'd be plenty of she-cats for you to pad after," Rootspring added, his eyes sparkling. "Clever, strong warriors . . . who can appreciate a kind, tidy tom with a bushy tail."

Slate turned to Ivypool with a shocked expression. "Oh, we couldn't do that! I mean, thanks and all that, but we can't be tied down."

"Yeah." Beach backed up his littermate. "We're free! We're living the dream!"

"Okay," Ivypool sighed regretfully. Glancing around, with the stink of stale bedding still in her nose, she wondered if this really was "living the dream." *At least the camp looks better now that it's clean.* "But if you change your minds before we leave, just let us know."

"And talking of leaving," Icewing mewed, "you said you could connect to the earth and find the direction we should take. Could you give it a try, please?"

"Sure we can!" Beach responded.

He would have jumped up, except that Whistlepaw laid a restraining paw on his shoulder. "If you move about too much, your poultice will fall off," she told him. "You need to take it easy until the dressing can come off."

"Okay." Beach stretched out, laid one forepaw flat against the earth, and closed his eyes. "I'll do it from here."

Ivypool could feel tension prickling every hair on her pelt as she fixed her gaze on Beach. Her companions were watching him too. *Please, StarClan, give us some guidance*, she prayed.

But after several heartbeats that seemed to stretch out into a moon, Beach opened his eyes and huffed out a long breath. "Sorry, I'm not getting anything," he meowed. "Sometimes the earth doesn't want to be connected with."

"But we're not giving up." Slate sprang to his paws. "We'll try something else. Bushes—look, bushes have roots that go way down into the earth, right? Maybe if I climb into a bush, I can sort of tap into the roots and get the connection that way."

Ivypool thought it sounded as if the young tom had bees in his brain, but she didn't say so. She liked his enthusiasm too much to spoil it. Still, she had to ask herself if the young toms really knew what they were doing. She'd assumed they had been trained by the Sisters to connect to the earth, but maybe this was something else they'd been left to figure out on their own.

"Worth a try," Rootspring commented, as Slate waited, bright-eyed, for his reaction.

Slate dashed for the nearest bush and clambered up into its branches, letting out a squeak as a thorn drove into his paw.

Ivypool winced for him. "He's going to get badly hurt," she muttered, half to herself.

The young tom stopped halfway up the bush, wrapped his paws around a branch, and closed his eyes. This time Ivypool didn't feel the slightest tingle of anticipation; she knew very well it wasn't going to work. And she wasn't disappointed when Slate clambered down again, shaking his head.

"Nothing. Sorry," he mewed dejectedly.

Scraps of debris from the bush were clinging to his pelt, and he kept one forepaw raised where the thorn was still stuck.

Whistlepaw beckoned him over and licked around the thorn until she could get her teeth to it and pull it out. A few drops of blood oozed from Slate's pad. "Now what should you do?" she asked.

Slate stared at his paw. "Put a bit of that stuff—horsetail—on it?" he guessed.

"Exactly. Well done." Whistlepaw passed one of the remaining stems to him. "Here, you can do it yourself. You won't need cobweb; it's not a serious injury."

"I thought of something else," Beach began as his littermate was chewing the horsetail and patting his paw into the juice. "Maybe we can summon the spirits, like the Sisters do." He threw his head back and let out an eerie wail.

"I don't think that's quite what the Sisters do," Ivypool whispered to Rootspring, who was struggling hard to hold back laughter.

"It's more likely to drive spirits off," Icewing responded. "Along with all the prey within earshot."

Beach kept on trying, while Ivypool had to stop herself clamping her paws over her ears, until Rootspring rose to his paws, padded over to Beach, and rested a paw on his shoulder.

"It's not working, is it?" he asked gently. "We're grateful to you for trying, but is there any other cat who might help us? Any cat you could take us to?"

To Ivypool's relief, Beach and Slate didn't seem offended or upset by Rootspring's words. They looked at each other for a heartbeat, until Slate exclaimed, "We could take them to the Sisters!"

"Are you allowed to go back?" Rootspring asked. "My father, Tree, made it sound as if once the Sisters cast you out, you were out for good."

"No, it's not like that," Beach replied. "We're allowed to go back, but only to visit. We can't stay with them."

"The Sisters welcome outsiders," Slate added. "I'm sure they'll be happy to help you. And they have all kinds of ways to connect with the spirit world and find out where you need to go."

"I'm sure they do," Ivypool meowed. She was feeling doubtful, knowing that when the Sisters had left Clan territory, they had warned the Clans not to expect help from them again. *But we can't go on like this. We have to try something.* "The Clan cats have met the Sisters before. We know each other well."

"That's good," Beach told her. "You'll be on your way before you know it!"

*I wish I could believe that,* Ivypool thought.



## Chapter 6



*Ivypool* was so exhausted that spending the night in the smelly den bothered her much less than she had expected. At least it was dry under the rocks and gorse; she hadn't slept so well since the wet weather had set in.

When she emerged from the den the next morning, she found Whistlepaw changing Beach's dressing, while Dovewing sat beside the pool, grooming herself.

"The others have gone hunting," she told Ivypool. "We'll eat, and then go visit the Sisters."

"That's healing well." Whistlepaw gave Beach's injury a good sniff; Ivypool could see that his flesh wasn't as red or puffy as the day before, and there was no more pus. "I won't put on another poultice, seeing that you have to travel," Whistlepaw went on. "We'll just trickle some horsetail juice into the wound and see how you do."

"Thank you," Beach mewed. "It feels loads better."

Just then the hunters reappeared, carrying another rabbit and a couple of plump mice and looking very pleased with themselves.

"The prey was running well for you," Ivypool commented.

"We thought we would take the mice as a present for the Sisters," Rootspring explained. "It's only right, when we're asking for their help."

Ivypool's belly was comfortably full again when she and her companions set out, led by Slate and Beach, who carried the gift of mice. For once, the rain had stopped, and a stiff breeze was moving the clouds across the sky. There were even a few breaks where the sun could peek through.

The two young toms led them past the Twolegplace and the barn where the Clan cats had met the hostile kittypets. Ivypool gave it a sidelong glance as they padded past; they were far too close to it for her liking. "Do you ever go there?" she asked Beach, who was walking at her side. "Have you met those kittypets?"

Beach rolled his eyes. "We explored it when we first came this way," he replied. "And yes, we met the kittypets, and the dogs they hang out with. It was one of them that gave me this wound." He pointed with his ears at his injury, which was healing well now, with the clean scent of horsetail. "It sounds like you met them, too," he added.

"We did," Ivypool told him. "And we were winning the fight with them when they called up their dogs. I don't think I've ever run so fast in my life!"

While she was speaking, Dovewing, who was in the lead, glanced back. "Let's pick up the pace a bit," she meowed. "We need to get well away from—"

The rest of his words were drowned in a loud baying sound, and suddenly the two dogs erupted from around the back of the barn and hurled themselves at the group of cats. Ivypool felt her stomach drop at the sight of the muscular brindled dog and his gleaming white teeth.

"Fox dung!" Rootspring exclaimed. "Scatter!"

*They must have scented us, Ivypool thought as she fled. Or the kittypets spotted us and set them on us. They still want revenge for the mice we "stole"!*

The small white dog was chasing her; she could hear its paw steps thrumming on the ground, far closer than she liked. She imagined its teeth meeting in her hindquarters.

Suddenly everything swelled up inside Ivypool, devouring her like a forest fire after a lightning strike. The mysterious quest, the foul weather, her worry about events at home, her grief for Bristlefrost . . . She couldn't bear it any longer.

"I've had it with you!" she screeched, spinning around to confront the white dog. "Shove off, flea-pelt!"

The dog skidded to a halt and stared at Ivypool as if it couldn't believe that its quarry had dared to turn on it. For a few heartbeats it stood gaping at her, and in that brief respite Ivypool flung herself at it and slashed her claws across its nose.

The dog let out a yelp of pain and backed off. Ivypool followed it, letting her fur bush up and laying her ears down against her head. "Want more?" she snarled.

Clearly the dog didn't. It backed off farther, stumbling over its own paws, then fled in the direction of the barn, yelping all the way.

Ivypool watched for a moment to be sure it was leaving, then looked around for the other dog and the rest of her companions.

What she saw made her fury flare up as if the fire had turned a tree into a roaring column of flame. The big brindled dog had caught Slate by the scruff and was shaking him to and fro; Slate was vainly twisting to claw at the dog's jaws, but he couldn't reach.

Dovewing and Rootspring were attacking the dog, darting in from opposite sides to land a blow, and then leaping out of range, in the smooth battle moves they had practiced since they were apprentices. Icewing had her teeth fastened in one of the brute's hind legs, while Whistlepaw was doing her best to hold Beach back from lunging in to rescue his littermate.

Ivypool let out her rage in a single bloodcurdling yowl, then launched herself straight at the dog, barreling into its flank. The force of her attack carried it off its paws; she caught a brief glimpse of Slate flying into the air.

The dog lay on its side, its underbelly exposed; Ivypool saw her opportunity and slashed at it, blood following the line of her claws. Dovewing began battering it around the ears, while Rootspring joined Icewing to strike at its hindquarters.

Only a few moments passed before the dog had clearly had enough. Throwing off the cats, it staggered to its paws and with a final snarl limped away to disappear behind the barn. All the cats watched it go.



"Great StarClan, Ivypool!" Rootspring exclaimed, staring at her with admiration in his eyes. "Where did that come from?"

Now that Ivypool's fury was ebbing, she felt shaken, realizing she had been using techniques learned long ago in the Dark Forest. "Stupid mange-pelts," she muttered. She caught Icewing's gaze and saw the RiverClan cat give a subtle nod of understanding. She had trained in the Dark Forest, as well.

She remembered how scared she had been to enter the Place of No Stars, and how much courage, determination, and loyalty she had needed to find within herself so that she could go on spying for her Clan. *The qualities that made Squirrelstar choose me as deputy*; she thought ruefully, admitting to herself how far she had fallen from those days. And yet she had drawn on inner reserves to drive off the dogs. *Maybe I can be that cat again.*

"You were great!" Dovewing gave her a lick around her ear. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine," Ivypool replied, aware that neither dog had touched her with claws or teeth. "What about Slate, though?"

The young tom was stretched out a few tail-lengths away, with Whistlepaw bending over him and Beach crouching at his side, gazing at him with eyes full of worry.

"It's okay. I'm fine. Honestly, I'm fine," Slate was repeating over and over, but his eyes were wide with shock and he was shivering.

"I wish I'd brought the last of that horsetail with me," Whistlepaw mewed. "You have some nasty puncture wounds on your neck. They need treatment."

"I'll be fine," Slate insisted, but no cat was convinced.

Meanwhile Rootspring had turned away and was gazing at the barn, a wary look in his eyes. "I really think we should be on our way," he declared. "Those dogs might come back, or the kittypets, looking for revenge. Slate, are you fit to travel?"

"Sure I am." The young tom rose onto tottery legs.

"It's best, if you can," Whistlepaw meowed. "We're on our way to the Sisters, and they're sure to have what you need for those wounds."

This time Rootspring took the lead, while Dovewing and Whistlepaw flanked Slate on either side in case he stumbled. Beach scanned the area and recovered the two mice, which he carried by their tails. Ivypool and Icewing padded together at the rear; they kept a lookout, but neither the dogs nor the kittypets followed them.

They headed away from the Twolegplace, leaving the rocky hillside behind and moving into a stretch of light woodland. It wasn't the same as ThunderClan's forest, but Ivypool felt much more comfortable when she was padding along through trees.

The sky was still mostly gray, but there was no rain, and a faint breeze rustled the branches. Ivypool began to hope that the weather was changing. *Maybe our luck is changing, too, if the Sisters can put our paws on the right path.*

As they journeyed through the forest, Whistlepaw kept pausing to taste the air. After a while, she let out a pleased *mrow* and darted off into the undergrowth.

When she returned, she was carrying a couple of leaves, which she set down in front of Slate.

"This is thyme," she told him. "Eat it; it's good for shock."

Slate murmured thanks and licked the leaves up. He was obviously impressed by Whistlepaw, Ivypool thought—and not for her fur or her tail, attractive though they were, but for her expertise as a medicine cat.

When they set off again, Beach led the way down a long slope covered with fern, to a stream at the bottom. After following the stream for a few fox-lengths, the cats came to a tiny waterfall and a wide hollow beyond, encircled by more fern and bracken. Ivypool spotted several cats lapping at the stream, grooming themselves, or sharing tongues.

*The Sisters!*

Beach leaped down beside the waterfall into the hollow, and Slate—his paw steps steadier since he ate the thyme leaves—clambered after him. "It's us!" Beach yowled. "Look who we've brought to see you!"

"We caught mice for you!" Slate added.

The Clan cats followed more slowly, aware of how easy it would be to fall on the rocks slick with water. By the time they reached the bottom, a handsome white she-cat was waiting for them, a look of surprise on her face.

"Greetings, Snow." Ivypool dipped her head to the leader of the Sisters. "It's good to see you again."

"Greetings." Snow nodded in return, but her blue-eyed glance was cool, as if she couldn't say the same about the Clan cats. "You're the last cats I expected to see here. Why have you left your Clans?"

"That's a long story," Dovewing meowed, stepping up to stand beside Ivypool. "We need to talk to you about—"

"Rootspring!" A joyful yowl interrupted Dovewing's words.

Ivypool looked up to see a large, pale yellow cat bounding across the camp; she recognized her as Sunrise, Tree's sister, one of the cats who had helped the Clans when they were trying to fight off the impostor Ashfur. Two or three cats Ivypool hadn't seen before followed her and crowded excitedly around Rootspring.

Snow turned to Slate and Beach. "Thank you for the mice," she mewed. "You might like to take them to your mother. You'll find her in the nursery."

"The nursery?" Beach's eyes stretched wide. "Do you mean—"

Snow's voice grew gentler. "Yes, Flurry has given birth to three kits, just days ago. You have two new sisters and a new brother."

"Oh, wow!" Slate exclaimed.

The two of them took off, dashing across the camp, their mice dangling wildly by their tails. "Quietly!" Snow called after them.

"Slate was wounded," Whistlepaw meowed, looking a little flustered at the disappearance of the black-and-white tom. "He shouldn't be dashing around like

that; he needs treatment.”

Snow stretched out her tail and touched Whistlepaw’s shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t worry. We’ll see to it.”

Ivypool watched the two brothers go, feeling a pang in her heart to see them so young and so excited to meet their new family. She felt her fur begin to rise in anger once again that the Sisters would drive out young toms before they were ready to fend for themselves, but she forced the feeling down, knowing how much she and her companions needed the Sisters’ help.

“Now,” Snow began, when the young cats had disappeared into a fern-shaded den behind an old tree stump. “We need to talk. Come with me.”

She led the way to a stretch of moss in front of a hollow oak tree that Ivypool guessed was her den. As they moved off, Snow glanced over her shoulder. “Sunrise, fetch Moon and Tempest and come and join us,” she instructed.

The cats she had named arrived quickly; Ivypool remembered the long-furred gray cat Moon and the tabby Tempest; like Sunrise, they had been among the Sisters who had helped them with Ashfur.

“Tell us what has happened in the Clans since we last saw you,” Snow instructed. “We left you in sad circumstances.”

It was Rootspring who replied, though he sounded reluctant; Ivypool guessed that he did not want to dwell on that terrible time. “Well, as you know, Ashfur was defeated, thanks in part to your help,” he meowed. “And Bramblestar was able to return to his own body. Graystripe was badly wounded, but he managed to return to the living world before he died, and so he journeyed to StarClan.” His voice quivered slightly. “But Bristlefoot died in the Dark Forest. We haven’t seen or heard of her since.”

Murmurs of sorrow came from the group of Sisters. “What a dreadful fate for a brave cat.” Sunrise shook her head sadly. “Especially since we helped your Clanmates to pass into the Place of No Stars.”

“We honor those who traveled there as the Lights in the Mist,” Dovewing told her. “But two of them will never return to the Clans.”

“Graystripe was an outstanding warrior,” Snow declared; her initial aloof demeanor had vanished like dew in the sunlight. “And so was Bristlefoot. It is hard to lose such a young cat with such promise—and so brave, choosing to go into the Dark Forest to help the Clans.” She turned her head to gaze at Ivypool, her eyes full of sympathy. “She was your daughter, wasn’t she?”

“Yes.” Ivypool could hardly choke out the single word.

“Most of us have borne kits,” Sunrise mewed. “We can understand how it must feel to lose one. But at least you have Bristlefoot’s spirit to comfort you.”

“But I *don’t*!” It took all Ivypool’s strength not to start wailing her grief to the sky. “Bristlefoot died in the Dark Forest, and that means that she doesn’t exist

anywhere, not even as a spirit."

The Sisters exchanged confused glances. "All spirits exist somewhere," Tempest protested.

Ivypool could only shake her head; her throat closed up, and she couldn't manage to find any more words to explain. For a dizzying moment she asked herself if the Sisters could possibly be right. But then she thrust away even that tiny shred of hope. *The Sisters don't understand about the Clans.*

"A lot has happened since you left our territories." Dovewing unobtrusively touched Ivypool with her tail-tip as she changed the subject. "Bramblestar decided that his experience in the Dark Forest had taken too much out of him, and he didn't feel he could lead ThunderClan anymore. So StarClan allowed him to retire, and Squirrelflight is now Squirrelstar."

Snow narrowed her eyes. "We remember Squirrelflight." Ivypool swallowed; the Sisters' first meeting with ThunderClan's new leader, when she and Leafstar had been searching for new territory, hadn't been exactly friendly, though Squirrelflight had helped them in the end. "I'm sure she will make an excellent leader," Snow finished smoothly.

"We ought to do something to welcome our guests," Moon suggested, with a warm glance at the Clan cats. "Let's hold a feast! It could be in memory of Graystripe and Bristlefrost."

"That's an excellent idea," Snow meowed approvingly. "Moon, could you organize hunters? And meanwhile, our guests can rest and catch up with old friends."

*Friends?* Ivypool wondered. *Can we really call the Sisters friends?* Then she let herself relax, the fierce emotions of a few moments earlier gradually draining away. She felt curiously limp, and more tired than she expected. The day was barely past sunhigh.

"Thank you," she murmured to Snow. "We'll be very happy to do that."

Ivypool felt guilty for enjoying the feast. Meeting with the Sisters had brought back all the memories of that dreadful time when living cats had ventured into the Dark Forest and Bristlefrost had never come home. But it was good to share a succulent wood pigeon with Dovewing and listen to the Sisters tell stories of everything that had happened since they'd last met.

She spotted Beach and Slate across the camp, curled up one on each side of their mother, Flurry, who had left the nursery briefly to spend time with them. *They look so young. Ivypool thought, and so happy to be back with their family again.* Anger threatened her once again, but she pushed it down; it wasn't her place to criticize cats whose way of life was so very different from the Clans.

"Where did you go after you left Clan territories?" Rootspring asked Snow as he nibbled on a pigeon.

"Oh, we kept moving for a while," Snow replied. "We ended up in some sort of park, with cats who spent most of their time meditating."

"That sounds like the park Nightheart and Frostpaw visited." Icewing looked up from the vole she was eating. "Frostpaw really liked those cats. They taught her how to meditate."

"They were . . . interesting," Snow admitted. "But their ways weren't our ways. We didn't stay there long."

"We followed a river for a while, and then made camp near a Twolegplace." Moon took up the story. "That's where Tempest met her kittypet."

A ripple of amusement passed through the Sisters.

Tempest looked up, indignation in her eyes. "What's so funny about my kittypet?" she demanded. "He was lovely." Her voice grew dreamy. "He had beautiful long white fur . . . it was so soft! And his eyes were just the color of the sky on a sunny greenleaf morning."

"And he had a weird pushed-in face, and his name was Sweetums!" Moon let out a *mrrow* of laughter.

Tempest couldn't stop herself from echoing the *mrrow*. "Well, it was good while it lasted," she meowed. "I'm sorry he was so upset when we all moved on. He wanted to leave his housefolk and come with us, and I had to explain to him that we Sisters don't allow toms in our group."

"After that, when the weather got colder, we made camp near a lake," Snow continued. "We had a bout of greencough, but it soon cleared up, after we communed with the spirits. And then we came here."

Ivypool ate in silence, thinking how different the Sisters' lives were from her own. They were constantly moving from place to place, and never had anywhere they could really call home. While she had been relieved to leave for a bit, she knew how much she would miss the ThunderClan camp, her nest in the warriors' den, and the stone walls that kept out enemies if she ever had to leave permanently. She would miss the territory, too: all her knowledge of the best places to hunt, the dangerous places where foxes or badgers might be lurking, the small streams that meandered their way down to the lake, and the boundaries that guarded ThunderClan's forest.

She thought too about Tempest, and how she had left her kittypet behind with only the smallest twinge of regret. *I could never leave Fernsong.* She suddenly missed him with a physical pain, remembering the feeling of his fur brushing hers as they slept curled up next to each other. They hadn't been close lately, and she had been hiding things from him: how devastated she was by Bristlefrost's death, and how she had been sneaking away to talk to Rootspring. Still, she realized now that that wasn't fair to him. Fernsong had always cared for Ivypool and their kits above everything else, and she hadn't given him the chance to be there for her, instead disappearing into her own grief. *When I get home, she promised herself, I won't take him for*

*granted again.* Every hair on her pelt rose in a surge of yearning for her mate, for his scent, for the touch of his cheek against her own.

*I couldn't live like a Sister,* she decided. *Especially because of how they abandon their mates and send their tom-kits away.* The Sisters would never know, she realized, the trust that could rise between a she-cat and her mate, or the joy of sharing kits with their mate, of caring for them together as she and Fernsong had done. Her happiness in giving birth and seeing her kits grow up had been so much deeper because Fernsong had felt it too. *The Sisters have no idea what they're missing.*

Eventually twilight was gathering and the feast was drawing to an end. Clan cats and Sisters, happily stuffed full of prey, were sharing tongues or quietly talking to each other.

Then Snow rose to her paws. "It is time to hold a ceremony to honor Bristlefrost's and Graystripe's spirits," she announced.

A sense of dread prickled through Ivypool's pelt as she wondered what the ceremony might be. She still wasn't sure that the Sisters understood that Bristlefrost's spirit was gone. *What if they try to bring her back and fail?*

At once the Sisters moved to form a circle in the middle of the camp. Ivypool noticed that Flurry returned to the nursery, but Slate and Beach remained, settling down outside the circle. The Clan cats did the same, padding to join the young toms a couple of tail-lengths away from the Sisters. The clean, sharp tang of herbs came from Slate, and Ivypool guessed his wounds had been treated.

"Are you okay with this?" Dovewing asked as she sat beside Ivypool and wrapped her tail around her paws.

"I guess . . . I'm not sure," Ivypool confessed. Her feeling of dread still remained, like a dull ache all over her body, but at the same time she knew that it would be a terrible insult to the Sisters if she protested.

Dovewing pressed comfortingly against her side. "If it upsets you, we don't have to stay," she whispered.

When the Sisters had all taken their places, Snow rose to her paws. "In this ceremony we remember Graystripe and Bristlefrost, and we honor their courage and their dedication. Spirit of Graystripe, spirit of Bristlefrost, we send our voices to reach you; we give you ourselves so that you may speak to us from the afterlife."

Ivypool frowned, confused. "The afterlife?" she asked.

Snow gave her a patient look. "What happens to us after we die," she explained. "Whatever form we may take."

*Whatever form?* Ivypool winced. "What is she meowing about?" she murmured to Dovewing.

Her sister shrugged, equally bewildered.

Snow finished speaking and threw back her head, letting out a thin, drawn-out wailing that seemed to rise through the trees, higher and higher until Ivypool thought that it might reach the stars. *So this is what Beach was trying to do,* she thought. Perhaps it would work better this time.

Another cat took up the sound, then another and another, until the whole circle of Sisters had joined together in a weird interlacing of sound.

Then, across the circle, one of the Sisters stopped wailing and let out a high-pitched stream of words. "The sun is shining and the water runs clear!"

*That sounds like a StarClan spirit, Ivypool thought. But I don't think Graystripe would communicate with us to tell us about the weather! He would have more important things on his mind.*

More cats joined in, chanting words that Ivypool supposed were meant to come from the spirits. Their voices had changed, as if the spirits were really speaking through them.

"We journey through the sky; our paws touch the clouds!"

"Beware the fox; beware the snake; turn your paws toward the light."

Ivypool knew that she ought to be full of wonder at what was happening, but instead trepidation was building inside her like the threatening clouds that end in storm. *Why don't they listen to me when I tell them that Bristlefrost is gone?*

Then another voice rang out clearly across the circle. "Graystripe! Graystripe! Is it you?" The cat who spoke was Sunrise; a moment later, she added with a deeper tone, "Keep going, whatever happens. Your Clans need you!"

"That sounds like Graystripe!" Ivypool whispered, turning to stare at Dovewing.

Dovewing nodded. "He would always try to encourage us."

For a brief moment Ivypool felt a touch of hope, as delicate as the fall of a snowflake. Perhaps the ceremony wasn't all nonsense. Perhaps somehow she really could connect with Bristlefrost's spirit.

"Bristlefrost! Bristlefrost! Speak to us!" some cat cried out from further around the circle.

"Bristlefrost!" More cats took up the cry, until it seemed as if all the Sisters were calling the lost cat's name.

Ivypool sat rigid with hope. *Could this be why I was chosen to join the quest?* Perhaps the Sisters knew something about the afterlife that was hidden from the Clans, even the medicine cats. She could feel Dovewing at her side, silently supporting her, and began whispering her daughter's name under her breath, wondering what she would say to her if the Sisters reached her.

But there was no response to the Sisters' calling. The voices died away, and every cat was silent until Snow meowed, "We will try once more."

The thin, wailing cries rose up again, interspersed with Bristlefrost's name. Ivypool still clung to the last scraps of hope. If Bristlefrost's spirit existed anywhere, she surely must hear.

But again there was no response. The voices died away into confused murmuring. It seemed as though none of the Sisters could understand how a cat might die and leave no spirit behind.

Ivypool felt furious with herself for hoping; she had only given herself another chance to be disappointed. She had been right all along: Bristlefrost was gone. Sharp

spikes of resentment like thorns pierced her heart—the Sisters had stirred all this up again, just as she was beginning to remember how to laugh again, and how to open up to other cats who had experienced what she had. *I was feeling better, and now . . . now I feel worse than ever.*

The ceremony began again: no more names, just the continual wailing thrown up to the sky. Ivypool didn't want any more of it. "I'm sorry," she mewed to Dovewing. "I've had enough. I'm going to my nest."

"Stay a bit longer," Beach urged her as she rose to her paws. "It's great having you here."

"No, I'm done." Ivypool realized how curt she had sounded, and dipped her head. "But thanks."

As she padded away to the nest the Sisters had arranged for her, Ivypool admitted to herself how stupid she had been to suggest that the young toms might return with her to the Clans. What, had she been trying to replace her lost kit with two different, slightly used ones? Slate and Beach were charming and sweet, but they weren't hers. And they couldn't replace Bristlefrost. She was irreplaceable.

Settling into her nest, Ivypool saw a gray blur in the darkness as Dovewing padded up to her, her green eyes wide with sympathy.

"Is there anything I can do?" her sister asked. "Do you want me to stay with you?"

"No." Ivypool sighed out the word. "I'm better alone."

"Okay." Dovewing stooped to rub her muzzle against Ivypool's, then stepped back. "You know where I am if you want me."

Ivypool was grateful for her sister's concern, but she realized now that there was nothing Dovewing could do to alter the truth, and nothing that the quest could teach her. She wasn't going to find a new way to connect to a spirit that wasn't there. Even if they succeeded in bringing the memory of the forgotten cats back to StarClan, that didn't mean they could bring back Bristlefrost. Bristlefrost wasn't forgotten at all—quite the contrary.

*I just have to accept it,* Ivypool thought, her whole body gripped by grief. *My kit is gone.*





## Chapter 7



*All that night Ivypool's sleep was disturbed.* She kept hearing the Sisters wailing, and couldn't tell whether the ceremony was still continuing, or whether the sound had invaded her dreams. Finally, as dawn light began creeping through the branches of the bush above her head, she gave up the struggle.

She rose to her paws, every one of her limbs aching and her head fuzzy from tiredness. She tried to shake off the feeling the way she shook off the scraps of bedding from her pelt. She was eager to get moving. Surely the Sisters would be able to give them directions to the fox-head mountain.

But when Ivypool emerged from her nest, she found the Sisters' camp quiet. None of the Sisters, none of her traveling companions, were awake yet. She could hear nothing except a breeze stirring the branches and the twittering of a bird in the trees. The dawn light was still pale; there was no sign of where the sun would rise.

Ivypool flexed her claws frustratedly, eager to get going and complete the quest. If she couldn't ever connect with Bristlefrost again, at least she could help find the strange cats in Whistlepaw's vision, discover what the Clan's debt was, and repay it, so they could prevent whatever catastrophe was signaled by the river of blood.

*If I can't be a good mother and find my kit, she mused, at least I can be a good Clan deputy.*

While these thoughts had been going through her mind, Ivypool realized, she had wandered away from the Sisters' camp and was brushing through long grass still wet with dew. A flicker of movement made her turn her head to see a plump squirrel climbing a tree until it stopped on a branch halfway up the trunk.

*That would make a good start to the day.*

Making sure to stay downwind, Ivypool slid stealthily through the grass to the other side of the tree and climbed it in one swift rush. She halted just above the branch where the squirrel still sat. The creature remained unaware of her as she snaked around the trunk, dropped down on her prey, and grabbed it by the neck.

Ivypool tottered precariously for a terrifying few heartbeats as the squirrel's thrashing limbs almost made her lose her balance. Pushing off from the branch, she let herself fall in a leap straight down to the ground and completed her kill with a swift blow to the squirrel's throat.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," she meowed, breathing hard.

Clasping the squirrel in her jaws, Ivypool made her way back to the camp to see that the Sisters and her warrior companions were beginning to wake up.

*I wonder if the scent of fresh-kill is rousing them,* she wondered wryly.

Snow had just emerged from her den in the hollow oak, and padded over to greet Ivypool. "That's a splendid catch," she mewed admiringly.

"It's to thank you and show you how much we Clan cats appreciate your hospitality," Ivypool responded, setting the squirrel down at Snow's paws.

Snow blinked at her good-naturedly. "I can sense your impatience to go," she remarked.

"You seem rather impatient to be rid of us as well," Ivypool retorted.

Snow's whiskers twitched in surprise, and Ivypool wondered if she had been too tactless. Then a glimmer appeared in the white she-cat's eyes. "Yes," she admitted. "I'll relax more when our camp is clear of so many toms."

Ivypool thought it was odd that Snow had such a problem with toms, especially as Rootspring was the only tom there who hadn't recently been part of their group, but she had more sense than to comment on it. That was the Sisters' way, and she didn't want to offend a cat who had shown her and her companions such kindness.

Picking up the squirrel, Snow beckoned Ivypool to a spot in the shelter of the oak boughs outside her den. "Let's eat," she began, "and tell me more about what brought you here. There wasn't enough time to discuss it last night."

While the two cats shared the squirrel, Ivypool concentrated on the difficulties the Clan cats faced, describing their journey so far. She told Snow the details of Whistlepaw's vision and how it seemed to be threatening disaster for the Clans. While she was speaking, Sunrise and one or two of the other Sisters joined them and settled down to eat and listen.

"I think it's important for the other cats in the vision, too," Ivypool told Snow. "At least, I think we have to do our best to find them."

It was a strange experience for Clan cats to be away from their territories beside the lake; Ivypool hoped that would be enough to convince Snow of how vital their mission was. They hadn't traveled this far just on a whim.

"So what do you want from us?" Snow asked when Ivypool had finished her account.

Ivypool remembered once more that when the Sisters had helped Bristlefrost and Shadowsight enter the Dark Forest, Snow had vowed this was the last favor they would ever do for the Clans. Their paws must lead them on different pathways. Now that fate had thrown them together again, there was a limit to what the Clan cats could expect from the Sisters.

"We're not asking you for anything more than directions," Ivypool began. "We don't want you to send any cats along to help us. None of your Sisters will be in danger."

Snow dipped her head, while Ivypool tried to find encouragement in her blue gaze.

"Do you know of a mountain with a summit shaped like a fox head?" she continued. "Like the mountain Whistlepaw saw in her vision."

Snow and the other Sisters exchanged glances; it seemed to Ivypool that they knew what she was talking about.

"If it's the place I'm thinking of," Snow meowed, frowning slightly, "you're heading in completely the wrong direction."

"I know," Ivypool sighed frustratedly. "We could see the mountain at first, but then when the clouds rolled in we lost sight of it, and since then we've just traveled off course. Do you know how we might get there from here?"

Snow nodded. "I remember we briefly made camp near that mountain, many moons ago." She flicked her tail at one of the other Sisters, whose name Ivypool couldn't recall. "Sparrow, you took a fancy to a tom from around there, didn't you?"

Sparrow rolled her eyes. "Yes, and what a waste of effort *he* was."

"We didn't stay long, because we didn't like the place," Snow continued. "The landscape was harsh, and there were dangerous Twolegs living nearby. Some parts of the terrain were full of sand, and there was a lake with foul-smelling water bigger than you could ever imagine. The water lunged forward and then retreated; sometimes it drained away for many, many rabbit-chases, but it always came back."

*The sun-drown-water*, Ivypool thought with a tingle of excitement.

Even though she guessed what Snow was describing, she couldn't manage to picture it. It sounded so unlike anything she had ever seen before. But that should mean, she thought hopefully, that she and the other Clan cats should recognize it when they found it.

"Which direction should we take from here?" she asked Snow.

The Sisters' leader thought for a moment. "You know the Twolegplace not far from here?" Ivypool nodded. "There's a narrow Thunderpath that circles around it, and all along the Thunderpath there are these weird Twoleg trees, tall and straight without any branches."

"I remember those," Ivypool mewed. She had noticed the trees when she, Rootspring and Dovewing had visited the barn, but she had no idea why Twolegs had put them there, and she hadn't thought they were important.

"When you get to the trees, you should see the black vines that connect them together. If you follow the vines, they should bring you close to the mountain."

"Oh, that sounds easy!" Ivypool explained, relieved that now they would be able to make progress. "Thank you, Snow."

"There's one more piece of advice I can give you," Snow continued. "Watch out for the gulls—you've seen gulls before?"

"Yes, we sometimes get one or two around the lake," Ivypool replied. "Why would they be a problem?"

"Well, it's more than 'one or two,' as you'll see when you get near the mountain. They fly over the place, screeching as if they're trying to tell the Twolegs that this is their territory." Snow's mew deepened with revulsion. "The Twolegs don't take any notice, but I've actually seen gulls attack and snatch prey from Twoleg kits."

“Really?” Ivypool asked, appalled.

“Really,” Snow assured her with a disgusted twitch of her whiskers. “So think what they could do to a cat. They’re dangerous, and not to be messed with.”

When Ivypool’s conversation with Snow was over, she went looking for her companions, eager to pass on what she had learned about the weird trees and the black vines. She found Dovewing and Whistlepaw sharing a mouse, while Icewing was giving herself a thorough grooming.

“Where’s Rootspring?” Ivypool asked.

“He went to look for his kin,” Dovewing replied. “I think he wanted to say a proper goodbye. Who knows when they’ll meet again?”

Ivypool could understand that, but all the same she felt frustrated now that they had directions to the mountain but they couldn’t set out. “I’ll go and look for him,” she mewed.

She began to search the camp, but she couldn’t find any sign of Rootspring. Sunrise and Moon had both seen him and said goodbye, but they didn’t know where he had gone after that. Ivypool’s pelt prickled with annoyance; this was no time for one of their group to disappear.

She was ready to give up when she finally spotted Rootspring under the oak tree, talking to Snow at the entrance to her den. His shoulders were tense, and as he turned his head, Ivypool could see anger in his face.

*Are they having an argument?* she wondered.

She eased herself closer, screening herself behind a tussock of dry grass, in time to hear Rootspring meow, “It’s not that simple.”

“It’s simpler than you think.” Snow sounded understanding, but slightly dismissive of whatever was troubling Rootspring. “And what are you going to do for the rest of your life? Never love again?”

Ivypool’s breath caught in her throat. Snow was telling Rootspring that he ought to take a mate—that he ought to move on from Bristlefoot. The idea felt like fangs sinking into her throat; she was almost surprised that there was no gush of blood.

*It’s nothing to do with me, she thought, and it’s not fair for Rootspring to be alone for the rest of his life.*

Even so, she hated the idea of Rootspring’s heart having room to love another cat after Bristlefoot. If he did, would he stop thinking about her? Would he forget in time, as if she had never been the cat to whom he had promised so much? The cat he had been ready to leave his Clan for, so that he could be with her? If Rootspring forgot about Bristlefoot, could that mean that every cat in every Clan would eventually forget her, too?

*Will the Light in the Mist be extinguished one day?*

“I can’t imagine loving another cat, ever.” Ivypool could hear the effort Rootspring was making to keep his voice level. “The pain of losing Bristlefoot never

goes away, and I can't imagine that I would ever want to betray her."

"It wouldn't be betrayal to find happiness in your life," Snow insisted. "Bristlefrost would want that for you."

"Maybe *I* don't want it," Rootspring snapped, raising his voice a little. "Doesn't that count for anything?"

Ivypool's ears strained in the silence that followed. She couldn't see much through the grass stems, and she tried to imagine the expressions on the faces of the cats as they argued. She had heard Rootspring declare his loyalty to Bristlefrost, and she wondered why his words hadn't quite filled her with the joy she would have expected.

"You might see it that way now," Snow continued eventually, sounding unruffled by Rootspring's outburst. "But do you want to hear what *I* see?" When there was no response from Rootspring, she went on, "I see you with a family of your own. At no time in my meditations do I see you by yourself. I know you aren't meant to be alone. That is not your destiny."

"I wouldn't be *permitted* to raise a family here with the Sisters." Ivypool could hear anger in Rootspring's voice. "So why are you so concerned?"

"You are kin to us," Snow pointed out. "That makes you family. You—"

"You might not have noticed that I'm a tom," Rootspring interrupted. "I've heard from my father what you Sisters do to toms when they're of age. You exile them."

"Toms have their own path to follow," Snow responded calmly.

"You *abandon* them." Rootspring's voice was almost a snarl. "You leave them to fend for themselves when they're too young to cope—like Slate and Beach. When we met them, Beach had a wound that could have killed him if not for our medicine cat. So don't talk to me about family! What do you know about it?"

Ivypool expected that Snow would match his aggressive tone, or at least reply defensively. But her voice was cool as she replied, "We know that family is important . . . whatever form it takes."



## Chapter 8



*Three sunrises later, Ivypool was in the lead as the Clan cats trekked alongside the Thunderpath, following the black vines that looped between the curious Twoleg trees. Ever since they had left the Sisters, she had tried to act more like a deputy, or a leader. As Dovewing had tried to tell her when they'd first made camp, she would usually have been the cat taking charge. Now Ivypool knew that she had to stop allowing her grief to overwhelm her, stop losing interest in what was happening around her. That meant that they had to complete the quest to prevent the catastrophe that Whistlepaw had seen in her vision. And if the only way they could move forward was for Ivypool to put Bristlefrost out of her mind, Ivypool knew that was what she must do.*

The day after they'd left the Sisters' camp, the clouds had parted to reveal a weak, watery sunlight. The fox-head mountain reappeared in the distance; the black vines led them straight toward it. The sky stayed clear, so they were able to keep it in sight. *But it doesn't seem to get any nearer,* Ivypool thought, sighing over her tired paws.

On the morning of the third day, Whistlepaw had bounced out of her makeshift nest before the sun had even risen, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I've had another dream!" she announced.

"Really?" Ivypool's ears had pricked with interest as she shook off the last of her sleep. "Tell us about it."

The rest of the cats had roused too, sitting up and gazing eagerly at the young medicine cat.

"I thought I got out of my nest and went to stand in the open," Whistlepaw had explained. "The stars were so bright! And I heard a voice calling to me."

"What did it say?" Icewing had asked.

"In the shadow of the fox, follow the white feather," Whistlepaw had meowed.

"Oh, that sounds like StarClan." Rootspring's voice was edged with sarcasm. "Clear as anything."

"Well, the fox is obviously the mountain," Dovewing had pointed out. "But what about the feather?"

"We'll just have to be on the lookout," Ivypool had declared. "StarClan wouldn't have told you about it if it weren't somewhere around. So let's get moving and see if we can find it."

Now the sun had risen, but before long the clouds massed across the sky and a chilly wind rose, ruffling the cats' fur. Dead leaves whirled in the air from the trees that lined the Thunderpath; leaf-fall was not far off.



Ivypool's optimism when she'd heard Whistlepaw's new direction was leaking away, like rain sinking into parched ground. She was left with only her determination, but it was hard to cling on to that when her paws were tired, her belly was bawling for nonexistent prey, and she felt as if the acrid scent of the Thunderpath and the monsters that roared along it had soaked into her pelt so that she would never get it out.

"At least we're making progress," Icewing meowed. "I'm sure the mountain is getting closer."

Ivypool was grateful for the RiverClan cat's attempt to encourage them, but she was too weary, too hungry, to acknowledge it, and so were the rest of her companions.

"We'd all feel better if we had something to eat," Rootspring remarked after a moment. "But we'll never scent any prey while we're trudging along here. Why don't we leave the Thunderpath and head into the trees?"

Ivypool's jaws began to water at the thought of juicy fresh-kill, but she still felt doubtful. "We're supposed to be following the black vines," she objected. "If we leave the Thunderpath, we could lose our way."

"We'd have to go a long way before we couldn't smell the stinky thing," Dovewing pointed out. "Or we could follow our own scent trail back. I say we do it."

"Dovewing's right," Icewing declared, with a decisive whisk of her tail. "If we don't eat soon, we won't be able to travel."

Ivypool could see the sense of that. She let Icewing take the lead as they veered away from the Thunderpath and padded into the shadow of the trees. At once her spirits rose; the sheltering branches felt a little bit like her home in ThunderClan territory, and without the constant blustering of the wind she began to feel warmer. She paused to taste the air, but the reek of the Thunderpath still swamped all other scents, and she followed her companions deeper into the forest.

A few heartbeats later, Icewing raised her tail as a signal for them to halt. "Can you smell that?" she whispered.

Ivypool tasted the air again. A delicious smell—a prey smell—flooded between her jaws, strong enough to overwhelm the Thunderpath stink. Her belly rumbled as she glanced around warily. The smell wasn't familiar to her; it didn't come from any of the creatures she was used to hunting.

The scent strongly in her nose, Ivypool took the lead, padding softly through the trees, skirting bramble thickets and patches of fern in case their movement alerted her prey.

Then, as she rounded a gnarled oak tree, she spotted her quarry: a lithe animal with a brown pelt and a bushy tail. It reminded her of a weasel, but it was much bigger, almost the size of a cat. She watched, transfixed, as it nosed among the debris under a beech tree.

"What is that?" Whistlepaw asked, blinking in wonder.

"A pine marten," Icewing replied, low-voiced. "I've seen them now and again in RiverClan territory."

"We have them in ShadowClan, too," Dovewing added. "Are there any in ThunderClan, Ivypool? I didn't see any while I was living there."

"I remember hearing warriors talking about them," Ivypool replied. "But this is the first time I've seen one." For all her hunger, she continued, "It's amazing. I don't want to kill it."

As she spoke, the pine marten, maybe alerted by the sound of the cats' voices, leaped into the tree, climbing as nimbly as a squirrel until it crouched in the fork between the trunk and a thick branch. It was looking upward, as if it too was seeking prey.

"I doubt we could kill it anyway," Rootspring meowed. "I've heard they're fierce, and while the five of us might be able to bring it down, we wouldn't do it without injuries. No, it's safe from us."

"Anyway, look." Icewing pointed with her tail to the nearest tree, a chestnut with low-growing branches. A finch with a dull red breast was perched there, facing away from the cats, twittering as if it didn't have a care in the world. "It won't be enough to feed us all," she went on, "but we're all too hungry to be fussy. It's worth trying to catch."

"What do you think, Rootspring?" Ivypool asked. "You and I are best in trees. Can we do it?"

"Can we do it without killing ourselves, you mean?" Rootspring asked. "I'd rather not fall out of the tree, thank you very much. Still," he added, "if you climb up the other side of the trunk and sneak out onto its branch, I can leap up and grab it if it tries to fly away."

Ivypool wasn't sure about that plan. She was sure she could do her part, but she wasn't sure that Rootspring could catch it even though he had the SkyClan talent for leaping. *That thing has wings, mouse-brain!*

"I suppose—" she began, but broke off at a rumbling sound coming from somewhere close by in the forest.

The pine marten, spooked by the noise, vanished farther up the tree with a clatter of twigs. That in turn spooked the finch, which fluttered up and landed on a much higher branch of a tree several tail-lengths away.

"Fox dung!" Rootspring hissed through clenched teeth.

Following the finch, Ivypool crept stealthily toward the tree where it was perching now, the rest of her companions following in her paw steps. When she reached it, she found that she was standing on the edge of a wide forest path, clear of trees and covered with grass and creeping plants.

The rumbling noise was growing louder. Ivypool remembered Daisy's tales of the horseplace, and the sound the horses there made, their huge hard paws pounding the

earth. But as she understood it, there were only a few horses at the horseplace; the sound she was hearing now seemed to come from many, many more.

*Mouse-brain*, she scolded herself. *There can't be that many horses in—*

As the thought went through her mind, Ivypool turned her head toward the thundering and saw the horses sweeping down the forest path toward her. There were more horses than she had ever seen before, and most of them were pulling square wooden things with round paws like monsters. Twolegs and their kits were inside the wooden things, and the kits were holding tendrils that they flicked up and down; that seemed to make the horses run faster.

Ivypool took this in, frozen in disbelief. Her paws seemed stuck to the ground, until she heard Rootspring yowling, "Run!"

The single word, rising above the pounding of the horses' paws, freed Ivypool. She hurled herself at the nearest tree and clawed her way up the trunk until she reached the lowest branch. Panting, she looked around for her companions.

Icewing had climbed the chestnut tree where the finch had been perching, and was swaying precariously on a branch that didn't look strong enough to bear her weight. Ivypool caught a glimpse of Whistlepaw as she dived into a nearby bramble thicket, while Dovewing scrambled into a hole among the roots of the oak tree the pine marten had climbed. Rootspring had vanished completely.

As Ivypool gazed down from her refuge, her heart racing as if she had run all the way around the lake, she saw the horses sweeping past, so many that she thought the line would never end. Finally the last of them disappeared into the distance, and the thundering of their paws faded, leaving the grassy surface of the forest floor churned up into brown earth. None of them had paid any attention to the cats as they passed by.

When she was sure no more horses were coming, Ivypool leaped down from the tree, and a moment later Icewing joined her.

"What in the name of StarClan was all that about?" the RiverClan cat asked, her fur bristling and her tail in the air.

Ivypool felt the pounding of her heart gradually begin to quiet. "No idea. Who knows what Twolegs get up to?"

Dovewing padded up to them, shaking earth and scraps of debris from her pelt. "That hole was full of pine marten scent," she mewed, wrinkling her nose in disgust. "I think it was its den." She shuddered. "I'm glad it didn't come back while I was in there!"

Just then a wail rose from the bramble thicket. "I'm stuck!"

Ivypool could see Whistlepaw's face peering out from a tangle of bramble tendrils. She bounded over to her, and Rootspring emerged from a clump of ferns and helped her hold the tendrils back to make a tunnel that Whistlepaw could creep through. The medicine cat's pelt was torn from the bramble thorns, but to every cat's relief, her wounds hadn't reopened and she seemed to be unhurt.

"Now what do we do?" Dovewing asked when all the cats had gathered together at the foot of the chestnut tree.

"This place is full of dangers," Icewing growled. "We need to get out of here as soon as possible."

Ivypool opened her jaws to agree, but before she spoke, she spotted the finch again, fluttering from branch to branch above her head. "We still need to catch some prey," she mewed, flicking her ears upward to point at the finch. "If we can build up our strength, we'll surely all feel better."

Icewing muttered something to herself, of which the words *no more than a mouthful* were all that Ivypool could hear. But as no cat had a better idea, and there was no sign of any other prey, they began to stalk the finch, following it from the ground as it flitted from one tree to the next.

With every paw step, Ivypool could feel her frustration rising. She knew that the finch was safe as long as it stayed up in the trees. It was too high up for the cats to pounce; as soon as it spotted them, it would have more than enough time to fly away.

*Come down from the branches, little bird,* she urged it hopefully. *We really need you here.*

"Maybe we should think about moving on," Dovewing suggested when the stalking had gone on for a while. "We might be able to find other prey."

For a moment Ivypool couldn't decide. As Clan deputy she was the highest-ranking cat in the group, and she felt it was her responsibility to keep them all fed. She knew they could all be wasting time, but the finch was the only prey that had crossed their path that day.

While she was still hesitating, she spotted movement in the corner of her eye. Turning toward it, she saw a rabbit bobbing between the trees, stopping and starting, raising its nose to sniff the air.

*Thank StarClan!*

Unlike the finch, the rabbit would feed all five of them comfortably, and they wouldn't have to climb a tree to get it.

Silently she pointed toward the rabbit, then gathered all her companions around her to make a plan. "We're downwind here," she murmured, "so, Dovewing, you and Rootspring can work your way around to the other side so that your scent is being carried toward the rabbit. If that doesn't alarm it, then you can start to stalk it, and try to drive it toward me and Icewing. We'll be here, ready to chase it and catch it."

"What about me?" Whistlepaw asked.

"You stay alert, and be ready to dash in if you're needed," Ivypool replied.

With a brief nod, Dovewing and Rootspring headed off in the direction Ivypool had ordered. So far the rabbit obviously hadn't noticed that its doom was approaching.

When Ivypool could see Rootspring and Dovewing creeping up from the far side of the rabbit, she signaled to Icewing and began to slide her way through the grass like a snake, keeping her tail tucked into her side. At almost the same moment the rabbit sprang up onto its haunches, letting out a squeal of terror. With a panic-stricken glance at Rootspring and Dovewing, it dashed straight for Ivypool, who rose up out of the grass with her muscles bunched ready to pounce.

But as she leaped, the rabbit veered aside. "Fox dung!" she snarled as her paws landed uselessly a tail-length behind the fleeing rabbit. Icewing was too far away; Whistlepaw sprang forward, but the terrified rabbit simply barreled into her and knocked her off her paws.

Ivypool gave chase, her belly fur brushing the ground as she forced her paws to move faster and faster. Icewing, Dovewing, and Rootspring were racing at her side. Only a tail-length separated Ivypool from the rabbit's bobbing white tail when suddenly the trees opened up into a clearing and she stumbled to a halt at what she saw.

Her companions stopped at her side. In front of them was a kind of Twolegplace, but not like any that the cats had seen before. The rabbit fled across the clearing and disappeared behind a half-circle of dens. They looked almost like monsters, even to the same round, black paws, but they had the same square shape as ordinary Twoleg dens. Opposite them was a row of the wooden things the Twolegs had ridden in, pulled by the horses. The horses had been freed from the wooden things; now some of them were tethered to trees and others to the dens.

"What in StarClan's name is going on?" Rootspring breathed out.

"I always knew Twolegs were weird, but this is *weird*," Icewing responded.

In the center of the clearing several Twolegs were gathered around a fire. Ivypool's paws itched with uneasiness at the crackle of the flames and the smoke that rose from it. Exchanging a glance with Dovewing, she could see that her sister shared her apprehension. Rootspring was flexing his claws nervously, too, while Icewing's fur was bristling up.

*Fire in a forest is so dangerous!*

Some kind of round container was suspended over the fire from what looked like branches, except that they were smooth and black, clearly not made of wood at all. Delicious smells of some kind of food came out of it; Ivypool shuddered with longing, but she knew there was no way the Twolegs would ever give any to strange wandering cats.

While she and the others were still staring, Whistlepaw came scrambling up. "Did you catch it?" she asked, then let her mouth gape open as she saw what was going on in the clearing. "What's *that*?" she asked.

"Your guess is as good as ours," Icewing replied. "Who knows why Twolegs do what they do?"

"We just have to decide whether we go across the clearing or around it," Dovewing meowed. "The Twolegs don't seem all that dangerous. . . ."

Letting her gaze travel around the clearing, Ivypool saw that her sister was right. The Twolegs around the fire were chatting comfortably together; several kits were chasing each other, letting out yelps of laughter; other adults were patting the horses and talking to them in gentle voices. Ivypool's eyes widened at the sight of one Twoleg actually washing her horse.

"You're right," she mewled to Dovewing, "but I think it's better not to take chances. Let's go around."

She led the way as the cats skirted the camp underneath the trees that surrounded the clearing. She tried to ignore her belly bawling with hunger, and how subdued her companions looked, from going so long without prey. Every hair on her pelt tingled with frustration at how they had been forced to abandon the rabbit, even after StarClan had delivered it to them.

*Next time StarClan offers us prey, I'm going to make sure I can catch it!*

Ivypool was thinking it was time to strike away from the camp, back into the deeper forest, when a high-pitched whinny from one of the horses made her freeze in her tracks.

"Keep down! Stay still!" she hissed to the others, crouching behind a thick clump of grass.

Anxious, urgent cries from the Twolegs mingled with the horse's shrieks. Peering through the trees, Ivypool saw that one of the horses had pulled free from its tether and was skittering this way and that. Clearly something had spooked it. A few of the younger Twolegs were running after it, reaching for it and making soothing noises.

Ivypool drew in a gasp of sheer horror as the horse reared up on its hind legs, its hard forepaws batting at the air. Just one of those paws, landing on top of a cat, could flatten it to a mess of bones and fur.

One of the Twolegs grabbed for the tendrils at the horse's neck but missed. The horse landed on all four paws again and took off, bolting straight for the terrified cats.

Ivypool still crouched, frozen. She knew she ought to order her companions to run, but she didn't know where. The furious, thrashing horse paws might trap them wherever they went.

Then relief poured over her like a cool spring in greenleaf, as the Twoleg made another grab for the tendrils and this time managed to clutch them in a firm grip.

*Thank you, brave Twoleg!* she thought.

While the Twoleg was calming the horse, Icewing rose from the dip in the ground where she had flattened herself. "It's time for us to make a run for it." Her voice sounded shaken from their narrow escape. "The Twolegs are busy with that horse. They won't have time for cats."

All the others sprang to their paws and Ivypool took the lead again. This time she veered into the clearing and sprinted across it to reach the shelter of the trees on the other side. None of the Twolegs paid them any attention.

Shoulder to shoulder the cats pelted through the trees, not daring to stop until the sights, sounds, and smells of the curious Twolegplace were far, far behind them.

"Thank StarClan!" Rootspring panted as they halted. "Now maybe we can see if there's any prey in this forest, or if it's just full of horses and Twolegs."

"I'm sure there is," Dovewing responded. "Let's hunt."

But as Ivypool raised her head to taste the air, Whistlepaw spoke up.

"I know we need food," the young medicine cat meowed. "But where are we? Where's the Thunderpath? How can we continue with our quest?"



## Chapter 9



*The other four cats stared blankly* at each other. Ivypool gazed around and could see nothing but trees. She only heard the creaking of branches and their rustling in the wind. There was nothing to tell them how to get back to the Thunderpath with its guiding black vines.

"We said we would follow our scent trail," she began uncertainly.

Rootspring gave a dismissive snort. "Good luck with that," he snapped. "That would lead us back to the weird Twolegplace, and after that we'd never find our scent again, among all the Twoleg and horse smells."

Ivypool had to admit that Rootspring was right, though he didn't have to sound so bad-tempered. Then she realized that they were all on edge, and being lost wasn't the only reason. Their most urgent need was prey.

"Let's hunt first," she mewed peaceably. "Everything will look better when our bellies are full. Then we can make a plan."

No cat objected. Spreading out slightly, though still staying within sight of each other, they began to sniff for the scent of prey, their ears pricked to pick up the tiniest sound. Ivypool noticed that Rootspring was eyeing a blackbird that perched on a branch above his head.

"Oh, no," she declared. "No more birds. Remember where the last one got us!"

Rootspring gave her a wry look of agreement and padded on.

Not much time had passed before Ivypool spotted movement in a rocky bank shaded by gorse bushes. She froze, one forepaw in the air, and signaled with her tail for her companions to halt. A couple of heartbeats later a rabbit emerged from between the low-growing branches and hopped forward, stopping here and there to nibble at the dried plants on the forest floor.

*Oh, please . . .*, she murmured silently to herself. Aloud she whispered, "Rootspring, its burrow must be among those bushes. Go over there and make sure that it can't get back."

Rootspring nodded and headed toward the rocky bank, flattening himself to the ground and wriggling forward like a snake.

Ivypool signaled to the other three cats to form a semicircle and follow the rabbit, not getting too close, but ready to leap onto it from any direction if it tried to flee. The wind had dropped, so there was little chance that the rabbit would pick up their scent.

The rabbit kept going, hopping forward, stopping for a few bites of grass, then continuing as if it didn't have a care in the world. Ivypool was surprised that it was going so far from the safety of its burrow. The pursuit took so long that Rootspring



padded up to join them. "It'll never be able to get back there now," he murmured. "But are we going to follow it all day?"

Ivypool realized he was right. The rabbit had led them into a mossy clearing, paused in the middle, and begun to wash its paws. There was no refuge it might make for within several fox-lengths. "It's time!" she whispered.

The cats began to creep forward, approaching the rabbit from all sides. They were almost within pouncing distance before it realized its danger. With a squeal of terror it tried to flee between Icewing and Dovewing. Icewing leaped on top of it, pinning it down as it thrashed, and Dovewing gave it the killing blow to its throat.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," she meowed.

The rabbit was big and plump, and there was enough for every cat to eat as much as they wanted. When there was nothing left but fur and bones, Ivypool would have liked to curl up and sleep, but she knew she couldn't do that.

Swallowing her last mouthful, she sighed and sat up. "Okay," she meowed. "What do we do now?"

Every cat rose and looked around. Trees hemmed in the clearing closely, and there was nothing to tell them which was the right way to go to return to the Thunderpath.

"I suppose we just pick a direction and keep going until—" Rootspring began.

"Wait!" Whistlepaw interrupted. She was staring through the trees, her eyes bright and her ears pricked. "What's that noise?"

Ivypool listened; very far in the distance she could make out a faint roaring sound. It would start, continue for a while, then fade away, then start up again. There didn't seem to be any rhythm to it.

"I know what that is!" Dovewing exclaimed after a moment. "Monsters! The Thunderpath must be over there."

Ivypool exchanged glances with her companions and saw the dawning relief and wonder in their eyes.

"Well," Icewing mewed at last, "I never thought I would be grateful for the sound of a monster!"

"I think StarClan must have sent us the rabbit," Whistlepaw added. "The way it ventured so far from its burrow. It was leading us to where we could hear the monsters."

Ivypool thought the medicine cat must be right. "Then we should thank StarClan again," she responded.

"And get going right away," Rootspring declared.

As daylight began to fade, the Thunderpath was leading them toward a forest, a dark mass lying across their path. Ivypool felt a prickle of disquiet in her pads. These trees were different from the ones she was used to in ThunderClan territory, and even the ones in the forest they had left earlier in the day, but the cats needed shelter, and nowhere else seemed to offer it.

"We ought to find somewhere to make camp for the night," she meowed as they passed under the outlying trees. "This looks like as good a place as any."

"I haven't seen trees like this before," Whistlepaw murmured, glancing around her doubtfully.

"Nor have I." Ivypool felt the fur on her shoulders rising as she heard that the medicine cat shared her own misgivings.

The trees were small, compared to the ones on ThunderClan territory, or to ShadowClan's pines. Their branches were gnarled, with gray bark and furry leaves. A sharp, sour scent came from them.

"Look!" Icewing was pointing with her tail to a branch where a few shriveled, red fruits still hung. "Apples. These are apple trees. I've seen them growing in the Twoleg gardens near the RiverClan border. Twolegs eat the apples. There are an awful lot of trees here, though."

"A forest of apple trees," Dovewing murmured. "Weird."

"If these apples are Twoleg food, then Twolegs will come here to collect them," Rootspring pointed out. "A lot of Twolegs, because there are a lot of trees. Maybe this isn't the best place for us to stop."

"I don't think we need to worry," Ivypool declared. Like any ThunderClan cat, she felt more comfortable in a forest, and her doubts were fading now that she had sheltering branches above her head; she was reluctant to head out into open land again. "It's not likely that the Twolegs will come at night."

When no cat objected, she led the way deeper into the apple forest, toward the trees she could see up ahead. After a while she noticed that all the trees were planted in straight rows, and the ones they were passing now were strangely bare of apples.

Glancing aside, Ivypool spotted wide, deep grooves cut into the earth between the next two rows of apples. The fur on her shoulders rose in apprehension, and an icy trickle flowed through her from ears to tail-tip.

*A monster!*

Ivypool swung around and chose a new direction, hoping that none of her companions had spotted the tracks. She knew they would only worry, and if she was to lead them, she had to keep them focused on what they had to do.

*Sleep tonight, a quick hunt in the morning, and then out of here!*

Eventually the cats came upon a place where the ground had fallen away into a shallow dip edged with drooping ferns. Ivypool led the way down into it, finding soft grass at the bottom and a drift of fallen leaves.

"This looks as good as anywhere," she meowed.

No cat objected; they were all tired from the long day's journeying, and by now it was almost completely dark. Working quickly, they gathered the leaf litter together to make nests. The bedding felt damp, and it reeked of the apples from the forest, but Ivypool supposed it would do.

*I've slept in worse places.*

As she and her companions settled down to sleep, Ivypool found her gaze flitting now and again to Rootspring. The SkyClan tom hadn't said much since they'd left the Sisters, and his expression had been closed, giving Ivypool no clue what he felt about Snow's advice to him.

Ivypool desperately wanted to ask him about it, but at the same time she was terrified of having that conversation. Part of her wanted to tell him that it was fine to move on from Bristlefrost, to find happiness in loving another she-cat. *But suppose I can't manage to do it?* she asked herself, imagining the words dying in her throat. *That would hurt Rootspring terribly.*

"Are you okay, Ivypool?" Rootspring's voice broke into her thoughts. "You're giving me a funny look. Do you want something?"

"Oh . . . no," Ivypool responded, startled. "I was just thinking. Sorry, Rootspring. I didn't mean to stare."

Determinedly she thrust her anxieties away, closed her eyes, and did her best to fall asleep.

"Wake up! Wake up!" Panic-stricken yowls and paws prodding her side woke Ivypool. She opened her eyes to see Icewing standing over her with terror in her eyes.

"Wha—?" Ivypool blinked and staggered to her paws to see Rootspring a tail-length away, rousing Whistlepaw and Dovewing.

She opened her jaws to ask what all the fuss was about, when she heard it . . . the roar of a monster.

Ivypool remembered the wide, deep tracks she had seen in the earth the previous night, and how she had turned aside to prevent the others from seeing them, to spare them the worry of fearing that there might be a monster in the forest.

*Well, a monster is in the forest.*

Looking where Icewing pointed, Ivypool could see a massive red monster slowly weaving its way in and out of the trees, and a Twoleg riding it like a horse. Its huge hind paws had surely made the deep gouges in the ground; behind it there followed a short line of wooden things that looked like huge square seedpods, each one with its own smaller paws. The monster's rumbling growl was deeper than any Ivypool had heard before.

"Run!" she yowled.

All five cats launched themselves out of the hollow and fled from the monster and its Twoleg. Ivypool quickly became frustrated by having to dodge around the trees; it was difficult to pick up the pace when she had to be careful not to collide with a tree trunk.

Then space opened up: Ivypool could see a long stretch of open ground between two rows of trees. *Yes!* She was sure that they would be able to escape the monster now.

Gazing ahead, Ivypool wasn't looking at the ground, or where she was putting her paws. She only saw the shriveled apple when her forepaw landed on it and it rolled underneath her. Losing her balance, she tumbled over; her flank and the side of her

head hit the ground a heartbeat before she felt paws slam into her and a cat went toppling over her body. She landed in a heap among gnarled tree roots; looking up, she saw that it was Whistlepaw who had tripped over her.

The young medicine cat had landed right in the path of another red monster creeping its way through the trees with the same slow, deliberate pace as the first one. It had one huge forepaw that was poised to crush Whistlepaw.

Ivypool felt a surge of panic and determination. *How could I ever face Featherpelt? She would be devastated if her daughter never came home from this quest.* Besides, they all needed Whistlepaw to complete the quest; without her, how would they ever know they were in the right place or how to repay the debt?

Determined not to let that happen, Ivypool sprang to her paws and flung herself toward Whistlepaw, ignoring the dull throbbing she could feel in her side where she had hit the ground. Letting out a desperate shriek, she grabbed the young cat by the scruff and dragged her out of the path of the red monster.

Looking back, she saw the Twoleg wrestling with the monster's black antler, pulling its body to one side as if he was trying to avoid squashing the cats. He brought the monster to a stop and shifted awkwardly in his perch to yowl something at them.

Ivypool didn't think he sounded hostile, but she wasn't sticking around to find out. She nudged Whistlepaw, who was staring at the monster, frozen in panic. "We have to get going—right now!"

Bounding side by side, the two cats rejoined their companions, who were waiting a few fox-lengths away, gazing in horror at their narrow escape. Once she came up beside them, Ivypool could see that not far ahead the forest came to an end, with open ground beyond.

"This way!" she gasped. "Hurry!"

All five cats pelted through the trees, shoulder to shoulder, until they burst out into the open and halted, their chests heaving as they fought to breathe. Now that they were clear of the trees, Ivypool spotted the fox-head mountain still visible in the distance; they hadn't wandered off course.

"Are you okay to keep going?" she panted as she glanced around at her companions.

Every cat looked dreadfully shaken, but they all nodded. Ivypool took the lead again, heading toward the distant mountain and the next part of their quest.



## Chapter 10



*For the rest of that day* the cats continued, padding along slowly but determinedly, with only a brief stop to hunt and eat. Ivypool allowed herself a satisfied purr; they had made good time. The apple forest lay far behind them. They had lost sight of the weird Twoleg trees and their black vines, but the fox-head mountain was clearly in view, looking much closer now, and though the path they followed wound around, it led them in the right direction.

Earlier in the day the cats had noticed that the air had seemed to change. A sharp tang had grown stronger as they journeyed on. Ivypool could hear squawking in the distance, way up in the sky, and wondered whether it was made by the gulls that Snow had warned her about. The last thing the questing cats needed was to have to deal with threatening birds.

As darkness gathered, Ivypool was on the lookout for a place where they could make camp for the night. Since they'd left the forest behind, the land had been all fields, with little cover—and the cover they *had* found among the apple trees hadn't been enough to keep them safe from the huge red monsters.

They were all trekking on in silence when suddenly Whistlepaw halted, letting out a gasp. "Look!" she exclaimed.

She was angling her ears toward a place where a dirt track branched off from the path the cats were following. Ivypool looked where she was pointing and saw a different kind of Twoleg tree, this one with a narrow trunk and a large, flat piece of wood at the top. She padded over to have a closer look, and her companions followed her.

The flat piece of wood had a picture of a white bird that Ivypool guessed was meant to be a gull. Beneath it were some blue and white Twoleg markings, and beneath that the image of a single white feather. "What's that?" she asked, puzzled.

Rootspring shrugged. "Maybe some kind of border marker," he suggested. "We could be entering a new Twoleg territory."

"The white feather is the one from my dream!" Whistlepaw's eyes were glowing with excitement. "The one we're meant to follow."

"Are you sure?" Ivypool asked.

Whistlepaw nodded vigorously. "Yes, the voice said, 'In the shadow of the fox, follow the white feather.' And now here's a white feather, showing us the way along this path."

Ivypool still felt doubtful. Dreams and visions didn't usually have clear explanations.

"Why don't we find somewhere to camp near here?" Dovewing suggested. "It's too late to go much farther anyway. Then we can come back here in the morning and

see if it really is sending us on the next part of our journey.”

“Good idea,” Rootspring mewed.

“Icewing?” Ivypool noticed that the RiverClan cat had turned away and was facing in the opposite direction. “Icewing, what do you think?”

Icewing didn’t reply. Her nose twitched as she lifted her muzzle into the air. “I can smell water nearby,” she murmured after a few moments.

“So can I,” Ivypool told her. “The sharp smell from the sun-drown-place that Snow described. It must be close.”

“No.” Icewing shook her head. “This is a different scent—a different kind of water, fresh like the river and the lake at home. Can’t any other cat smell it?”

She began walking and then scampering across the path and through the field on the other side. Ivypool followed her; when she looked ahead, she could see the flat land coming to an abrupt stop, as if there was a sharp drop in the distance.

“Be careful!” she called out.

But Icewing didn’t need the warning. The RiverClan cat slowed down and halted at the very edge. Her tail was standing straight up in the air, as if she was excited about something. Ivypool and the rest of the questing cats caught up and drew up alongside her, looking down.

At their paws the land sloped down sharply to a level stretch of ground and then a wide lake that glimmered in the twilight. Small Twoleg dens were dotted on the far side, but the near side was empty of everything except grass blowing in the wind, with here and there a few bushes.

“Why not make camp down by the lake?” Icewing suggested. “It looks nice and quiet, and I can catch some fish for us.”

There was a murmur of agreement. Ivypool guessed that every cat was exhausted, and the lakeshore did look peaceful, almost like home. Icewing led the way down, and the rest of the cats clambered after her.

“Rootspring, will you help me fish?” Icewing asked when they had reached the stretch of flat ground beside the lake.

“Sure,” Rootspring replied.

“Please can I help too?” Whistlepaw begged, gazing at the water with fascinated eyes.

“Of course you can.” Icewing laid her tail on the younger cat’s shoulder. “I’ll teach you how.”

When all three cats had padded off to the water’s edge, Ivypool and Dovewing settled down in the shelter of a bush. Ivypool felt exhausted after traveling for so many days, and the stillness of the lake, the soft ripples on the surface gleaming in the last of the light, made her feel even more tired.

She opened her jaws in a massive yawn. “I think I’ll just doze a little, until the others come back with their catch. . . .”

Ivypool padded along a track between overhanging foliage. The air was full of the sickly smell of rotting vegetation, and everything was bathed in a pale, eerie light. Some trees were smothered in clinging vines; others had lost all their leaves as if they had been struck by lightning. When she looked up, she couldn't see a single star.

*I know where I am, she thought. This is the Dark Forest.*

Her surroundings were just as gloomy and oppressive as she remembered, and yet she couldn't feel any of the dread and anguish that she had experienced when she had ventured there in dreams to spy for her Clan. Even though she could sense malevolent cats lurking in the shadows, they had no power to unnerve her. She felt utterly numb as she moved through the desolate territory.

From time to time Ivypool caught glimpses of cats flitting through the skeletal trees, mere transparent shapes; she could see the undergrowth through their insubstantial bodies. Somehow she knew that they were cats who had been forgotten. She sensed the lost spirits' despair, the awareness piercing her numbness and flooding her with red hot grief from her ears to the tips of her claws.

*They must have done something terrible to be here. Perhaps they're best forgotten—but oh, what a dreadful fate!*

Then an even more fearful thought shook Ivypool. Was it possible that Bristlefrost could be among these misty spirits, clinging to the last scraps of their living selves? *But I will never forget her!* she cried silently, rejecting the idea as soon as it entered her mind.

Still, Ivypool couldn't stifle the hope that she might catch a glimpse of Bristlefrost's shape, even if she couldn't see her face or her pelt. Then she reminded herself that such a fate would be terrible for Bristlefrost.

"How selfish of *her mother* to yearn for it."

Ivypool froze at the sound of the familiar, hostile voice coming from just behind her. Instinctively she pricked her ears as her whole body grew tense. *No . . . it can't be. Please . . .*

Overcoming a deep reluctance, Ivypool forced herself to turn around and found herself staring into the eyes of Flametail. He was the orange tom she had tried to murder, here in the Dark Forest. Brokenstar had ordered it, and Ivypool had not dared risk being discovered as a spy. To her relief, Flametail's brother, the second Tigerstar, had managed to stop her.

"I'm sorry . . . it wasn't . . .," Ivypool began to stammer.

But while she was still trying to find words, Flametail's outline quivered, and within a heartbeat a different cat stood in front of her.

*Brokenstar!*

The hideous flat-faced tom glared at Ivypool from his ruined eyes. "Yes, you're selfish from ears to tail-tip," he taunted her. "This place is where you really belong. Perhaps you should stay here, and then you might see Bristlefrost again one day. Don't you want that?"



Ivypool closed her eyes, shaking her head in rejection of the Dark Forest cat's words. "Be quiet," she growled. "You can't manipulate me anymore."

After a moment of shivering horror, she forced herself to open her eyes. Brokenstar was gone. Ivypool felt relief flood her chest. She gazed around, bracing herself for a new challenge, until she caught a glimpse of pale gray fur among the trees.

"Bristlefrost!" she called. "Is that you?"

There was no response. The fleeting gray shape was withdrawing deeper into the forest. Ivypool gave chase, desperation giving speed to her paws. Her gaze fixed on Bristlefrost, she did not see the yawning chasm opening up beneath her paws. She skidded to a halt, scrambling backward to stop herself from falling in, then approached the edge cautiously and looked down.

The cliff face plunged down into a swampy abyss. Plumes of purple and yellow smoke rose toward her, bringing with them the reek of foul water. Bristlefrost was down there, padding as lightly across the swamp as if she were out for a stroll in her own familiar territory. On the far side she leaped up onto a barren island, its jagged rocks streaked with blood.

Ivypool yearned to follow her, to catch up with her lost daughter, but all her instincts told her that she wouldn't be able to cross the swamp as easily as Bristlefrost had. Instead she would be sucked into the murky depths and maybe never return, as lost as Bristlefrost had been.

Gazing across at the island, Ivypool spotted a brown-and-white tabby tom, and recognized Icewing's son Beetlewhisker. Seeing him gave Ivypool a shred of consolation; at least Bristlefrost would have him for company.

But as she watched her daughter trekking across the island, Ivypool saw that Beetlewhisker didn't react to Bristlefrost at all. And when Bristlefrost reached Beetlewhisker, she padded past him as if he weren't there.

Seeing the two cats unaware of each other gave one last twist to Ivypool's anguish. She let out a hoarse cry as she felt herself falling, falling into darkness that smothered her like a heavy black pelt. Then she knew nothing more.



## Chapter II



*Ivypool woke from a disturbed sleep, feeling that every one of her muscles was aching and her head was crammed with thistle-fluff. The memory of her nightmare lingered in her mind like a foul stench she couldn't escape. She hauled herself out of the makeshift nest she had scabbled together the night before, and arched her back in a good long stretch.*

All her companions were awake. Rootspring was giving himself a thorough scratch behind one ear, while Dovewing was grooming her chest fur with long, slow licks. Icewing and Whistlepaw were talking with their heads together, and turned to Ivypool as she emerged from her nest.

"We're going down to the lake to catch more fish," Icewing meowed. "We thought we could eat quickly before we get going again."

"Good idea," Ivypool responded. "I'll come with you."

Following her companions, Ivypool looked up at the fox-head mountain. It was looming over them now, and she hoped that they might even reach it today. *And maybe this will be the last time I have to force down fish.*

As they padded along the lakeshore, Ivypool was surprised to see that there was a large, stinking monster on the water. Like they had with the fat red ones in the apple forest, Twolegs were riding it. This time the riders were mostly kits, wearing thickly padded pelts with bright orange pieces on their upper bodies. They dangled slim sticks over the edge of the monster, with long, thin stems reaching down into the water. Their monster was motionless, sleeping perhaps, on the still, twinkling surface of the lake.

Beyond the kits and their monsters, on the opposite side of the lake, a whole mass of Twolegs, adults and kits, were moving around. Two large, colorful rocks, open on top and with water sloshing inside, dotted the shore, and one adult Twoleg stood slicing up some unfortunate fish with a sharp, shiny claw.

"I don't like the look of that," Icewing remarked, pointing with her tail. "There are far too many Twolegs for my liking."

"What are they even *doing* here in this cold?" Ivypool wondered aloud.

"The same thing we are," Icewing declared, "fishing. But we'd better keep our distance."

Whistlepaw was gazing nervously across the lake, and Ivypool could feel her own neck fur beginning to rise. Icewing was right: It was far better for cats to stay well away from Twolegs.

"Maybe we'll be okay as long as we stay on this side of the water," Ivypool mewed.

But as the cats moved on, looking for a good place to fish, she realized that the Twoleg kits on the monster had spotted them. Loud noises came from them; Ivypool thought they sounded excited, but they could be threatening, too.

"Why are they squealing like that?" Whistlepaw asked, gazing across the lake toward the monsters.

"I don't know," Ivypool replied. "But I don't want to stick around and find out. Let's head farther along the shore and make sure we fish well away from them."

Icewing led the way, picking up the pace until the three cats were bounding along. But then a horrible wail sounded up from the monster, followed by a chugging noise. It turned and began racing toward the cats with appalling speed. The Twoleg kits were riled up, making more of the excited or threatening noises.

"This isn't good." Icewing halted, flexing her claws tensely. She sounded thoroughly agitated as she added, "Let's turn around and head back to Dovewing and Rootspring. We'll have to forget about fishing for the time being."

"Good idea," Ivypool agreed.

She turned her back on the lake and headed back toward the bushes, only to realize that she and her companions were walking right into the path of several more Twoleg kits, wearing the same thick puffy pelts as the ones riding the monsters. One of them was carrying a pelt in a shade of blue so bright it dazzled Ivypool's eyes. The kits gasped with excitement, and the one carrying the pelt opened it up and stooped down as if she meant to scoop up all the cats inside it.

"Run!" Ivypool screeched.

She took off, dodging between the Twoleg kits' legs and heading toward the bushes farther up the lakeshore. Gasping and panting, she forced every last scrap of speed from her legs, and noticed Icewing drawing up alongside her.

Then she heard a yowl of distress from Whistlepaw. Spinning around, Ivypool saw that the kits had caught the young WindClan cat and wrapped her in the pelt. They were carrying her over to the kits in the monster, which had drawn close to what looked like a small, rectangular pathway over the water.

Ivypool gazed anxiously across the lake to the Twoleg dens on the other side, and at the vast expanse of water that lay between. If the Twolegs took Whistlepaw over there, she might be lost for good. There was no way that any cat—not even Icewing of RiverClan—could survive a swim as long as that.

"We have to do something!" she exclaimed.

*Thank StarClan!* she thought as Dovewing and Rootspring appeared, racing toward her, alerted by the commotion. Their wide eyes and bristling fur showed they were just as anxious as Ivypool.

Down by the lake, Whistlepaw was wriggling with all her strength, but her struggles were hampered by the folds of the pelt, and the Twoleg kit was holding on tight, yowling something at the other Twolegs in the monster.

"What can we do to rescue her?" Icewing asked, desperation in her tone.

"Maybe all four of us should rush the Twolegs," Rootspring suggested. "That might make the Twoleg drop her."

Dovewing nodded. "As long as Whistlepaw lands on her paws, she should be able to run away. And after that we scatter, to make it harder for them to catch us again."

"But if all five of us head off in all directions, we might get lost, and not be able to find each other again," Ivypool objected.

For a moment a worried silence fell, until Rootspring meowed, "We'll just have to risk it. The most important thing is to get Whistlepaw away from the Twolegs."

Ivypool blinked anxiously. "I guess you're right."

Beckoning with her tail, she gathered the other three cats in a huddle around her. "Okay, how are we going to do this?"

"We have to get the kit with Whistlepaw to put her down," Dovewing mewed thoughtfully. "If we jump up at her?"

Icewing's mouth was grimly set. "I'll claw her if I have to."

Ivypool didn't like the sound of that, but she had to admit that there might be no other way. "Let's go," she meowed.

But before the cats could move, Ivypool heard loud barking from an adult Twoleg. A short, plump male with a bright red puffy pelt was charging toward the kits, waving his forelegs. Ivypool thought he sounded exactly like a mentor telling off a disobedient apprentice.

As the Twoleg approached the kits, Ivypool noticed that his red pelt showed the same image of a seagull that they had seen the day before on the Twoleg sign. Her fur prickled. *That has to mean something.*

The Twoleg kits ran to meet the adult Twoleg, except for the one who was holding Whistlepaw. Instead, she dashed away in a different direction, away from the lake, and clambered up the slope. Whistlepaw was still struggling vainly to escape from the smothering pelt.

Ivypool and the rest of the Clan cats followed her. At the top of the slope, farther along from where they had approached the lake the day before, there was a small Thunderpath that ended in a wide area covered in the same black Thunderpath stuff. Ivypool was reminded of the place by the halfbridge between ShadowClan and RiverClan territory.

Several monsters were sleeping on the wide area, as if it was their den. The Twoleg kit dashed across to the biggest, which was blue with the same image of the white seagull that they had seen on the sign and on the adult Twoleg's pelt. The kit opened a door near the front, thrust Whistlepaw and the pelt inside, and slammed the door again, before racing off the join the other kits.

Ivypool stared after her, her belly churning with apprehension. "Now what do we do?" she asked. "It seemed like the Twoleg kit was hiding Whistlepaw from the adult—but in a monster? Oh, poor Whistlepaw!" Ivypool shivered. She had never been inside a monster, and she could only imagine it was terrifying.

She hardly expected an answer to her question, but Rootspring gave her one. "Let's go and take a look. We might be able to get her out."

As they approached the monster, keeping a wary eye out for other Twolegs, Ivypool saw that Whistlepaw had freed herself from the pelt and was standing with

her forepaws against the transparent shiny stuff along the side of the monster. Her eyes were wide with terror, and her jaws were gaping in a silent meow.

Rootspring padded over to where the Twoleg kit had opened the door. There was a tiny gap, barely a whisker's width, where the door met the side of the monster, but even though he managed to insert a claw, the door wouldn't open.

Dovewing padded all around the monster and came back shaking her head. "It's just the same on the other side."

Meanwhile Icewing had wriggled underneath, and emerged with her white fur covered in grit from the Thunderpath stuff. "There's no way in from there," she reported.

The four cats looked at each other. "If a Twoleg wakes the monster up and they run off, we'll lose Whistlepaw forever," Ivypool meowed.

"What was that Twoleg kit *thinking*?" Dovewing asked despairingly. "Surely her parents or her mentors wouldn't just let her kidnap a cat?"

"No, and if they see Whistlepaw when they come back, perhaps they'll just put her outside," Icewing suggested. "Maybe all we have to do is wait."

"But if the kit manages to hide her, and they run off . . ." Rootspring shook his head helplessly. "They would put her out when they see her, sure, but where?"

While Ivypool was listening to her companions, she was looking around the black-surfaced monster den, and spotted a male Twoleg sitting on the low wall that surrounded it. Like the Twoleg by the lake, he wore a red pelt with the image of the seagull. He was looking at something shiny in his hand, paying no attention to the monsters or the cats.

"We need to get that Twoleg to open the monster," Ivypool mewed thoughtfully, half to herself.

"And how are you going to do that?" Rootspring asked.

"I don't know . . . yet," Ivypool responded.

As she went on watching the Twoleg, he put the shiny thing on one side, and took out what looked like a leaf wrap from inside his blue pelt. Unwrapping it, he took out a square white thing—two white things, Ivypool realized, with something colored brown and yellow between them. He put the whole thing into his mouth and took a bite.

Ivypool watched, fascinated. This was some kind of Twoleg food, and the Twoleg was obviously enjoying it. And there was another of the white things, still in the leaf wrap, on the low wall by the Twoleg's side.

"Yes . . .," she breathed out. "Stay here," she instructed her friends. "Wait."

Slinking stealthily alongside the wall, Ivypool reached the leaf wrap. The Twoleg was looking at his shiny thing again and hadn't noticed her.

*He's going to notice me now. . . .*

Ivypool let out a yowl, then grabbed the second white thing and raced back to the big monster with it in her jaws. The Twoleg sprang to his paws, barking loudly, and

lumbered after her.

Beside the monster, the other three cats began leaping up to where Whistlepaw still stood with her paws pressed against the hard transparent stuff.

The Twoleg halted, staring, then let out a single bark. Ivypool could tell he was annoyed. He opened the door and was about to climb inside, but just as he took a step, Whistlepaw appeared in the gap and slipped past him, leaping down to join the other four cats. "Let's get out of here!" she yowled.

With Icewing in the lead, they streaked away, their belly fur brushing the ground and their tails flowing out behind them. Ivypool paused for a moment, looking back and dropping the white thing she had stolen.

*He can have it back now. It tastes pretty good, actually.*

The Twoleg was gaping as he stared after them, scratching his head fur with one forepaw.

"Thanks," Ivypool meowed, and raced to catch up with her friends.

Once they had left the Twoleg behind, they halted, panting as they struggled to catch their breath. At first every cat was too stunned by Whistlepaw's narrow escape to speak.

Eventually it was the young medicine cat who broke the silence. "Thanks, Ivypool." She blinked gratefully. "That was a brilliant idea."

"It was." Rootspring let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "The look on that Twoleg's face when you stole his food!"

"Yes, Ivypool, you were great. All the same, we were lucky to get away with it," Dovewing pointed out. "I'd really like to complete this quest and get back to the Clans. There's too much danger in the world beyond our borders."

"You're right," Ivypool agreed. "We need to push on."

"Push on?" Rootspring sounded despondent. "Where? We haven't seen a gull, except the ones scratched on the Twolegs' pelts. Maybe the message was wrong?"

Ivypool had a horrible feeling that the SkyClan tom might be right, though she could hardly bear to think that. Feeling utterly helpless, she cast an anguished glance up at the sky.

A white gull was flying overhead.

"Look!" she cried. "Follow the white feather!"





## Chapter 12



*As the day wore on, the clouds cleared and the sun came out. Ivypool enjoyed the warmth on her fur for what felt like the first time in days as the questing cats followed the seagull along the shore to the end of the lake. Here the land opened up to a flat plain of grass that ended in a steep rise of rocks and mud.*

Crossing the plain was easy, but the rise in front of them looked like a stiff scramble. As they halted at the bottom, Whistlepaw eyed it doubtfully. "Do we really have to climb this?" she asked.

Ivypool nodded, looking up and beyond the summit of the rise. A single gull circled and swooped, sunlight flashing on its wings. "We've followed this bird from the lake," she pointed out. "It feels like it's led us here, doesn't it?"

"I'm not arguing," Whistlepaw responded. "I'm just not looking forward to the climb, that's all."

Rootspring gave his pelt a shake. "Standing here won't get us anywhere," he muttered.

As they began to clamber upward, Ivypool took the lead. The morning had been damp, so the mud was soft, and the rocks were slick with a thin film of water. She had to concentrate, careful where she was putting her paws, but even so she had a few heart-stopping moments when she felt her pads slipping; only digging her claws into a crack stopped her from plummeting to the ground below. Eventually she forced herself not to look down between her paws in case dizziness overwhelmed her, and she struggled on, doing her best to hide her fear from the others.

*This quest is so important. We can't mess it up now.*

Finally every cat reached the summit of the rise to look out across the land beyond. A sandy shore stretched in front of them, as far as they could see in both directions, strewn with what Ivypool assumed were rocks. A few Twolegs were scattered along it, walking or staring out at the water.

Beyond the shore the cats could see the sun-drown-place. Ivypool let out a gasp of wonder at the sight of it. There was so much water, dazzling in the sun, endless water with no sign of the opposite shore. Waves rolled up onto the sand and were sucked back again in a continuous roar. She wrinkled her nose at the strong stench of fish in the air, and the sharp tang that she had picked up before was much stronger here. Her belly lurched as the mingled scents almost overwhelmed her.

Breathing hard, she turned to the others. "Do you think this is the right place?" she asked.

Whistlepaw leaned over the edge of the rise.

"Careful!" Ivypool warned her. "The cliff is much steeper here."

Whistlepaw nodded, though Ivypool suspected she wasn't really listening. "Look!" she exclaimed, angling her ears toward some clumps of wilted leaves growing

among the rocks. "They're not much to look at in leafbare, but those look like the pink flowers I saw in my vision. And over there—can you see those spiky rocks at the bottom of the cliff? They were in my dream, too."

Ivypool looked where the medicine cat was pointing, and saw jagged black rocks in the distance, between the cliff and the sun-drown-water.

"I'm almost sure this is where we should be," Whistlepaw mewed happily.

Ivypool felt a wave of relief run through her from ears to tail-tip. Perhaps they really were reaching the end of their quest. Soon they might be able to turn around and go home.

"Let's start making our way down to the shore," she meowed to her companions. "And we should be even more careful than we were climbing up. We can't afford injuries now."

Taking her own advice, Ivypool began edging down the cliff face. At least there were plenty of cracks in the rock, and ledges; she tested that every paw hold was firm before she put her weight on it.

About halfway down, she spotted a Twoleg walking along beside the water, chewing on some kind of Twoleg food held in his forepaw. She paused, waiting for the Twoleg to move on so he wouldn't spot them.

A moment later a seagull swooped down from the sky at great speed, snatched the food from the Twoleg's paw, and flew away with it.

*What in StarClan?* she thought, watching as the Twoleg let out an angry yowl and shook his paws at the disappearing bird. *I hardly believed Snow when she told me they did that.*

Ivypool leaped down the last couple of tail-lengths to land lightly on the shore. Before she had the chance to look back and see how her friends were managing, she heard an angry hiss close by and breathed in an overwhelming scent of mingled cat and fish. She whipped around to find herself facing a black-and-white tom.

"What are you doing here?" the tom demanded. "This is my territory. You have no right to be here."

His fur was bristling and his lips drawn back in a snarl. *Not now!* Ivypool thought as she braced herself for an attack, baring her teeth and sliding out her claws. *Not when we're getting somewhere at last!*

The tom's muscles tensed as he was about to leap. "Get out, or I'll rip your fur off!" he growled.

*You can always try.*

Then Ivypool heard the sound of paws hitting the sand as her four companions jumped down to join her on the shore.

The tom relaxed, letting out a sigh of resignation, though his gaze was still hostile. "It's not fair," he grumbled, "attacking a cat when he's outnumbered."

Ivypool shook her head at the others as they drew up beside her. "It's okay," she reassured them. "No cat is attacking you," she added to the tom. "We're not here to steal your territory. We're just passing through, on our way to the sun-drown-place."

The tom nodded, seeming to accept her words. "You smell strange," he muttered with a grimace.

*He's one to talk!* Ivypool managed to bite back the comment; the tom reeked of fish. "We're Clan cats," she told him. "We come from a place very far away from here."

The tom blinked slowly, looking out across the endless water as he pondered something. "Clan . . . Clan . . .," he murmured. "I think I've heard that word before."

Whistlepaw's eyes gleamed with excitement as she stepped up to the head of the group. "What's your name?" she asked.

The tom shrugged. "I was never given one. I never knew my parents, or my littermates."

"What happened to you?" Ivypool asked, a throb of sympathy for the tom running through her.

"I was found by Twolegs and taken to a cold den with lots of rogue cats," he replied. "I stayed there for a while, and eventually a Twoleg family came and took me home with them. *They* used to call me Jake, but I haven't used that name since I ran away from them. There's not much use for a name when you're a loner like me."

Ivypool thought that Jake was a strange cat, but she was relieved he hadn't followed through on his hostile challenge. Besides, if he was telling the truth that he was a loner, he would have no friends or allies who would attack her and her friends just for being there.

Jake turned to look along the shoreline. "If you're going that way, watch out for the crabs," he advised.

Ivypool exchanged a confused glance with her four companions. "What do you mean, 'crabs'?" she asked.

Jake shrugged. "They sometimes make their territory on the sand," he explained. "They're about so big. . . ." He gestured with one forepaw, forming a shape in the air.

"Smaller than us, then," Rootspring commented.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean they're not dangerous," Jake warned him. "They're horrible creatures with vicious claws and hard shells. They have a lot of legs, and they move sideways; that can give you a nasty shock if you're not expecting it."

"Are they any good to eat?" Icewing asked.

Jake shrugged once more. "No idea. I've never tried. Twolegs don't go near them," he continued, "and I suggest you don't either." He gave them a brusque nod. "Good luck to you." With that, he scampered off along the bottom of the cliff.

"Have any of you ever seen these . . . crabs?" Dovewing asked.

Icewing shook her head. "I've never heard of any creatures like that living by the lake," she replied. "Or in the old forest, either."

"Crowfeather sometimes talks about his visit to the sun-drown-water," Whistlepaw meowed. "But I've never heard him mention crabs."

*Hard shells . . . move sideways . . .* Ivypool found it hard to imagine that. "I wonder if Jake was just messing with us," she suggested.

"Whether he was or not, there's nothing we can do about it." Rootspring's tone was brisk. "I suggest we get going."

Ivypool began to lead the group along the sandy shore, staying close to the base of the cliff they had just climbed down. She wanted to keep away from the Twolegs. *I don't want them catching us, like Whistlepaw by the lake.*

However, the Twolegs seemed to be entranced by the water. They weren't paying any attention at all to the cats.

*And that's just how I like it.*

They hadn't traveled for many fox-lengths when Icewing moved up to pad alongside Ivypool. "We haven't eaten today," she pointed out. "I don't know about you, but my belly feels like my throat's torn out."

Ivypool realized that the RiverClan she-cat was right. The near miss with Whistlepaw and the Twoleg kits by the lake had completely distracted them from hunting. "You're right," she mewed. "I'm hungry, too."

She called a halt so that they could hunt, but though they scratched around in the sand for a while, they found no prey. No mice or shrews lived in the crevices at the bottom of the cliff face, and not even Icewing dared to try fishing in the heaving mass of the sun-drown-water.

"I can smell some tasty scents coming from those Twolegs over there." Rootspring sniffed appreciatively while pointing with his tail at a large group of adult Twolegs and kits near the water's edge. "What do you think?"

Ivypool opened her jaws and let the smell of Twoleg food drift over her scent glands. "It does smell good," she admitted, seriously tempted to approach the group and see what she could scavenge. "But I think it's too dangerous," she added resolutely. "Remember what happened to Whistlepaw when we got too close to Twolegs."

"But—" Rootspring began to protest.

He broke off as a shadow passed over the cats where they huddled next to the cliff face. Ivypool looked up to see something falling from the sky. She let out a startled screech as all the cats flung themselves out of the way, rolling over on the cold sand.

Ivypool heard something hit the ground with a splat. Scrambling to her paws, she saw that it was a fish. "What sort of place *is* this, where fish fall out of the sky?" she asked.

No cat replied. They crept cautiously toward the fish, which was flopping and thrashing helplessly as it tried to stay alive out of the water.

"You know, that looks pretty tasty to me," Icewing meowed, pressing her belly to the ground and advancing paw step by paw step.

Ivypool wasn't so sure. She wasn't fond of fish at the best of times, and who knew what this weird sky fish would taste like.

Reaching the fish, Icewing caught it between her teeth and crunched down to stop its frantic struggles. She paused for a moment to swipe her tongue around her jaws, then started tearing at the fish's flesh to pull off a mouthful. After a moment Whistlepaw edged up beside her and took a small bite. Dovewing and Rootspring padded up to join them.

"Come on, Ivypool," Rootspring urged her. "It's good—well, it's okay. At least it's food."

Ivypool's belly was bawling with hunger, and she realized this wasn't the time to be fussy. Even though she didn't like the smell of the fish, she chomped down on the flesh—only to find she didn't like the harsh taste, nothing like the lake fish she had eaten sometimes. "Yuck!" she exclaimed.

"I know," Icewing mewed apologetically. "I don't like it either. I feel so stupid for suggesting we should try it, but we need to eat something if we're to keep going."

Before Ivypool could respond, a strident cry sounded just above her head. Looking up, she saw a seagull swooping down from the sky to hover over the cats, batting at them with flapping wings and stabbing beak.

As she darted this way and that to get clear of it, Ivypool understood where the fish had come from. It must have been the seagull's prey, but the gull had dropped it. And now it wanted it back. She wished she could tell the angry bird, *You can have it!*

"Dovewing, draw it away toward the water!" she yowled. "Rootspring, you and I will attack it from the side. Icewing, Whistlepaw, stay away from the fish!"

Bounding after the gull, Ivypool and Rootspring leaped up, grabbed the bird's tail feathers, and dragged it to the ground. Ivypool raised a claw to strike a killing blow on its neck, but at that moment more gulls plummeted from the sky. Their harsh cries told Ivypool they were swooping in for the kill.

She and Rootspring lost their grip on the first gull. For a few heartbeats Ivypool felt blinded by the riot of wings and beaks and feet, cutting her off from her companions. *It's like we're being attacked by a whole Clan of gulls!*

Ivypool knew they couldn't possibly fight so many of the huge birds. "Run!" she screeched, lowering her head and charging out of the storm of wings. Once she got clear, she glanced over her shoulder to check that her companions had escaped too. To her relief they were all running with her.

Taking the lead, Ivypool fled along the sand, dodging among the rocks she had noticed earlier when they were at the top of the cliff. Thankfully the gulls gave up the chase; one of them snatched up the fish, and their squawking faded as they wheeled away and headed over the sun-drown-water.

When she was sure they were gone, Ivypool halted, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. Some of the others ran several fox-lengths ahead of her before they too realized the danger was over and drew to a stop.

"Is every cat okay?" Ivypool asked.

"I think we're fine," Dovewing panted as she padded back to join her sister. "Shaken up, that's all."

"Thank StarClan those gulls had webbed feet," Rootspring meowed. "Claws would have done a lot more damage."

"You're right." Ivypool repressed a shudder as she imagined what it would have been like to be attacked by eagles. "And now we should—"

She broke off as she thought she glimpsed movement out of the corner of her eye. Just a fleeting flicker of something dark. Not a gull . . . Ivypool braced herself to meet another attacker, a predator.

Turning around, she saw that something was moving. *It's one of the rocks!*

Ivypool's heart pounded, and her mind whirled as she tried to understand how a rock, a chunk of stone on the sand, could possibly move. *Rocks don't move*, she told herself. *They don't have legs. . . .*

Except that *this* rock seemed to lift itself off the sand and *grow* legs. Many legs.

By now her companions had noticed the moving rock, too. Whistlepaw let out a cry of alarm, while Rootspring took a pace toward it and stretched out his neck as if he was going to give it a good sniff.

"Come back, you stupid furball!" Dovewing snapped. "We don't know what it is."

"I think it's one of the crabs Jake told us about," Ivypool meowed, recovering from her shock. She had only half believed him. *What is this StarClan-cursed place?* she wondered.

All around the questing cats, more and more crabs walked toward them, scuttling sideways on spindly limbs. In a few moments, Ivypool realized, they would be surrounded.

"Do you think we should fight them?" Icewing asked.

Ivypool shook her head. "I don't think a cat's claws will be any use on their hard pelts," she replied. "I think we ought to run, right now."

"But where?" Dovewing asked, gazing around helplessly.

For a few heartbeats Ivypool stood frozen, unable to decide. Behind them was the sun-drown-water, and there were more crabs between them and the fox-head mountain. "This way!" she gasped at last. "Head for the mountain! Leap over the crabs!"

She took off, her muscles bunching and stretching as she raced along the sand. She pushed off with her powerful hind legs to soar over the approaching crabs. Her companions pelted alongside her; she could hear their rasping breath and hear the beating of their paws on the hard sand.

But as Ivypool began to think they were escaping, more gulls swooped in from the sun-drown-water, their flapping wings and fearsome beaks driving the cats back toward the rocky cliffs. She wondered if they would be able to grab a small cat like Whistlepaw, the way the first gull had grabbed the fish.

Weaving this way and that to get clear of the flapping wings, Ivypool spotted cracks in the rock, big enough for her and her friends to squeeze into. They could take

refuge in there and wait for their attackers to get bored, or hungry, and move on.

"Make for the cliffs!" she yowled at her companions.

Beckoning with her tail, she headed for what she thought looked like the biggest crack, a narrow gap leading back into darkness. "Climb in there!" she meowed.

Rootspring leaped up, followed by Dovewing and Icewing. Keeping one eye on the gulls, Ivypool boosted up Whistlepaw and then scrambled up herself. She barely had room to get inside, and the others had to wriggle to make space for her. Squeezed together, they looked out to where the gulls swooped threateningly overhead. Now and again one of them would plunge down and glare into the crevice, its stabbing beak barely a mouse-length away from where Ivypool crouched.

"Hang on," Rootspring mewed after a few moments. "I think this crack goes back farther. I'm going to look."

"Be careful," Ivypool warned him. "We don't want you getting stuck."

She felt movement as Rootspring struggled backward; then suddenly the pressure of his body was gone.

"I was right." His voice came from the back of the crevice, with a curious echo. "Come and join me. There's plenty of room, and we know we're safe in here."

First Icewing, then Dovewing and Whistlepaw, squeezed themselves down a narrow tunnel in the rock. With a last look at the gulls outside, Ivypool followed.

The narrow tunnel opened up into a small cave, big enough for all five cats to settle comfortably. The only light was what filtered in through the crack.

"The gulls and crabs can't get us here. We can relax until they wear out and leave us alone," Icewing murmured.

*That's true*, Ivypool thought as she huddled together with her companions and listened to the sound of the gulls squawking as they attacked the cliff. *But will the gulls ever leave us alone?*





## Chapter 13



*Ivypool felt that the time she and her companions spent in the cave seemed to stretch out for seasons. The squawking of the gulls outside echoed around her, seeming to bounce off the rocky walls, rushing into her ears and rattling the inside of her head. The wind whistled around the cliff, and the surge of the sun-drown-water seemed louder still.*

*Will those StarClan-cursed seagulls ever go away?*

As Ivypool crouched on the cold stone floor of the cave, she noticed that Whistlepaw seemed to be concentrating deeply, hardly aware of what was happening around her.

"Whistlepaw, are you okay?" Ivypool asked.

The young medicine cat gave a start of surprise. "I'm fine," she replied. "I was just thinking that the sounds inside this cave remind me of the way the kits were crying in my vision—the way they echo and seem lost in the roar of wind and water outside. I wonder if those kits were trapped in a crevice like this. It must have been so terrible for them!" Her gaze met Ivypool's, full of distress at the memory. "Maybe that's why no cat could find them," she added, with sudden understanding in her voice. "If they were stuck in a crevice, they wouldn't be visible." She shook her head sadly. "Poor kits!"

Ivypool pressed her muzzle against Whistlepaw's. "Keep listening," she advised. "Maybe you'll learn something important."

The day dragged on. Ivypool dozed and woke again to the sound of Dovewing exclaiming, "My paws are wet!"

"They can't be," Icewing objected. "Even if it's raining outside, the rain can't get in here."

"I think I know whether my paws are wet or not," Dovewing responded in an offended tone.

Struggling fully awake, Ivypool saw that her sister, who had been sitting nearest to the tunnel entrance, had risen to her paws and was shaking each one in turn. Water droplets spun into the air.

Then Ivypool noticed a small surge of water washing out of the tunnel and retreating, leaving a thin film of water spreading out into the cave. She touched her tongue to it and grimaced at the acrid taste; her nose wrinkled at the foul smell. A second surge followed, bigger than the first, and the water it left behind spread farther into the cave until every cat was springing to their paws with cries of alarm.

Ivypool slipped past Dovewing and squeezed her way along the tunnel to the outside. At first all she could do was stand in the crevice and gape at what she saw in front of her.

The sandy foreshore had vanished, along with the Twolegs. The sun-drown-water had swallowed it up, and now it was rising up the cliff, lapping at the edge of the crack where Ivypool stood, swirling around her paws. Instead of the sunny skies of earlier in the day, rain was sweeping in, blotting out all but a few fox-lengths of rock and water. While she stared, frozen, a wave surged up again, down into the tunnel, and this time it didn't retreat.

Ivypool struggled backward into the cave. "The sun-drown-water is rising!" she exclaimed. "We have to get out *now*!"

"What about the gulls?" Icewing asked.

Now Ivypool recalled what she hadn't noticed at first in her shock at the sight of the engulfing water. "The gulls are gone—and we have to go too."

She grabbed Dovewing and shoved her into the tunnel, then pushed Whistlepaw after her. Icewing and Rootspring followed. By the time Ivypool brought up the rear, she had to wade; within heartbeats the water would fill the tunnel.

She emerged onto the cliff face to find her companions clinging to the rocks as they gazed at the heaving mass of the sun-drown-water.

"Climb!" Ivypool gestured to Rootspring with her tail. "We can't stay here!"

She noticed with a huge throb of relief that the cliff face here wasn't nearly as steep as the way they had come down earlier. Although the rocks were slippery from the rain, there were plenty of paw holds and ledges leading upward.

Rootspring led the way, while Ivypool followed at the end of the line of cats, all of them struggling away from the engulfing waves. When they reached the top of the cliff, soaked and shivering, she gazed around to see no sign of the gulls. But when she looked down the way they had come, an even icier trickle seemed to flow through her pelt.

"Look down there," she mewed, her voice hoarse with fear. "The crevice where we sheltered is covered and no doubt flooded with water. If we hadn't gotten out in time, we would have drowned."

"So what now?" Rootspring asked.

Whistlepaw let out a groan. "I'm so hungry!"

"So is every cat," Icewing agreed. "We really ought to hunt before we do anything else."

"In this rain?" Dovewing gave her whiskers a disgusted twitch. "All the prey will be hiding in their holes."

"Then let's keep walking," Ivypool suggested. "After all, we've wasted a lot of time down there by the cliffs. We can keep a lookout for prey on the way."

She took the lead as the cats trekked away from the cliff edge. The ground was uneven, with puddles gathering in hollows and tussocky grass that spilled water on the cats as they brushed past. Every cat was alert, looking for prey, but just as Ivypool had feared, there was nothing, not even the whisker of a mouse. Her belly was bawling with hunger, even worse than when they were stuck in the forest with the Twolegs and their horses, and she was starting to feel unsteady on her paws.

*How much longer can we keep going like this?*

The rain was beginning to ease off when they came to a Twoleg path; clouds were covering the fox-head mountain once again, but that wasn't so important now. It had guided them to the place Whistlepaw had seen in her vision, and now what they needed most was safety and shelter.

*And an explanation of what all this is for,* Ivypool thought.

"Let's go this way," Rootspring meowed. "I've got mud up to my belly, trudging over this wet ground."

Ivypool glanced at Whistlepaw. "Does it feel right to you?"

The medicine cat nodded. "It does, I'm sure of it. This is where we are meant to be."

She took the lead as the questing cats turned to follow the path. The going was much easier, and they made better time, but there was still no prey, not so much as a shrew.

Then a strange smell caught in Ivypool's throat, and she rounded a turn in the path to see Twoleg rubbish scattered all over the ground. It seemed to have come from a huge round Twoleg thing, like a hollow tree made of some shiny stuff, that was tipped over on its side.

Every cat halted. By now Ivypool was so hungry that the mingled scents seemed more appealing than they would have if her belly had been full; by the way they were sniffing deeply, she could guess that her companions felt the same.

*But none of us wants to be the first to suggest actually eating it.*

For a few heartbeats the cats stared at the rubbish, exchanging doubtful glances. Eventually it was Dovewing who broke the silence.

"I've eaten Twoleg trash before," she admitted. "It wasn't all horrible."

"When did you eat Twoleg trash?" Ivypool asked.

"Remember when I left the Clans for a while?" Dovewing replied. "And Tigerstar followed me? Well, I found myself in a territory with more Twoleg dens than I'd ever seen before—lots of Twolegs, leaving their trash everywhere. There was no prey, and I needed to eat, so . . ." She shrugged.

"I'd never hold it against any cat who eats Twoleg trash when they have to," Ivypool meowed. "But only as a last resort. Are we at that stage yet?"

Rootspring sighed. "I don't think we are."

Every cat reluctantly murmured agreement and skirted the rubbish to continue along the path. It led into a patch of scrubby undergrowth that gave way to bushes and a few trees.

Then Ivypool spotted something up ahead: a huge dark mass that at first she thought was blocking the path. As she and her companions drew closer, she saw that it was a wall, built out of squared-off stones, and so high that she couldn't see anything over the top of it. The path ran alongside, with a narrow stretch of grass between it and the bottom of the wall.

"What in the world is *that*?" she asked, hardly expecting a reply.

"Some kind of Twoleg den, I suppose," Dovewing responded. "But it's weird. Can you smell those disgusting scents? I don't like it."

Ivypool didn't like it, either. The air was awash with unfamiliar animal smells, like nothing she or her companions had ever encountered before. They filled her nose and mouth with the sharp scent of fear. The stench reminded her of a giant dirtplace rather than somewhere animals would choose to live.

*What could it be?* she asked herself. *And why is that awful reek in a Twolegplace? And worse,* she wondered, shuddering, *why is there so much fear-scent?*

Glancing at her companions, Ivypool could see that they were just as unnerved as she was. Whistlepaw in particular stood frozen, her eyes wide with distress as she gazed at the menacing barrier.

Movement at the base of the wall distracted Ivypool, and she spotted several mice feeding on more Twoleg garbage. "Fresh-kill!" she whispered, her belly rumbling as saliva flooded her jaws.

"Look how fat they are!" Icewing murmured.

"Yes, only Twolegs produce this much rubbish," Rootspring mewed. "And they throw it away as if they don't care about the mess they make, so the mice have a feast every night. It's obvious there are Twolegs behind this wall."

Ivypool was sure that the SkyClan tom was right. "Okay, let's hunt!" she urged her companions. "Rootspring, you and I will attack the mice. Dovewing and Icewing, stay back to catch any that try to escape."

"Got it." Icewing moved to one side of the nibbling mice, while Dovewing slipped away to cover the other side. "We're ready."

Ivypool dropped into the hunter's crouch and saw Rootspring doing the same beside her. Paw step by paw step, she crept forward, remembering to let her pads glide over the ground as her mentor, Cinderheart, had taught her in her first hunting lesson. The mice seemed quite unaware of the cats sneaking up on them.

When Ivypool was within range, she pushed off in an enormous pounce, both forepaws striking out as she landed in the middle of the cluster of mice. Terrified squeaks were cut off suddenly as she slammed her paws down. She had trapped two mice, one under each forepaw, but as she bent her head to bite one of them in the neck, the other wriggled desperately and freed itself. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Icewing snapping it up.

Ivypool stood up with her mouse in her jaws to see Rootspring pick up one limp body, while a second one lay unmoving beneath his paw. "Great catch!" she exclaimed.

The cats carried their prey to a sheltered spot among the roots of a tree, well away from the Twoleg den. Ivypool felt a thrill of absolute enjoyment pass through her from ears to tail-tip as she sank her teeth into a mouse. The juicy flesh seemed even more delicious because she had been so hungry. *It's so much better than that weird fish!*

Her companions were reveling in the prey too, and for a while no cat spoke; they were all concentrating on eating.

Finally, Ivypool sat back and swiped her tongue around her jaws. "That was amazing," she purred. "But we still have a quest to fulfill. Do you think we should carry on a bit farther?"

Dovewing cast a doubtful glance up at the sky. "It will be dark soon," she responded.

Ivypool had to admit her sister was right. Although the rain had stopped, clouds still covered the sky, and the daylight was fading fast.

Before any other cat could comment, the silence was broken by a Twoleg's voice raised in anger, followed by a loud bang and a shriek of fear and pain from some animal. Ivypool's heart twisted at the heartrending note of desperation in the cry.

Whistlepaw shivered, her eyes wide and dark. "This is a bad place," she whispered. "It sounds as if that animal needs help."

Dovewing stretched her tail across the young medicine cat's shoulders. "I think you're right. But there's nothing we can do," she mewed, shaking her head in disgust.

"I'm not sure . . .," Ivypool murmured. She couldn't imagine how, but she was sure that the yowling Twoleg must be responsible for the anguished cry she had heard. "We ought to think about it," she declared.

"I'd like to camp here for the night," Whistlepaw suggested shyly. "Then we can go back to the Twoleg den before dawn."

"Why do you want to do that?" Dovewing asked.

The young medicine cat hesitated for a moment. "I'm not sure," she confessed at last. "I knew we had to come this way. And that place seems familiar to me somehow, even though I've never seen it before. I really want to know what's going on behind that wall—I have a feeling it might be important."

Ivypool couldn't imagine what that might be. But if it would somehow help them advance on their quest, she hoped that Whistlepaw was right.



## Chapter 14



*The sharp green of unfolding leaves* misted the trees as Ivypool padded toward the lake. Sunlight dappled the forest floor, and the air was filled with the scents of prey and fresh, growing vegetation.

But Ivypool's heart was dark. All that eased its aching, just a little, was the thought that she was on her way to meet Rootspring. There beside the lake, where he and Bristlefrost had first met when she'd saved his life after he plunged through the ice, they could remember her together.

Ivypool was sure that Rootspring had loved Bristlefrost from that day forward. It was the first day, too, when she remembered being so *very* proud of her daughter. Of course she had already been proud of all her kits, but there was something special about seeing your own daughter take such an amazing risk for another cat. That was when Ivypool had first thought that Bristlefrost would go on doing great things in her life, that she had qualities that would make her a great leader of ThunderClan one day.

Letting out a sad, despairing sigh, Ivypool settled down beside the lake to wait for Rootspring. Sharing her pain with another cat wouldn't take it away, but it would ease it a little.

After a while, Ivypool heard a muffled banging. She raised her head, ears pricked, trying to work out where it was coming from. At first she thought it might be behind her; she sprang to her paws and spun around, trying to pinpoint the sound in the forest.

*No . . . it's coming from the lake.*

When Ivypool turned back, the sunny newleaf day had melted away. Now the sky was gray with cloud, and the surface of the lake was covered with ice. The noise was getting louder, and Ivypool suddenly realized where it must be coming from.

*No . . . not that! Please, not that!*

Venturing to the very edge of the water, Ivypool could see Bristlefrost trapped beneath the frozen surface, staring up at her. Bristlefrost's face was filled with fear, her claws scratching feebly at the ice.

*I can save her!*

Ivypool battered and clawed at the ice, trying to break through it. Somehow her claws had become unnaturally strong and sharp, and she managed to shatter it as easily as if it were soft dirt.

*Hold on, Bristlefrost! Hold on!*

But when Ivypool finally broke through the ice, releasing a lazy gush of water that arced and crept across the surface, she couldn't see any cat there.

"She's gone, Ivypool."

Hearing Rootspring's voice behind her, Ivypool spun around to look into eyes as grief-laden as her own.

Ivypool's eyes flickered open, and she found herself underneath the tree where she and the other questing cats had settled down for the night. A heavy ache was weighing on her chest; it had the sharpness of a new pain that had crept up on her, or taken her by surprise, except that it was the ache that had been with her now for moons. The ache that she supposed would never, ever go away.

Now she understood the meaning of her dream: Bristlefrost always felt close, and yet she couldn't reach her. She would never reach her, not ever again.

Dovewing, Whistlepaw, and Icewing were still asleep, but when Ivypool glanced around, she spotted Rootspring sitting quietly by himself a few tail-lengths away from the others. She rose and stretched the tiredness out of her limbs, then padded over to him.

"How did you sleep?" she asked quietly.

"Not well," Rootspring admitted. "And I can see that you would probably say the same."

Ivypool hesitated for a moment, afraid of blurting out exactly why she'd struggled to sleep. But then she realized that Rootspring was the only cat who would understand.

"I dreamed about Bristlefrost," she told him, describing how she had tried to save her daughter from drowning under the ice. "It isn't the first dream like that I've had," she finished.

Rootspring listened with deep sympathy in his eyes. "I can imagine how awful those dreams are," he mewed. "I've been having dreams of Bristlefrost too, of the life we were going to have together."

"You sound very certain when you say that," Ivypool commented. "What makes you so sure the dreams are showing you what might have been?"

For a heartbeat Rootspring looked as grief-stricken as he had on the day that Bristlefrost died. It took him a little while, and a massive effort, before he could gather himself to speak again.

"I'm certain because the dreams feel like memories of things that never happened," he continued at last. "We are pressed against each other, relaxing beneath a spreading willow. Running side by side through a forest, our pelts and flanks brushing against each other. Our nest in ThunderClan—you know that I'd decided to leave SkyClan for her, just before the day she died. We're standing over three tiny kits, the kits we would have had together. Ivypool," he went on more earnestly, "all those things never happened, and yet I *remember* them as if they did. *That's* how I know that was the life I was meant to have with her."

Ivypool gently nuzzled Rootspring in compassion for his pain. She knew that other cats, like Icewing's son Beetlewhisker, had also died in the Dark Forest. They would have families of their own who mourned for them, just as she and Icewing did.



Yet Ivypool felt as though she and Rootspring were the only cats who knew this pain, the only ones who understood each other. One day, most of their Clanmates would be reunited in StarClan with the cats they loved. But she and Rootspring didn't have that to look forward to. Somehow they had to make peace with the fact that Bristlefrost was simply gone.

*And I'm not sure that I ever will.*

Ivypool's heart broke for Rootspring as much as for herself, and yet she felt gratitude that her daughter had had a cat who loved her so completely. It was a very faint comfort to her, like a small gap in the rain clouds that enveloped her heart.

Like a tiny light in a dense mist.

Ivypool swallowed her last bite of mouse. "That was good," she remarked.

The questing cats had all woken up and hunted successfully again among the mice feeding on the Twoleg rubbish beside the wall. The day was fine, and now and then a gleam of sunlight broke through the clouds that still moved slowly across the sky.

"So what now?" Icewing asked. "Are we still going back to the Twoleg den?"

Ivypool turned to Whistlepaw. "Are you sure that it's important?" Her paws pricked with a bad feeling about that den; she would rather have carried on and forgotten all about it.

Whistlepaw nodded. "I had a dream about this Twoleg den last night," she replied. "It was so murky, I couldn't really make sense of it. But something about it told me this is the path our paws must follow."

"How can you be so sure?" Dovewing asked.

"I don't know," Whistlepaw confessed. "All I can say is that when I think about going around this Twoleg territory, my belly clenches and I feel so afraid—far more than when I think about going *through* it. That *has* to mean something, right?"

In spite of her reluctance, Ivypool respected the young medicine cat enough to believe her. Her instincts had served them well so far. "Right, well, let's get going, then," she meowed.

She led the rest of the cats across the path and leaped up onto the wall. Her companions leaped up beside her, and they all paused to survey the territory. Several long, low Twoleg dens lay in front of them, surrounded by the wall. The grass between the dens was limp and brown, with patches of bare earth here and there. There was no sound or movement anywhere; Ivypool wondered whether all the creatures inside were asleep.

"This is a terrible place," she mewed, flinching inwardly at the thought of leaping down from the wall and walking among the dens. "But I trust you, Whistlepaw. Let's do it."

Without any more delay, Ivypool led the other questing cats down onto the patchy grass. Quickly they headed toward the low Twoleg dens, padding along a muddy path that ran between two rows of cages of varying sizes, made of flat strips of wood.

The front of each cage was open so that the cats could see inside, blocked off sometimes by a lattice of shiny stuff, and sometimes by the transparent screens that Twolegs used to keep rain out of their dens. Everything looked as if it might fall apart at any moment, the walls uneven and the front sections tied together with twisted vines.

Ivypool could hear all kinds of weird snorts and rumblings coming from the cages. Her senses were almost overwhelmed by the strange animal scents, along with the dull, stomach-churning scent of fear and a harsh tang that she recognized as blood. She could sense how uneasy her companions were, too, as they ventured farther along the path.

"I've never seen animals like these before," Whistlepaw murmured. She was standing in front of a cage where an enormous brown-and-yellow animal was standing on long spindly legs; it had a neck as tall as a tree, and Ivypool and the other cats had to crane their necks to see its face. "I didn't think there could be any creature as massive as this one!"

"Nor did I," Ivypool whispered in reply. "Look at this horse," she added, gesturing with her tail toward the next cage. "It's so much smaller than the ones at the horseplace, and it's covered in black and white stripes!"

"And the one in the cage next to it!" Icewing exclaimed. "Is that a weasel or a badger?"

Icewing blinked in surprise at an animal with the long, sinuous body of a weasel. It had a white stripe running along its fur, dividing its black underside from its gray back and the top of its head—similar to a badger.

"A weasel-badger," she murmured.

"And look at this!" Rootspring called from farther down the row.

Ivypool padded to join him; a shiver ran through her body from ears to claws as she found herself staring at a snake bigger than she could have imagined. It was coiled around a dead branch, and she felt that its small glittering eyes were fixed on her.

"Thank StarClan it's behind that shiny stuff," she breathed. "It could swallow us in one mouthful!"

At first most of the animals seemed to be asleep, but while the cats were inspecting them, they were starting to wake up. Ivypool forced herself not to flee as she realized that they were becoming aware of strangers in their midst. A creature like a huge dog, with thick fur around its neck and shoulders, growled at her in a language she couldn't understand, but the tone was clearly hostile. *Is that a wolf?* she wondered. More unfriendly growls and hisses came from all around her; once again she was thankful for the walls that separated the creatures from her and the rest of the queuing cats.

Then she heard words that she *could* understand; some animal behind her was speaking her own language, but with a raspy rumble that she had never heard from any other cat, in the Clan territories or anywhere else.

*It's not a Clan cat, not a rogue, not a kittypet. . . .*

The cat sounded as if it were speaking through a mouthful of rocks. "Who are you? What are you cats doing here?"

Ivypool froze, glancing at her companions to make sure they had heard it too. She saw four wide-eyed expressions, four tails in the air, four pelts bristling in surprise and readiness for anything this weird place might throw at them.

Swallowing her nervousness, Ivypool turned around to discover where the voice had come from. She gasped in astonishment when her gaze fell on the next cage. Sitting there, staring at the questing cats, were two solid tabbies, taller and broader than any cat she had ever seen before, with bushy, blunt-tipped tails.



## Chapter 15



*The questing cats crowded together outside the tabby cats' pen.* Ivypool put her face right up to the interlaced fence, tasting the air. *They smell kind of like cats,* she thought, *but very different at the same time.* At first she wondered whether the odd scent might just be the reek of this terrible place clinging to them, but after a couple of deeper sniffs she decided that the smell must be coming *from* them.

After a few heartbeats the two cats rose and cautiously approached the fence. Now Ivypool could see that one of them was a tom and the other a she-cat whose heavy belly showed that she must be near her kitting.

"Hmm . . .," the she-cat mewed. "Strangecats . . ."

Ivypool was aware of Rootspring and Icewing bristling beside her, but she understood that the weird cats weren't trying to insult them; that was just their word for cats that weren't like them.

"Are you kittypets?" she asked.

The two tabbies blinked in surprise, as if they couldn't believe that Ivypool was speaking to them in their own language. There were no other cats in this weird place; for a long time they must have had only each other to talk to.

"What's that?" the big she-cat asked eventually, with a puzzled look.

"Cats who live with Twolegs," Icewing explained. "The Twolegs feed them and look after them. Do you have Twoleg owners?"

The two tabbies exchanged a doubtful look. "I suppose we do, in a way . . .," the tom replied. "The Twolegs here capture animals and keep them in these cages. That's what happened to me and my mate. Sometimes the animals only stay for a few days, but others stay longer. We've been here a long time," he finished sadly.

"Why do the Twolegs do that?" Ivypool asked.

The tabby tom shrugged. "It depends if the Twoleg is able to give the animals to other Twolegs. Over the moons we've been here, we've seen many Twolegs turn up in big rumble beasts to collect animals and take them away."

*He must mean monsters.* Ivypool frowned, trying to make sense of what these strange cats were telling her. "All these are special animals," she mused, half to herself. "We've never seen anything like them. Maybe that's why the Twolegs want them. And we haven't seen cats like you, either," she added to the tabbies in the cage.

"I'm not surprised," the she-cat mewed. "There aren't many of us left."

"We're wildcats," her mate continued. "My name is Tumble Leap, and this is Stalk Purr."

Ivypool introduced herself and the rest of the questing cats. As they exchanged greetings, a horrible thought crept into her mind, and she hesitated before asking it.

“Do you think that the Twoleg might give your kits away?”

The two wildcats glanced at each other anxiously. “We really, really don’t want that to happen,” Stalk Purr murmured. “We just hope that the Twoleg will want to keep them here. After all, he has kept us for more moons than I can count. Maybe that means that he likes us.”

Ivypool doubted that. Looking around at the cages where the other animals were kept—the small spaces, the isolation, and the dirt—she couldn’t believe that even a Twoleg would do that to animals that he liked.

“Have you had other kits?” she asked Stalk Purr. “What happened to them?”

Sorrow flooded into the she-wildcat’s eyes. “I had two litters before this,” she replied. “This is my third, and it’s not even the right season for kitting. None of the others survived, so I don’t know if the Twoleg would give them away or not.”

Ivypool felt a pang of agony so deep that she felt it would split her heart in two. Her belly churned at the idea of kits dying or being taken away. “Don’t you want to leave this place?” she asked.

Tumble Leap bowed his head in defeat. “Life is hard for us out in the wild,” he explained. “Twolegs have destroyed so much of our home, it was becoming impossible to find prey. Cats soon began leaving in the hope that they would find a place where the prey was running better. They said if they found somewhere, they would come back for the rest of us, but they never did.” He sighed. “At least here we don’t have to worry about hunting for food.”

“I’m so sorry to hear about all your troubles,” Dovewing meowed, her eyes full of sympathy. “Life in our home by the lake isn’t always easy, but we have our Clanmates, and all the cats look out for each other.”

As she spoke, Ivypool spotted a flicker of recognition pass over the eyes of the wildcats. Stalk Purr leaned forward, letting out a small purr. “You call yourselves Clans too?” she asked.

The questioning cats exchanged shocked looks. “Yes, we’ve called ourselves Clans for generations,” Rootspring replied to Stalk Purr. “Is it just a coincidence that you use the same word? Or does it mean that there’s some sort of connection between your group and ours?”

No cat could answer him.

Then Whistlepaw, who so far hadn’t spoken, stepped forward and gestured with her tail for her companions to move back. In the cleared space in front of the wildcats’ cage she stretched out her forepaw and drew in the earth the symbol she had seen in her vision, the cloud split by lightning and the vines.

Stepping back, she looked up at the wildcats. “Does this mean anything to you?” she asked.

The two wildcats drew closer to the shiny lattice at the front of the cage, peering at Whistlepaw’s drawing. “Is that . . . ?” Tumble Leap whispered, gazing wide-eyed at

Stalk Purr. "Could it be . . . ?" They gazed at each other for a heartbeat more, then nodded in agreement.

"That is the symbol for StormClan," Stalk Purr meowed. "The Clan that birthed our group."

The Twoleg den seemed to spin around Ivypool as she heard the she-wildcat's words and tried to understand what they might mean. *StormClan? The wildcats had their own Clans?* She wondered what else the Clans might have in common with these wildcats she had never known existed until that morning. Her pads prickled with anticipation at the thought that they might have discovered something vital to their quest.

"I am a medicine cat." Now there was authority in Whistlepaw's voice. "That means that my ancestors sometimes send me visions to guide or to warn the Clans. That symbol came to me in a vision. And there was something else. I saw a huge tree that looked as if it had been burned out from the inside. Is that familiar to you?"

Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr gazed at each other for so long that Ivypool felt her shiver of anticipation begin to fade.

"I'm not sure," Stalk Purr murmured at last. "Whistlepaw, it sounds like you just described a place I once saw when I was a much younger cat. It was called the Star Tree. It was where our parents and their generation of wildcats used to go to commune with our ancestors."

Whistlepaw's eyes lit up with excitement. "Like our Moonpool!" she breathed out. Springing onto her hind legs, she wrapped her forepaws around the shiny lattice and pressed her muzzle through a gap. "Do you know where the tree is?" she asked urgently.

Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap bowed their heads, both deeply dejected. "If we were still living in the territory where we grew up, we would know where to go," Tumble Leap replied. "We could give you a vague idea, but we haven't been there for so long, we can't be sure."

"We don't want to lead you wrong," Stalk Purr added.

The questing cats exchanged frustrated glances. Ivypool couldn't believe that they had come so close to discovering what they needed to know, only to be disappointed because the wildcats couldn't remember.

"Tell us more about your Clans," she meowed, hoping that somehow talking about the past might jog their memory.

"Once we lived in a large group who hunted together and looked out for each other," Tumble Leap responded. "We marked our borders, and sometimes we fought with rival groups or other animals like foxes and badgers."

*That sounds exactly like a Clan,* Ivypool thought.

"Did you commune with StarClan?" Whistlepaw asked.

Tumble Leap tilted his head thoughtfully. "I never heard it called that," he replied. "But I remember that our elders used to go and speak with our ancestors—at the tree

you mentioned," he added with a nod to Whistlepaw. "I only went to the tree myself once, when I was just a kit, but the elders told us they would walk into the tree and somehow emerge into the hunting grounds of the ancestors. It never really made sense to me," he admitted.

"If we find the tree, would your Clanmates be able to help us?" Ivypool asked.

Stalk Purr let out a sad sigh. "We told you, our Clan doesn't really exist anymore," she responded. "I don't think you'll be able to find more of us. Our numbers have been dwindling for many, many moons. Tumble Leap and I can remember friends and kin of ours who left on their own quest, to find help, but they never returned. In the end, things got so desperate that lots of cats went off in different directions. For all we know, Tumble Leap and I are the last two wildcats left."

"Stalk Purr, you said you visited the Star Tree when you were younger," Ivypool meowed. "Please tell us what you can remember. If we're able to find it, it's not impossible that we might find more wildcats there."

Stalk Purr shook her head sadly. "I can't believe that. But I'll tell you what I know." She sat staring at her paws for a few moments, and then looked up. "I remember the tree was in a forest," she began. "But it stood alone, in the middle of a clearing. For part of the way, we followed a stream; I remember climbing upward, and the stream tumbled down in a series of small waterfalls, foaming around rocks. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"And then?" Whistlepaw asked eagerly.

Once more Stalk Purr shook her head. "That's all I remember. But I don't think the Star Tree was very far from the top of the falls."

"That's really helpful," Ivypool mewed. "Thank you, Stalk Purr."

"No need to thank me," the wildcat murmured. "Having cats remind us of our old ways is thanks enough."

"Have you ever spoken to your ancestors before?" Whistlepaw asked. "Maybe they could tell you if more of your kind are out there."

"No." Stalk Purr's shoulders sagged despairingly. "Only the elders were able to do it; the knowledge and power came to them as they aged. We were too young—and we still are. We couldn't even try it, since we can't reach the tree. That might be why we wildcats are dying out, because there's no cat old enough to receive the ancestors' guidance, or to connect with other wildcats—if they still exist."

Ivypool felt a surge of compassion as she listened to the wildcats' tale. Part of her could understand why they had given up and resigned themselves to living in this vile Twoleg den, but another part wanted to tell them to give their pelts a shake and *do* something.

"You ought to find a way out of here," she urged them. "You can join us if you like. We can find the Star Tree together, and if we find it, maybe it can help you reunite with others of your kind."



Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap exchanged another look, this time miserably reluctant. "Our Twoleg is a horrible creature," Stalk Purr mewed, "but for all his faults, he feeds us regularly and keeps us safe. Before he captured us, we were close to starving."

"We can't go through that again," Tumble Leap added.

Ivypool was disappointed that her persuasion had been useless. Both wildcats sounded so resigned, as if their suffering in their barren territory and their ill treatment from the Twoleg had drained away all their courage.

Stalk Purr bowed her head for a moment; clearly, she had guessed some of what Ivypool was thinking. "At least I'll be able to feed my kits here . . .," she choked out feebly.

Ivypool's whole body cramped with tension. She didn't want to push the wildcat queen any further, or make her feel worse, but at the same time she couldn't imagine why any cat would want to stay in this vile place if there was a chance of escaping.

"If the Twoleg takes your kits, you won't get to feed them at all," she reminded Stalk Purr.

The wildcat looked desperately miserable, and Ivypool felt guilty for making her feel even worse, but she knew that there was no way to help the two tabbies unless they faced up to the truth.

Before Stalk Purr could respond, Ivypool heard the sound of a door opening in one of the Twoleg dens. Startled, she spun around to see a Twoleg emerging, carrying something in his forepaw that made a high-pitched clanging sound when he shook it.

"What's *that*?" Rootspring hissed.

"It means it's feeding time," Tumble Leap explained in a rapid undertone. "You have to get out of here. If the Twoleg catches you, he'll put you in a cage for sure!"



## Chapter 16



*"Run!" Ivypool yowled.*

She hurled herself along the path between the cages, her companions racing along at her shoulder, and sprang up onto the top of the wall.

Dovewing, Icewing, and Rootspring leaped down on the other side and dived into the shelter of the tree roots where they had made their temporary camp. Ivypool jumped down too, but she wanted to get a better view of the Twoleg and discover how he treated his captives. Instead of following the others into hiding, she scrambled up another tree near the wall, from where she had a good view of the Twoleg den.

She had barely settled herself on a branch when she realized that Whistlepaw had joined her.

"I'm sure those wildcats are important," the medicine cat explained. "I want to make sure they're all right."

Ivypool could read her own concern for Stalk Purr in Whistlepaw's wide, troubled eyes. She knew that it was more than the sympathy a medicine cat would naturally feel for an injured cat or a queen near to kitting.

From her vantage point in the tree, with no need to worry about being captured, Ivypool had time to study the Twoleg as he walked up and down the path, stopping in front of each cage and putting his face against the barriers. He was a tall, broad-shouldered male, with thick fur dangling from his face but none on his head. He was carrying a kind of pouch slung over one shoulder. At his heels padded a large, muscular dog with a brown pelt and a broad, blunt face; it seemed to be growling at the imprisoned animals as they pressed eagerly against the front of their cages.

Ivypool couldn't understand why the animals wanted to get close to the Twoleg when he and his dog were so obviously brutal. Then the Twoleg reached into his pouch and took out a piece of fresh-kill, which he dangled in the air in front of the cage with the huge furry dog. The dog leaped up, whining desperately as if it was trying to get through the mesh at the front of its cage.

Instead of opening up the cage to feed the dog, the Twoleg put the fresh-kill back in his pouch. Ivypool noticed that part of the paw holding the food was missing.

*Ha! I wonder if some animal had a mouthful of his pads and a claw or two.*

The Twoleg kicked the dog's cage and bellowed something at it, making it let out a long, menacing growl. The other animals were cowering at the loud noises. Ivypool's heart clenched with pity, and she felt rage spreading through her as she sensed how much the Twoleg was enjoying himself, terrorizing these powerful animals and withholding food.

"We've seen enough," she meowed to Whistlepaw. "Come on."

The young medicine cat looked as if she wanted to be sick, but she said nothing, only followed Ivypool down the tree and into the makeshift den where the other cats

were waiting.

"What did you see?" Icewing asked.

Ivypool described the Twoleg and his dangerous dog, and the way he was taunting the creatures with food dangled in front of them.

"It was horrible!" Whistlepaw exclaimed. "I always knew some Twolegs could be dangerous, but until now I never imagined any of them could be so cruel, even if they don't understand how Clan cats want to live. I never thought a Twoleg would torture animals."

Ivypool faced her friends, her gaze traveling from one troubled expression to the next. "I want to do something," she declared at last. "We can't let Stalk Purr have her kits in this terrible Twolegplace."

"Yes, it is terrible," Dovewing agreed. "But I'm not sure what we can do. Both wildcats seem resigned to staying where they are."

"You're right, Dovewing," Icewing mewed, certainty in her voice. "I want to complete this quest and get back to the lake. Who knows what's going on in RiverClan while I'm away? Whistlepaw, your dream didn't mention the wildcats, did it?"

Whistlepaw shook her head.

"Then maybe they'll be happy here," Icewing continued. "At least as happy as they would be anywhere else. Besides, how would we help them escape?"

Whistlepaw was staring at her paws, her head and her whiskers drooping. When she looked up, Ivypool was shocked at the misery in her eyes. "I'm sure these cats have something to do with my vision," she meowed. "And that means they're important to the Clans. If it wasn't StarClan who sent us on this quest, maybe it was the wildcats' ancestors. Maybe we've been sent here to help the wildcats."

"I thought we were sent to find a tree," Rootspring commented, his shoulders hunched moodily.

Whistlepaw flexed her claws in frustration. "Yes, we were," she responded. "And didn't the wildcats tell us that their elders communed with their ancestors at a *tree*?"

Dovewing still had a doubtful look. "None of us have ever heard of StormClan before," she pointed out. "It's hard to believe that could be what the vision was about."

"But the StormClan symbol is the same one in my vision," Whistlepaw insisted. "And helping the wildcats is just the right thing to do. Besides, is it just a coincidence that they know a Clan name and Clan ways? Please, you have to trust me!"

Silence fell over the whole group. Ivypool could see thoughts flickering like minnows in her companions' eyes as each cat wondered what to do.

Finally, it was Icewing who spoke. "Whistlepaw, of course I trust you," she began. "If you think that saving the wildcats is important, then I'm with you. But I'd feel better if we had more information to go on. We set out without much direction, but

we managed to find the cliffs and the sun-drown-water. Now I think that the next thing we ought to do is to find the tree. That way we can be certain about what we need to do. Finding the tree, and maybe others of their kind, would help convince the wildcats to flee this awful place once we get them free."

Whistlepaw blinked gratefully at the RiverClan she-cat. Ivypool was impressed by Icewing's suggestion. Even though she was clearly impatient to return to her Clan, she was prepared to put her faith in Whistlepaw.

"We have the directions that Stalk Purr gave us," Ivypool reminded every cat. "Alone in the middle of a forest clearing, near the top of a series of small waterfalls. Should we head there?"

She let her gaze travel around the other questing cats. Whistlepaw's eyes were shining with enthusiasm, and gradually each of the others nodded agreement.

"Good," Ivypool meowed. "Let's go."

The path grew steeper, and the woodland thickened as the cats trekked on. Ivypool guessed that they were climbing the lower slopes of the fox-head mountain; at least, the summit had disappeared, screened from their gaze by the seemingly endless forest.

Sunhigh had just passed when Rootspring, who had taken the lead, halted and looked around with a disgusted expression on his face. "How are we supposed to find a tree in this?" he demanded, sweeping his tail around to indicate the countless trunks and the spreading branches that blocked out almost all the sunlight. "It's not like there aren't a lot to choose from."

"Stalk Purr said the Star Tree was in a clearing," Icewing pointed out.

"Very helpful," Rootspring muttered.

Ivypool was about to suggest taking a break when she noticed that Whistlepaw was standing rigid, her ears pricked and an expectant look on her face.

"Are you okay?" Ivypool asked her.

Whistlepaw turned to her, excitement in her shining eyes and quivering whiskers. "I can hear running water!" she explained. "And Stalk Purr said we had to find the stream before we could find the tree."

Listening closely, Ivypool could make out the rushing of water, very faint in the distance. "You're right," she purred. "Come on! It's this way."

She let Whistlepaw take the lead, and soon the young medicine cat was bounding through the trees, the noise of the water growing louder with every paw step.

Before long they reached the bank of the stream. The water tumbled down just as Stalk Purr had described, foaming around the rocks in a series of small waterfalls. Every cat halted, crouched on the bank, and lapped from the swirling water; it was fresh and icy cold.

"I think we ought to cross," Whistlepaw meowed when they had all finished drinking.

"Why?" Dovewing asked; her tone was curious, not hostile.

"I don't know," Whistlepaw admitted. "It's just a feeling in my paws. I think we'll find the tree on the opposite side."

"Okay," Ivypool mewed. "Your paws have led us well so far."

She was grateful that the stream was narrow enough to leap across; the fierce current and jutting rocks could injure or even drown a cat who fell in.

The medicine cat went leaping up the rocky path on the far side of the stream; Ivypool flinched at the thought that she might slip on the wet stones, and she followed more slowly with the rest of her companions.

"Look!" Whistlepaw exclaimed as the others reached her.

She pointed with her tail farther into the forest, where Ivypool could see strong sunlight slanting down among the trees. "That means there must be a clearing," she declared. "And that's what we're looking for!"

Catching Whistlepaw's excitement, every cat raced toward the sunlight, brushed through a clump of fern, and halted at the edge of a clearing.

"Is that it?" Rootspring mewed after a moment.

"Yes! It has to be!" Whistlepaw exclaimed, bouncing on her paws like an enthusiastic kit.

There was a tree in the center of the clearing, and it looked as if it had been burned out from inside. Some of the branches seemed dead, while others still held shriveled leaves that must have sprung the previous newleaf. Ivy covered the burned-out shell. Ivypool struggled with a smothering fog of disappointment; this was nothing like the magical place that Whistlepaw had described from her vision. Even the sun had disappeared behind a cloud.

"Are you sure?" she asked the medicine cat. "This looks . . . dull, somehow. Not like the Star Tree the wildcats told us about."

"I'm sure," Whistlepaw replied. "We followed the directions. Maybe it's better on the inside."

Gazing at the tree, Ivypool wasn't sure how they were going to get inside. From where she was standing, the only opening she could see looked as if it had been gouged into the wood by huge claws. It was screened by ivy and far too small for a cat to squeeze through.

*Too small for us, she thought. Those massive wildcats would have no chance.*

"Let's take a look," Whistlepaw meowed, bounding across the clearing to the opening and sticking her nose inside.

A heartbeat later she reared back with a shriek of fear, turned, and raced toward her companions, her ears laid against her head and her fur bristling. Following her was a stream of angry weasels, letting out furious, squealing cries as they flowed across the grass.

*Weasels living in the tree, Ivypool groaned silently, unsheathing her claws. That's all we need!*



## Chapter 17



*Weasels were pouring out of the tree*, appearing through the screen of ivy as if the tree itself were spitting them out. As Ivypool braced herself for battle, one of them leaped through the air and landed on top of her, flattening her to the ground and knocking the wind out of her. While she struggled to take a breath, the weasel wrapped its long, sinuous body around her belly as if it were a snake. It opened its mouth to reveal rows of teeth as sharp as thorns and two long fangs. Ivypool tried to twist herself out of its grip, but its claws were digging into her. She knew she couldn't free herself before those teeth closed on her throat.

*StarClan, help me!*

As the weasel was poised to strike, Icewing appeared, looming above it; she bit down hard on the writhing weasel's neck, then tossed it aside with a grunt.

"Thank you!" Ivypool gasped.

"Don't waste time thanking me," Icewing snapped. "Get up and help!"

Staggering to her paws, Ivypool stood tail-to-tail with Icewing, ready for the next attack. A few tail-lengths away she spotted Whistlepaw, facing their foes with lips drawn back as she hissed at them.

Ivypool's belly cramped with anxiety. Whistlepaw was a medicine cat, the apprentice's wild, haphazard swipes at the weasels would have made it clear that she hadn't had much battle training. And she was the youngest of them all—younger even than Ivypool's own kits.

*I need to protect her*, she thought.

But just as she was poised to fight her way to Whistlepaw's side, she noticed that perhaps her swipes weren't so haphazard after all. Whistlepaw was edging backward, leading the weasels into Rootspring's and Dovewing's waiting claws, then slipping aside to let the experienced fighters deal with them.

Rootspring was especially formidable against the swarm of weasels, gripping them with teeth or claws and tossing them aside to where they lay unmoving. The thought flickered across Ivypool's mind that although Rootspring seemed numbed by grief most of the time, he could come alive when he needed to, which was a relief.

But the weasels didn't stop coming. As soon as Ivypool flung one away, there was another to take its place. She thought that she and her companions were outnumbered at least four to one. The weasels were fierce for small creatures, their teeth bared and their beady eyes glinting angrily in the light.

"What do we do?" Whistlepaw cried, darting aside to avoid a weasel that was trying to fasten its fangs in her shoulder. "They won't stop!"

Icewing kicked one of the smaller weasels with her hind paw. "If we're going to drive these mange-pelts away, we need to work together," she yowled. "Join me by the



tree, shoulder to shoulder.”

At first Ivypool thought she wouldn’t be able to reach the tree, with the crowd of angry weasels blocking her path. But she fought her way through, shielding Whistlepaw as much as she could, until she stood beside Icewing at the foot of the tree. Dovewing and Rootspring were heartbeats behind.

“Now, stay together,” Icewing meowed. “Keep moving forward.”

Advancing side by side, the cats turned themselves into a hard line of teeth and claws, moving like a rolling log, battering the weasels and driving them farther and farther into the darkening forest. They fought without trying to kill, but when Whistlepaw lashed out at the biggest weasel and opened a deep gash in its belly, the vicious creatures decided that was enough. They finally retreated, diving into a mound of dead leaves and then scurrying away through the trees.

“You can have your tree back when we’re done!” Icewing yowled after them.

When Ivypool was sure the weasels were gone, she turned to Whistlepaw, regarding the medicine-cat apprentice with newfound respect. “Well done,” she mewed. “Are you sure you aren’t a warrior?”

Whistlepaw beamed with pride. “Well, I did train as a warrior for a few moons, but still, I only did what needed to be done,” she responded. “We all did.” Then more anxiously she added, “Is any cat hurt?”

The cats checked themselves for injuries. Ivypool had a couple of scratches where the first weasel had grabbed her, but they weren’t deep; she could hardly feel them, and the slight bleeding had stopped.

“We’re all fine,” Rootspring meowed at last. “Fighting together like that helped a lot. Good idea, Icewing.”

Icewing shrugged off his praise. “Fine. But the skirmish has slowed us down. I know that we don’t have an exact time to complete this mission, but every moment I spend away from my Clan right now weighs on my mind. I’d rather not take any longer than we need to.”

“That makes sense,” Dovewing commented. “If it weren’t for the weasels, we could have checked out the tree and maybe discovered whatever it is we have to do.”

“It’s already starting to get dark,” Whistlepaw added.

Ivypool realized that the young cat was right. The clouds had cleared away again, but now the sun was near setting, casting long shadows through the trees.

“It’s not too late,” she meowed. “There’s time to take a look.”

All five cats turned back toward the tree. Ivypool gazed doubtfully at its blackened branches and withered bark. If it had ever been a gateway to the wildcat ancestors, that time had surely passed long ago.

“Okay, Whistlepaw, what do we do now?” Rootspring asked when the silence had dragged out for several heartbeats.

Whistlepaw blinked anxiously. “Stalk Purr said the wildcat elders went inside the tree to meet with their ancestors, but I can’t see how we could do that. The hole the

weasels came from is too small for us. In my vision it was much bigger. There must be another way in."

"Okay, let's look for it," Ivypool mewed.

Slowly the cats began to circle the tree, looking for an opening. But thick stems of ivy wound around the trunk, and the bark was almost completely hidden by the leaves. Ivypool was beginning to wonder if this was the right tree after all when Whistlepaw cried out, "Look!"

Her tail was pointing up at one of the thicker branches, higher off the ground. At first Ivypool couldn't see anything except for the smothering tendrils and leaves of the ivy, but then a breeze gently moved the foliage to one side, and she spotted a gap, big enough for creatures even larger than Clan cats.

"That must be how the wildcats got in," Ivypool murmured.

"But it's pretty high, and if the tree is hollow . . .," Rootspring began, then let his voice trail off.

"We'll have to climb up and then leap down into darkness," Whistlepaw finished for him. Now that they had found the entrance, she sounded as cheerfully optimistic as if she were suggesting a gentle stroll around the lake.

The rest of the cats exchanged doubtful glances. "Okay," Ivypool agreed at last, knowing how reluctant she sounded. "We'll do it, if that's what it takes."

"We don't all have to go," Whistlepaw pointed out. "Back home, only the medicine cats would go to commune with StarClan, after all."

"You're *not* going on your own." A shudder passed through Ivypool at the thought of the young cat facing danger—maybe death—alone. "What do you think we're here for?"

"Besides, things might be different here," Rootspring pointed out. "We're trying to make contact with ancestors who aren't our own. For all we know, the more cats who reach out to them, the better chance we'll have at connecting. We should all go."

"No, not all of us," Dovewing objected. "At least one of us should stay behind to keep watch. The weasels might not be the only foes we have to deal with. I'll stay, and if it comes to that, I'll fight off any creature that tries to interfere with what you're doing."

"Are you sure?" Ivypool asked, anxious for her sister. "What if the weasels come back?"

"If that happens, I'll climb the tree and hide among the leaves," Dovewing responded. "That way I can warn you, but they won't even know I'm here."

Ivypool nodded, impressed by her sister's common sense and courage. *I'm so proud of her!* "Good luck!"

"You're the ones who need luck," Dovewing told her. "May StarClan light your path."

With Whistlepaw in the lead, the rest of the cats began to climb the tree. It was easy enough; the ivy stems twisting around the trunk gave them plenty of paw holds. Not many heartbeats had passed before they were all standing on the thick branch just above the hole.

Ivypool felt as though a bunch of butterflies were flying around in her belly; she spotted anxious glints in Rootspring's eyes, while Icewing was flexing her claws nervously.

Whistlepaw took a deep breath, murmured, "Here we go . . .," and took a massive leap down into the dark.

Ivypool caught her breath; she had meant to take a look and a good sniff first, hoping to get an idea of what they might find at the bottom. Listening hard, she could just make out a soft thud as Whistlepaw landed.

"It's okay!" the medicine cat called out. "There's loads of moss and leaves down here. It's a soft landing."

With that reassurance, Ivypool felt her butterflies settle and followed Whistlepaw into the darkness of the hollow tree. After a couple of heartbeats two more soft thuds told her that Rootspring and Icewing had also jumped safely.

*At least we didn't land on top of each other,* Ivypool thought, then remarking how strange that was.

Inside the tree was almost total darkness. The ivy cut off nearly all the light from the hole where they had entered, and from the tiny gap at the base that the weasels had used. But Ivypool could somehow make out that the space inside the tree was larger than it had appeared to be on the outside. All she could see of her companions was their shimmering eyes; she felt the fur on her neck slowly start to rise as she realized that they were standing farther apart than the width of the tree should have allowed. *Maybe there's still a spark of something special in this tree after all.*

"So what do we do now?" she asked tentatively.

"I'm not sure," Whistlepaw replied. "But when I and the other medicine cats go to the Moonpool, I have to calm myself down, listen to my breathing, and imagine that wind is blowing through the trees."

Ivypool allowed herself a grin. "That all sounds a bit WindClan to me," she remarked.

"True," Icewing agreed, "but maybe it would help if we all think of something tied to our Clans."

"How would that work?" Rootspring asked.

"Well, instead of imagining wind blowing through trees, you could imagine yourself leaping from branch to branch, sensing the air rushing through your fur until you feel like you're flying."

"I could do that," Rootspring responded.

"And you, Ivypool," Icewing continued, "I don't think it would work to concentrate on the thunder your Clan is named for. Suppose you imagine the calm

just after the storm, the ground damp beneath your paws, and the leaves wet with raindrops.”

Ivypool wasn't sure that Icewing's idea would work, and she guessed that if she could see Rootspring, she would find doubt in his eyes as well. But no cat could suggest anything else, and so they settled down on the mossy ground, falling silent and taking deep breaths.

Clearing her mind of all her worries, Ivypool pictured the last storm she could remember: the terrible wind and rain that had caused such damage to all of the Clans, and nearly taken a kit's life in WindClan. She remembered listening to the rain as it gradually eased off, and first one bird, then another, then even more calling to each other throughout the forest. Without realizing it, she fell into a calm, relaxed state between waking and sleep.

When Ivypool finally eased her eyes open, she drew a breath in wonder. Everything had changed. The darkness had cleared, and she could see the inside of the tree. But instead of the scorched, hollowed-out bark, she was surrounded by healthy, light wood. A golden ray of light was shining down from the hole they had leaped through. Even more, she could see her companions rousing and, like her, gazing around in amazement.

“Is this . . . is it really happening?” she stammered.

“I think we're having a shared vision,” Whistlepaw suggested. “But this isn't StarClan. I think we're in the wildcats' version of StarClan.”

Turning around, Ivypool spotted a wide opening, like the mouth of a cave, leading out of the tree. Her heart began pounding uncomfortably. She knew they ought to go that way, but she couldn't imagine what they would find when they stepped through the gap. Glancing at her companions, she saw the same hesitation in Icewing's and Rootspring's eyes, but Whistlepaw once again was almost bouncing with enthusiasm.

“Come on!” she meowed. “What are we waiting for?”

With Whistlepaw in the lead, the questing cats filed out into the open. Ivypool gazed around, almost overwhelmed by the sight of the way that everything had changed. The tree still stood in the center of the clearing, but now it was green and flourishing, undamaged, and there was no ivy twisting around it. The trees at the edge of the clearing looked younger too, letting more sunlight into the forest. The floor of the clearing was covered with creeping vegetation and small, starry flowers. The air was full of the scents of fresh, growing plants.

“It's as if . . .” Ivypool let her voice trail off, then tried again. “It's as if we've stepped many seasons into the past.”



## Chapter 18



*"Hello! Is any cat here?" Whistlepaw called.*

A deep purr answered her, seeming to echo all through the forest. Ahead of them, Ivypool saw that through the trees the land rose to a ridge. The purring came from two wildcats standing on the edge, beckoning with their tails. Their muscular bodies and tabby fur showed that they must be kin to Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr.

"We're coming!" Whistlepaw yowled joyfully as she took off through the trees and raced up the ridge.

Ivypool and the others followed. *I really ought to have a chat with Whistlepaw about thinking before she leaps into the unknown*, Ivypool thought.

But as she drew closer to the wildcats, she saw that their eyes were twinkling warmly as if they had been expecting the questing cats. She was filled with an overwhelming certainty that there was nothing to fear from them.

"It's good to see Clan cats here after so long," one of the wildcats meowed.

Ivypool's fur bushed up in surprise. *After so long?* This was the first time any cat had confirmed that the Clans and the wildcats were connected.

"You're very welcome," the other added. "Just follow us."

Ivypool was surprised to find that she felt no hesitation at all about obeying. Their calm demeanor and kind eyes made her trust these cats completely.

The two wildcats led them across the ridge and down into a ravine. The sides were rocky; ferns and small bushes clung to the sides and clustered on the banks of a small stream that ran along the bottom.

As they reached the water's edge and began padding downstream, Ivypool picked up the mingled scents of many cats. She exchanged a glance with Rootspring. "These aren't all wildcat scents," she murmured.

Rootspring nodded. "This must be where we discover what all this is about."

Their path took a sharp turn, and as they followed it, Ivypool saw that the ravine opened out into a wide stretch of flat land. The stream spread into a maze of meandering channels feeding small pools.

Several cats were milling around in the middle of the open area; some of them were lapping from the pools, some of them grooming, some of them relaxing together and sharing tongues. Ivypool thought it looked rather like the beginning of a Gathering, before the Clans' business began.

She had never seen so many different-looking cats together in the same place. Some were tabbies, as large as the wildcats they had found trapped in the Twoleg den, others a little smaller, with fluffy pelts like the Sisters, others smaller still, like Clan cats. Every color Ivypool could think of appeared in their pelts.

The wildcats who had led them here merged into the crowd, while a black-and-white she-cat who was the same size as the Clan cats stepped forward and faced them.

Ivypool noticed two others who looked very like her hesitating in the background, examining the questing cats with curious stares.

"Greetings," the she-cat meowed. "My name is Galestar."

"Galestar?" Rootspring exclaimed; his eyes widened into a shocked expression. "That's a Clan name! So you're a Clan leader?"

"I *was* a Clan leader," Galestar explained. "A leader of StormClan. Seeing you here suggests that you got my message."

"Do you mean my vision?" Whistlepaw asked, her eyes widening in surprise. "It was *you* who sent it?"

Galestar inclined her head. "It was."

Ivypool glanced at her companions; she could see that they looked just as confused as she felt.

"We've never heard of StormClan," Icewing declared. "Only RiverClan, ThunderClan, WindClan, ShadowClan, and SkyClan. And StarClan, of course. Was there another Clan we don't know about?"

Galestar dipped her head, a hint of sadness in her eyes. "There was. The tragic story of StormClan has been willfully forgotten," she sighed. "But there are some things that you Clan cats must know. That's why I tried to make contact with you."

She led the way to a patch of bare earth and moved her forepaw over the surface. When she stepped back, Ivypool saw that she had drawn the same symbol that Whistlepaw had shown them earlier.

"Does that mean anything to you?" she asked.

Whistlepaw nodded. "Yes," she replied. "I saw it in my vision, but I don't know what it means."

"I hoped to rouse your curiosity," Galestar responded. "And I was right. That is what led you here, exactly where I hoped that the Clan cats would come."

"But what is the symbol?" Whistlepaw persisted.

"I will explain that at the proper time," Galestar told her. "There is much you need to know first."

Ivypool felt irritation like ants crawling through her pelt. Galestar still hadn't told the questing cats anything about why she had sent the message in the first place. Her head felt stuffed full with all the questions she wanted to ask. "*Please* will you tell us why we're here, and what all this means?" she begged Galestar.

The StormClan leader bowed her head. "I will. Come with me."

The Clan cats followed her to a spot by the waterside, shaded from the sunlight by an arching clump of ferns, within earshot of the gentle trickle of the stream.

"Many, many seasons ago, but long after the Clans were created," she began when every cat was settled, "I was the leader of WindClan. I fell in love with Stripestar, who was the leader of ThunderClan."

Ivypool let out a gasp. "A Clan leader has *never* fallen in love with the leader of another Clan!" She tried to remember if the elders had ever told any stories of Stripestar, but she was sure they never had. The time Galestar spoke of had truly been forgotten.

"Not that you know of, anyway," Galestar retorted, her mouth twisted in a wry grin. "Stripestar and I were the first, and we knew that it would be difficult for us to love each other. Leaving our Clans for each other would mean breaking the warrior code. Believe me, we tried to deny our feelings, but we couldn't."

"So what did you do?" Rootspring asked, leaning forward earnestly. Ivypool guessed he was remembering how torn he and Bristlefrost had been between their love for each other and their loyalty to their Clans. *And he's still looking for a solution that could have kept him and Bristlefrost together*, she mused sadly.

"We realized there was a way we could be together and stay with our Clans at the same time," Galestar replied. "We would combine our Clans and form a new Clan: StormClan."

"I would never have guessed that," Icewing muttered.

"There's no reason why you would," Galestar responded. "No Clan leaders had ever done anything like that before. We were both so excited about our idea," she continued, "until we presented it to the other Clans. The cats of WindClan and ThunderClan accepted the change, even though they were reluctant. But the others were staunchly against it. They were worried that such a large Clan would be too powerful, and that we would eventually steal prey and take advantage of our increased numbers and territory. They feared there would be nothing the smaller Clans could do about it. We tried to convince them we would never do that, but they didn't believe us. Besides, some cats pointed out that StarClan had made it clear there should be five Clans, not four."

"What?" Stunned, Ivypool raised a paw to halt Galestar's story. "When did StarClan say that?"

"It was part of a prophecy StarClan gave us when the Clans were first formed," Galestar explained. "That there should always be five Clans, and they should work together, like the petals of the Blazing Star flower."

Ivypool stared at her, almost lost for words. "How is it we've never heard about this prophecy? Whistlepaw, do you know anything about it?"

The young medicine cat shook her head. "I've never even heard of the flower. I don't think it grows beside the lake."

"We had to admit that the other Clans made some good arguments," Galestar went on. "But Stripestar and I had made up our minds. We went ahead and combined the Clans, and for a while it worked. And that is why we invented the symbol," she mewed with a nod to Whistlepaw. "We wanted the original two Clans to feel proud of being together, and so we made the image of lightning that comes with thunder,



and cloud that scuds across the sky when the wind blows, all bound together by vines. The symbol means two Clans have become one."

"Now I understand!" Whistlepaw breathed out.

"Unfortunately," Galestar continued, "we never managed to convince the other Clans that we wouldn't take advantage of them, but we stuck strictly to the warrior code."

"And something went wrong?" Icewing asked bluntly. "It must have, of course. You called the story of StormClan 'tragic.'"

Galestar gave her a nod of acknowledgment. "I did. As you've already worked out, the good times couldn't last. Of course, Twolegs were at the root of the problem. They began to encroach on Clan territory; they drove prey away, and hunting became harder for every cat. It wasn't StormClan's fault—we were suffering just as much as every cat—but the other Clans blamed us and started to feel resentful."

"So what did you do?" Whistlepaw's eyes were wide, her gaze fixed raptly on the StormClan leader.

"In the end," Galestar continued, "we felt so unwelcome in the forest that we made a bold decision: We would move away and seek out a new place to live. We chose a warm day in newleaf, and we set out with our hopes high that soon we would discover new territory."

"You left?" Whistlepaw sounded astonished. "But WindClan and ThunderClan still live by the lake. What happened?"

"Listen to the rest of my story," Galestar told her. "I'll explain what I can. We never imagined how difficult it would be," she continued. "We stopped in one place that looked ideal, with woodland and a stream, but every time it rained, the stream overflowed and the ground was so soggy our paws sank into it. Once we tried to settle on the outskirts of a big Twolegplace, but too many Twolegs came out with their kits and their dogs. And more often than I could count we found somewhere promising, except that foxes and badgers had settled there before us."

Dovewing shivered. "That's terrible!"

"And it wasn't an easy journey," Galestar continued. "We hadn't realized how hard it would be to feed a whole Clan without our own hunting grounds. Some cats left to return to the forest, and I imagine they became the WindClan and ThunderClan you know today. Some of us died along the way, either from sickness or falling prey to hawks when there was no cover." She paused, letting out a sigh. "I've never lost my sense of guilt. Our cats had trusted us, and they followed us to their death, all because Stripestar and I wanted to be together." She fell silent for a moment, gazing into the distance as if she were reliving those terrible times. "Besides," she went on at last, "I have to admit that Stripestar and I weren't handling things well. With the extra stress of the journey, and the number of decisions we had to make every day, we found ourselves arguing more and more, in private at first, and then in front of our Clanmates. With all the tension, I started to wonder if we'd

made a mistake when we left the forest. But then something happened that made it impossible to turn back: I found I was expecting kits."

Ivypool drew in a breath, feeling deep sympathy for any she-cat who had to give birth when her Clan had no settled home. "What happened next?" she asked, pushing away the thought of Bristlefrost that Galestar's mention of kits had called up.

"We didn't have much choice," Galestar replied, "so we pushed on until we reached the sun-drown-water. We set up a temporary camp there, and just as greenleaf changed to leaf-fall, I gave birth to three tiny kits." Her voice softened a little. "At first their birth brought joy to the Clan in the midst of our troubles. But as the air grew colder, the former ThunderClan cats grew restless to move on. They wanted to find a permanent home before leaf-bare set in—somewhere safe, where they wouldn't have to scrounge for food. I understood how they felt, but my kits were still so small and fragile, and I didn't want to force them to travel. Stronger cats had died on the journey, and I didn't want to risk their lives. But the ThunderClan cats pointed out that as leaf-fall drew on, the storms would get stronger, and if we didn't leave now, we might never be able to."

"What did Stripestar want to do?" Rootspring asked. "After all, he was the kits' father."

Galestar shook her head, a look of bitterness creeping into her eyes. "I hoped for his support," she replied. "But he felt committed to the cats who had been his Clanmates. He was concerned for the kits, but he decided that the ThunderClan cats were right. Staying where we were would risk the kits' lives and the rest of the cats we were responsible for."

"So you left?" Icewing murmured.

"We left," Galestar meowed. "Left our shelter among the rocks and started to climb up toward the mountain again. But that very day, the worst storm we'd ever faced swept in from the sun-drown-water. Rain beat down on our heads, and the winds were so strong, they threatened to sweep the kits right off the cliff."

"Stripestar was so far ahead, leading the Clan, that I couldn't even see him. And looking after the kits meant that I'd fallen behind the rest of the group. The storm was too loud for me to call out to the others, and I couldn't wait for Stripestar to realize I wasn't there and come back. So to keep my kits safe I took shelter with them in a small crevice in the rocks near the water. I knew that no cat had seen where we had gone, and they would be bound to worry. I just hoped that once the storm had passed, we would be able to find each other again."

Ivypool and Rootspring exchanged a glance. The picture of the mother cat and the three tiny kits, every cat drenched from the storm and staggering along, was vivid in Ivypool's mind. *They took shelter in a crevice. It might have been the same one where we stayed!*

"Suddenly there was an even louder noise, rolling like thunder, going on and on, until something thumped against the entrance to our crevice and everything went dark. I groped my way to where the entrance had been, and I could feel that a rock was blocking it—far too heavy for me to move. I could only assume that the storm had set off a rockslide."

"Oh, no!" Whistlepaw whispered, her eyes as wide and troubled as if she were witnessing the scene for herself.

"All I knew at the time," Galestar continued, "was that the sound of the wind and crashing water was suddenly cut off, and the kits and I were left in complete darkness. I pushed against the stone, but it wouldn't budge. We were trapped."

"What did you do?" Rootspring asked.

"There wasn't much we *could* do." A shudder passed through Galestar's body at the memory. "The kits were mewling pitifully, crying out for their father and their Clanmates, but with the storm raging, I knew no cat would be looking for us.

"I'm not sure how long we were in there before we heard frantic yowling coming from outside. Cats were calling my name; obviously they were looking for us. I yowled back, as loud as I could, but I guess my voice never carried beyond the rock that blocked our crevice. Eventually the yowling stopped, and very faintly I could hear moans of despair, and then even they died away. I knew then that they had given up."

Galestar's voice tightened over the last few words, as if she was trying to suppress fury at the memory of how her Clanmates had abandoned her and her kits.

"You sound angry," Icewing pointed out.

"And why shouldn't I be angry?" Galestar retorted. "Then and now? Stripestar had sided with his Clan over me, even though I knew better, and because I didn't want to fight about it, I gave in. But in the end, Stripestar's decision led to disaster, and he left me and my kits behind to suffer for his mistake."

Whistlepaw let out a sudden gasp. "The rocks . . . the mewling kits!" she stammered. "I saw all that in my vision!"

"You saw what happened?" Galestar asked, half disbelieving.

Whistlepaw nodded fervently. "I was clinging to the rocks in the storm," she explained. "And I heard the kits wailing for help . . . I tried to help them, but I couldn't find them. And I saw Stripestar!" she added. "A tabby tom, yowling on the cliff path. He was feeling such a crushing weight of guilt. He didn't abandon you willingly," she assured Galestar. "Only because his Clanmates persuaded him."

Galestar stared at her. "You're very wise, for such a young cat," she mewed after a moment. "That's why I sent the vision to you. You're flexible enough to consider strange new ideas, more so than Kestrelflight."

Whistlepaw ducked her head and gave her chest fur a few embarrassed licks. "I'm only a medicine-cat apprentice," she responded.

"I sent you the vision," Galestar continued, "but I couldn't show you what happened afterward." Bitterness crept back into her tone. "If Stripestar was so reluctant to leave us, then why didn't he come back to find us?"

"I'm sorry, I can't answer that question," Whistlepaw responded sadly. "But tell us what happened next," she went on. "Is that how you died, trapped in the crevice? I can't imagine anything more horrible," she finished, shivering.

Galestar shook her head. "I thought my kits and I *would* die, trapped and starving to death. For a long time I just lay curled around my kits, whimpering over the awful fate that had overtaken us. But then I heard a grinding, growling sound, and sunlight poured into the crevice as the boulder was pushed away. At first I thought my Clanmates must have found us, but our rescuers weren't from StormClan at all. They were wildcats: large tabbies like I'd never seen before. Their speech sounded strange, like their mouths were full of rocks, and I was surprised I could understand them.

"To begin with, I was scared. Would these massive cats look on me and my kits as prey? But my fears soon faded away as the wildcats took us to their camp. It was more like a Clan camp than anywhere we had stayed since we left our forest territories, and we felt at home right away. They didn't have separate groups like warriors and apprentices, so each family had their own den, except for the elders, who shared a den and seemed like a combination of leaders and medicine cats. When we arrived, they found us a comfortable spot to make our den, and they brought us fresh-kill. They told us we were welcome to stay as long as we wanted." Galestar sighed, remembering. "They were so kind."

"Did you ever try to find StormClan?" Ivypool asked.

"No, they were long gone," Galestar replied. "I thought about going to look for them, but I was too weak after our ordeal to think about traveling, and my kits were too young to risk ending up in another storm.

"Every day, as the kits and I got stronger, I would think about leaving, and every day I decided against it, until the day came when I didn't think about leaving at all. Besides . . ." She paused, looking slightly self-conscious. "By then I had fallen in love with one of the wildcats who had rescued us. His name was Bound Hunt. I worried that my feelings for him were just gratitude because he had rescued us, but gradually I realized that they were something more. At first I fought against it, because I felt guilty about being unfaithful to Stripestar, but I had to accept that I would never see Stripestar again. Besides, I was angry with him for abandoning us. So when Bound Hunt asked if I would be his mate, I said yes. He and I raised my kits together and formed a new family. We went on to have kits of our own, and the kits I had with Stripestar eventually found mates among the wildcats."

Ivypool swallowed a lump that had formed in her throat when she heard that Galestar had found happiness at last. "Whatever became of StormClan?" she asked. "Did they ever come looking for you?"

Galestar blinked sadly. "I never heard from the Clans again," she murmured. "They probably assumed that my kits and I died in the storm, and by then it was just as well. I wasn't the cat I used to be, and I'd found happiness in my new home. My love for Stripestar had been true, but I had let it go, along with Clan life and the duties of a leader—and my nine lives. I hardly ever thought of all that anymore. And one day, when my paws led me to the afterlife, I was glad to find myself not in StarClan, but in this wilderness among the ancestors of my wildcat family."

Whistlepaw shifted uncomfortably on her paws. "If you've left all things Clan behind, why have you called us here?" she asked.

"Just because I'm not part of the Clans any longer doesn't mean that I bear them any ill will," Galestar replied. "Now I need the Clan cats to repay the kindness the wildcats showed me all those seasons ago."

"And we want to do that," Whistlepaw assured her. "There was a warning in my vision—that if the Clans don't help, the river will run with blood."

Galestar's eyes widened with shock, and Ivypool saw a shiver run through her pelt. "I don't know anything about that," she meowed. "I sent the vision to ask for help, and I know that you Clan cats have your own difficulties, but . . ." She paused, and her voice took on a note of wonder. "There must be a force greater than me sending the warning." She gave her pelt a shake. "In any case, I need you to repay the wildcats who helped me, by helping their imprisoned kin."

"You know about Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap?" Ivypool asked.

"We do. And above everything we would like to see them reunited with their kin."

"But they didn't seem as if they wanted to be freed," Icewing pointed out. "What if we go back to help them but they won't come with us?"

"They only feel like that because they believe they're the last of their kind," Galestar told her. "But they aren't. There are wildcats on the other side of the mountain range."

Rootspring gave the former StormClan leader a doubtful look. "That's a very big area. What if we release Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap, and then we can't find their kin?"

"It's not difficult," Galestar assured him. "You need to follow the edge of the sun-drown-water until you come to a trail cutting through the cliffs and leading up into the mountains. It will take you to the hidden valleys that the wildcats call home."

"I think I could find that trail," Whistlepaw mewed. "It's the way the StormClan cats went in my vision."

"That's all very well," Rootspring declared. "But what if Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap still refuse to come with us?"

“They won’t refuse once they find out that the Twolegs are planning to give away their kits the moment they’re weaned,” Galestar promised. “Pounce, Stretch, and Hunt deserve better. They deserve to be raised among their kin. You Clan cats must convince them to escape, and then help them do it.”

“Pounce, Stretch, and Hunt?” Ivypool’s voice was shaking as she repeated the names. “You already know what the kits will be called?”

“Yes, I do,” Galestar told her. “I’m not able to see every outcome, but being here in the eternal hunting grounds has given me a special connection to kits—those who have been born, and those who are still to come. These kits and their parents will be very important to the wildcats and the last remnants of StormClan. It’s up to you to reunite them.”

Whistlepaw’s eyes were shining with excitement. “We won’t let you down!”

“No, we won’t,” Ivypool promised. She felt a renewed sense of purpose thrilling through her whole body and giving her strength. *I couldn’t protect my own kit, but I can protect these.* “I know the pain a mother feels when she’s separated from her kits. I won’t let that happen to the wildcats. Not on my watch.”



## Chapter 19



*Ivypool clambered up the hollowed bark inside the tree and scrambled out of the hole and onto the branch. Dazed, she looked around her. When she and her companions had entered the tree, the sun was only just beginning to set. In spite of the long conversation with Galestar, she didn't feel they had spent much time in the eternal hunting grounds of the wildcats. She had expected to see the stars blazing in the night sky; instead, the glittering warrior spirits were winking out one by one as the sky grew lighter, and a rosy glow above the trees showed where the sun would rise.*

"It's about time!" Dovewing's voice rose from the foot of the tree; looking down, Ivypool could just make out her pale shape. "If you had taken any longer, I was going to come in after you."

Ivypool clambered down the tree to her sister's side, and the other questing cats followed her.

"I'm so sorry," Whistlepaw meowed. "But we got the answers we came for. And our mission is clear now."

Dovewing's ears pricked alertly. "Tell me all about it. Look, I caught some prey while you were away. You can eat while we talk."

Ivypool felt as if her empty belly were flapping in the wind. Her jaws watered as she gulped down her share of the fresh-kill—two mice and a shrew—that her sister had caught. Between mouthfuls, she and her companions told Dovewing the story they had heard from Galestar.

"What?" Dovewing's eyes were wide with shock. "I thought leaving my own Clan to be with Tigerstar was bad enough. And now you tell me that two *Clan leaders* forced their Clans to combine so they could be together? I would never have dreamed that could happen!"

"Too bad it seems to have ended tragically," Rootspring commented.

"It wasn't all tragedy," Ivypool pointed out. "Galestar and her kits were saved from the cave, and after her heart was broken over Stripestar, she found a new cat to love and a whole new life."

Realizing what she had just said, Ivypool cast a meaningful glance at Rootspring. The SkyClan tom merely blinked and looked away, clearly thinking of Bristlefrost. *I don't blame him for not being ready to move on from her, she thought. I'm not, either.*

"So what is our plan now?" Dovewing asked when she had heard everything her companions had learned.

"We have to free Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr," Rootspring replied.



"And we don't have much time to spare," Icewing pointed out. "Stalk Purr is close to kitting, and if that happens, she won't be able to travel, and we'll have come all this way for nothing. We have to get back to that Twoleg den right away."

"I know, but—Dovewing, do you need time to rest?" Ivypool meowed. "You've been on watch all this time, and you hunted, while all we had to do was sit and listen to Galestar."

Dovewing shook her head. "No, thanks, I'm fine. The sooner we finish this mission, the sooner we can all get back to our Clans."

As the questing cats headed back to the Twoleg den, Ivypool noticed that Whistlepaw was unusually quiet. Her intense excitement at their discoveries had faded; now she looked thoughtful, and like maybe her thoughts weren't pleasant ones.

"Whistlepaw, are you okay?" Ivypool asked, slowing down a little to pad along beside the medicine cat. "You're not talking to us."

Whistlepaw gave a start, as if her mind had been far away. "Oh, I'm fine," she responded. "It's just that I'm having trouble understanding everything that Galestar told us. How could it be that such an important part of Clan history was forgotten? Even the cats of StarClan didn't know! When the other medicine cats and I met them at the Moonpool, some of them thought they should recognize the symbol, and they were troubled by it, but they didn't *remember*!"

"You're right that it's hard to believe," Ivypool meowed. "But it is possible. Only those spirits who remain in the hearts and minds of the Clan cats endure in StarClan, and only they have their stories told and passed down through the generations."

As always, while she was speaking, Bristlefrost rose to the top of Ivypool's thoughts. *How could she disappear when she is always in my heart and mind?* she asked herself.

"But this story seems too important to have simply faded away." Rootspring stepped back to walk on Whistlepaw's other side. "Two leaders became mates! That's huge. I had to go to the Dark Forest and back to get the leaders to consider letting cats switch Clans. And now I find out that long ago two leaders did a lot more than that for the sake of love. It feels like the Clans have gone backward since then."

Ivypool detected an edge of resentment in Rootspring's tone. She guessed that the SkyClan tom was thinking of all the time he and Bristlefrost had wasted, denying their feelings to honor the warrior code—and now he discovered that it had been broken much more seriously in the past.

"But were they really breaking the code?" Whistlepaw asked. "They didn't switch Clans; they just combined them."

"Oh, you're right." Rootspring spoke with unusual sarcasm. "They didn't do anything major, like individually switching Clans. They just basically destroyed two entire Clans and formed a new one so they could be together." He let out a

contemptuous snort. "No big deal. I guess if Bristlefrost and I had been leaders, we could have done something like that instead of breaking the warrior code!"

Whistlepaw winced. "I'm sorry," she mewed in a small voice.

At once Rootspring's anger faded. "I'm sorry too," he told the young medicine cat. "I didn't mean to snap at you. But it's so frustrating, thinking about how Bristlefrost and I agonized about what to do, when two whole Clans had been disrupted so that two cats could be together."

"I know." Ivypool blinked gently at Rootspring. "But it didn't turn out well for them, did it? StormClan didn't last very long. Galestar told us that some of the cats returned to the forest in the end; otherwise how would ThunderClan and WindClan still exist?"

Whistlepaw nodded thoughtfully. "That's true. . . . Some of our ancestors gave up because the journey was too hard, and came home."

"But think how their actions affected their Clans and all the others," Ivypool continued. "First of all, Galestar and Stripstar turned the Clans upside down by combining WindClan and ThunderClan. Then, after Galestar was rescued, she chose never to return. Her Clanmates probably thought she died. But it turns out she just decided not to go back to her Clan so she could stay with her new love. It must have caused so much pain." Glancing over her shoulder at Dovewing, who was padding along just behind her, she added, "No offense. But I remember how hard it was for me when you left ThunderClan to join Tigerstar in ShadowClan."

"It was hard for me, too," Dovewing responded. "If I could have combined ShadowClan and ThunderClan so that I could be with my mate and my sister, I would have."

"I wouldn't have wanted that," Ivypool told her, though she was touched by the thought. "I support cats switching Clans if they want to, but I'm a proud ThunderClan cat. I would never leave it, and I would never want it to be dissolved to form a new Clan like StormClan."

"I would have," Rootspring meowed immediately. "If I could have made that happen, then maybe Bristlefrost and I . . ." His voice choked and he fell silent.

Ivypool knew what he wanted to say. Maybe he and Bristlefrost wouldn't have wasted so much time being apart. And because every event influences how things work out, maybe Ashfur would never have gained authority in the Clans, and Bristlefrost would never have needed to visit the Dark Forest.

"That's enough talking." Icewing, who was in the lead, glanced over her shoulder and spoke in a rapid undertone. "We're almost there."

Looking ahead through the trees, Ivypool caught sight of the high wall that surrounded the Twoleg den where the wildcats were being held prisoner. She tasted the air and picked up the mingled scent of the strange animals. The daylight was dying, only the last traces of sunlight streaking the sky with scarlet. Ivypool guessed

that soon the Twolegs would retreat to their own den and leave the animals alone for the night.

"This should be a good time to talk to the wildcats," she murmured.

Icewing signaled with her tail, and, silent now, the questing cats raced across the stretch of open ground that separated the den from the woodland. They sprang to the top of the wall.

This time two Twolegs, the one with the furry face and another who looked younger, were walking along the line of cages, peering into each one as if they were checking on the animals. Ivypool could only hear quiet rustling from the cages, as if the animals inside were settling down to sleep.

Crouched on the wall alongside her companions, Ivypool flexed her claws impatiently. It seemed to take seasons before the Twolegs disappeared inside their den. Then the questing cats leaped down with five soft thuds and crept stealthily along the line of cages until they reached the one where the wildcats were imprisoned.

Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr were dozing, but they woke with a start at the sight of the Clan cats. "You again!" Tumble Leap exclaimed. "We thought you must have gone home."

"No," Whistlepaw mewed. "We're sorry if you thought that, but we told you we were going to look for the Star Tree, and that's what we did."

"It took a while to find it and make contact with your ancestors," Ivypool added.

Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap glanced at each other, then collapsed into loud *mrrows* of laughter. "You couldn't have made contact with our ancestors, when we tried so many times and failed. You're making it up!" Stalk Purr gasped.

"No, we spoke to Galestar," Rootspring declared. "A black-and-white she-cat, who was a joint leader of StormClan."

The wildcats' laughter abruptly died. "Any cat could have made that guess," Tumble Leap meowed, blinking uneasily.

Icewing's shoulder fur began to bristle. "Oh, yeah—then are we guessing when we tell you that you're planning to name your kits Pounce, Stretch, and Hunt?"

For several heartbeats the wildcats didn't respond, only gazing openmouthed at the Clan cats. "How did you know that?" Stalk Purr choked out at last. "We've had the names chosen ever since I had a dream of nursing three tiny kits."

Ivypool let out a hiss of frustration. "We know because we're telling you the truth." She understood why the wildcats were finding their story hard to believe, but she wished they would just accept it so she and her companions could get on with the rescue. *We have no reason to make any of this up.* "Look, Galestar sent us a message to come here and help you—to pay the debt we owe your ancestors for taking her and her kits in. I don't know why we were able to contact them when you weren't, except that you must need us. Perhaps you couldn't escape alone. And here's some more truth for you," she continued. "The Twolegs are planning to give your kits away as soon as they can be safely weaned."

"No . . .," Stalk Purr whispered, exchanging a shocked look with Tumble Leap. "They wouldn't . . . would they?"

But Tumble Leap looked solemn. "You know they would," the huge cat mewed softly.

"That doesn't have to happen," Ivypool went on briskly. "You *aren't* the last of your kind! Galestar told us about a group of wildcats living in a mountain range not far from here. They're waiting for you. And your kits. You could live in a Clan again, guided by the knowledge of your ancestors."

She couldn't help being moved as she saw hope springing up in the wildcats' eyes. "A Clan?" Tumble Leap whispered. "Like when we were younger, Stalk Purr. We could raise our kits as we were raised. They could be guided by elders, and learn everything that we once knew about how to live best." They stared at each other, and Stalk Purr let out a tiny, shaking *mrrow*. Tumble Leap stretched out his tail and rested it on his mate's shoulders.

"Well. I'm sorry we didn't believe you at first," he declared at last. "We've been caged up here for so long, thinking we were alone. I think we lost hope that we would ever see another of our kind. But we believe you now. It would be amazing to find our kin."

"We'll go with you," Stalk Purr added, "but how do we escape before my kitting? We're locked in here."

"There must be a way. Is there ever a time when the Twolegs unlock the gates?" Dovewing asked.

"Only when they feed us, first thing in the morning," Tumble Leap replied.

Every cat fell silent. Ivypool could see thoughts flickering in the eyes of her companions. *The Twoleg only opens the cages at feeding time, she thought. But then the dog is with him. We need a distraction. . . .*

Letting her gaze wander along the line of cages, an idea came to her. "I think I know what to do," she mewed. "It's risky, but it might just work. . . ."



## Chapter 20



*The warriors of StarClan were paling in the sky as the Clan cats crept silently between the animal cages and approached the one where Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap were imprisoned. This would be the second sunrise since they returned to the Twoleg den and persuaded the wildcats to escape.*

Ivypool had spent the intervening day keeping a close watch on the Twolegs and their routine. As the wildcats had told them, the furry Twoleg only opened the cages early in the morning, when the animals were fed. He checked them again in the evening, but that was all. He didn't clean out the cages or feed the animals a second time.

*Of course he doesn't, Ivypool thought. Or the place wouldn't stink like it does, and the animals wouldn't look so skinny. They must be starving. It's terribly sad for them, but it is good for our plan,* she added to herself.

She felt terrible for these strange beasts, most of which she'd never seen before, and which were clearly hungry and mistreated. The sight of them filled her with wonder, but she had no idea how she and the Clan cats could help them if they were to escape the Twoleg.

*Best to keep our plan to helping the wildcats escape,* she mused. *And we can only hope that the Twoleg comes to his senses and works for a better future for these others.*

Whistlepaw raised herself on her hind paws and placed her forepaws on the mesh at the front of the wildcats' cage. "Are you ready?" she whispered.

The wildcats nodded, exchanging a nervous glance. "Yes," Tumble Leap mewed. "But are you sure this will work?"

"I can't be sure of anything," Whistlepaw admitted. "But after we hid out yesterday to watch the Twolegs, I'm as sure as I can be. This is our best chance. If we stick to the plan and work together, you'll soon be free."

*We hope,* Ivypool, overhearing, thought.

She padded over to Icewing, who was hunched beside the cage where the striped horse was kept, chewing on the rope that bound the door to the ramshackle walls. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Icewing unsheathed her claws. "Ready as I'll ever be. I just hope everything goes according to plan."

As Ivypool checked on Rootspring and Dovewing, who were chewing on the ropes of other cages, she wasn't sure that *she* was ready. She could see the other animals giving them hostile looks, and she realized how terribly wrong things could go. For some of the creatures, at least, she and her companions would be prey. The huge dog with the furry ruff opened his jaws as she padded past his cage, revealing

strong white teeth. Ivypool shuddered inwardly, imagining those teeth meeting in her neck. She could only hope that she wasn't putting the wildcats and all her companions in dreadful danger, and that the animals' need to escape would be stronger than their instinct to eat whoever crossed their path.

Eventually the first rays of sunlight slanted over the wall; soon the Twoleg would appear for feeding time. Ivypool signaled to her companions, and they all fled into hiding behind a pile of Twoleg trash in one corner.

It seemed a long time before anything happened. Ivypool's heart was pounding harder and harder, and she wondered briefly if the Twoleg might have forgotten to feed the animals. Tumble Leap had told her that it had happened once or twice before. *And then what would we do?*

But finally, as the sun flooded the enclosure, the Twoleg shuffled out of his den with his dog trotting by his side. He was carrying a pouch slung over one shoulder and the thing in his hand that clanged as he shook it vigorously.

Ivypool could smell the food in the pouch from her refuge behind the rubbish. *Yuck!* she thought. *Crow-food!* But as the animals roused at the clanging sound, they bared their teeth and swiped their tongues around their jaws.

As Ivypool had hoped, the Twoleg stopped at the wildcats' cage first. As soon as she heard the snick of the catch opening, she whispered, "Now!"

Together the Clan cats leaped out of hiding, yowling at the Twoleg's dog and swiping at its tail. The dog whirled around, baring its teeth and letting out a growl from deep in its chest. Ivypool could smell the stink of its breath and suddenly realized how big it was compared to the Clan cats.

"Run!" she yowled.

Terror throbbed through her as she and her companions fled around the cages with the dog right on their tails. Rounding a corner, Ivypool tripped on a loose scrap of wood and felt the dog's hot breath on her flank. Just in time, she jumped away and heard the dog's powerful jaws clamp down on the wood. It let out an angry howl.

But for all the danger, Ivypool saw that the distraction was working. The Twoleg had turned away from the cages to get the dog back; of course, Ivypool realized, the dog was all that would protect the Twoleg if any of the larger animals got out. The Twoleg called out to the dog, clapping his paws together, but the dog took no notice.

As Ivypool raced around past the wildcat cage, she spotted the two wildcats coming up behind the Twoleg through the open door. Tumble Leap pounced on the Twoleg, grabbing his hind leg and overbalancing him so that he fell to the ground. Stalk Purr sank her claws into one foreleg. The Twoleg flailed, openmouthed and screeching, trying to punch the wildcats away with his free foreleg, but they clung on.

The other animals were letting out menacing growls and brays, riled up by the chaos around them. The Twoleg started screaming for his dog again, and at last the creature seemed to remember that it had an owner. It paused reluctantly, then gave up chasing the Clan cats and trotted back toward the open wildcat cage.

Ivypool felt icy panic crawl up her spine. The next part of the plan was the most crucial, but it was the hardest to control. If the dog made it back to its owner without

any other distraction, the Twoleg could probably grab the wildcats for long enough to stuff them back into their cage.

Glancing at the other Clan cats, Ivypool nodded. *It's time.*

They split up; hesitantly Ivypool approached the cage with the huge furry dog. The large gray creature looked particularly angry; Ivypool could hear its belly rumbling, telling her how hungry it was.

*That could work for us—or it could all go horribly wrong.*

She had only heartbeats to put the next part of the plan in motion. Hissing furiously, she launched herself at the gray dog's cage. That was enough to anger the creature, and it hurled itself at the mesh barrier at the front of the cage. It bounced off, frothing at the mouth.

Gathering all her courage, Ivypool raced across to the Twoleg, who was still writhing on the ground, and tugged at his pouch of food. Her claws snagged a long piece of meat; dodging the Twolegs' dog, she dragged the meat to the furry dog's cage and dropped it outside the barrier, a fox-length beyond where it could reach.

The gray dog growled even more furiously and lunged at the mesh again—harder this time. There was a ripping sound, and the barrier pushed forward.

"Yes!" Ivypool hissed.

The dog leaped over the barrier and grabbed the piece of meat, snapping and snarling as it gulped the food down.

Ivypool looked around. Icewing and the others had painstakingly chewed through the ropes that held the tumbledown cages together, so they were ready to fall apart at the least pressure. Rootspring had lured the weasel-badger to lunge out of its cage. And now that the other animals had seen what was happening, they began to ram their cages too. Ivypool could hear the flimsy wood splintering in all directions.

She looked back at the Twoleg, who had managed to stand again and was fending off the wildcats with his dog. As he realized that the furry dog and the weasel-badger were out, and soon others would be too, his eyes widened in panic. He began waving his foreleg around, brandishing the clanging thing, and it smashed into the shiny stuff at the front of the snake's cage. The snake let out a hiss and began to slither toward the Twoleg, coil after coil, until Ivypool thought it would never end. The Twoleg shouted something and ran for his den.

Ivypool yowled a signal to the other Clan cats, and they ran back, past the wildcats' cage, and took refuge on top of a nearby storage den. Soon cages were collapsing all around them; the animals were roaming freely, growling with hunger.

Among the chaos the two wildcats managed to leap up onto the den roof to join the Clan cats. "We need to get out of here!" Stalk Purr urged.

While she was speaking, the Twoleg emerged once more from the den. He was holding a long stick made of some shiny stuff, with two round holes at the end. As soon as he appeared, the furry dog swung around to face him with a menacing growl. It crouched briefly, then took off in a massive leap, straight at the Twoleg.

The Twoleg let out a yowl of terror and raised the shiny stick; there was a soft spitting sound, and the furry dog jerked and let out a howl, seeming to halt mid-leap. Then it fell to the ground and lay still.



Ivypool flinched. "He killed it!" Guilt surged over her; the dog was fierce, but it was a magnificent animal. "It's my fault. It never would have gotten out if I hadn't used it as part of our escape plan!"

Tumble Leap shook his head. "No, it's not dead," he meowed. "We've seen this before. We call that thing the Twoleg's sleep-stick. He puts the animals to sleep if he has to handle them. It'll be fine."

Ivypool stared at the large dog creature. It was completely motionless. *It doesn't look fine. . . .*

"Never mind that!" Icewing yowled. "We have to go. Follow me!"

Ivypool shook off her guilt. Icewing was right . . . and surely Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr knew how the Twoleg operated. The Clan cats and the wildcats leaped down from the den and took off, racing across the enclosure. When they reached the wall, the Clan cats leaped up to the top, but the wildcats halted, looking upward uncertainly.

"It's been a long time since we've had to jump that high," Tumble Leap meowed, with a glance at Stalk Purr's pregnant belly. "What if we can't do it?"

"I know you can!" Whistlepaw responded, her eyes shining encouragement. "You're cats, after all. You're built for this. Remember who you are," she urged them when Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr still looked doubtful. "Your ancestors believed you could do it. They wouldn't have summoned us Clan cats from so far away if they didn't know that you could help free yourselves."

The wildcats glanced at each other, a gleam of determination in their eyes. Together they took several paces backward, then took running leaps at the wall. Ivypool caught her breath in awe to see just how high they could jump. In one leap, they landed first their forepaws, then their hind paws on top of the wall, then flowed gracefully down to the ground on the other side.

It wasn't until Stalk Purr mewed, "What are you waiting for? Let's go!" that Ivypool realized that she and all the other Clan cats had just been staring in amazement.

Snapping out of their shock, they leaped down and began bounding away in the direction of the sun-drown-water. The roaring of the animals, the yells of the Twoleg, and the spitting of his sleep-stick faded away behind them. Ivypool was relieved.

As they fled, Ivypool took one last glance back at the wall surrounding the Twolegplace. She couldn't help feeling bad for the animals. She hoped that the Twoleg wouldn't abuse them for what she and the other Clan cats had done, and, even more, that somehow they could all be free of him.

*But that's not my problem, she reminded herself. For now, we have to complete our quest.*



## Chapter 2I



*Icewing took the lead as the cats emerged from the trees and headed along the Twoleg path, retracing their paw steps in the direction of the sun-drown water. If Galestar was right, they had to return to the cliffs and find a trail leading away from the shore and up into the mountains to reach the place where the wildcats were living.*

Bringing up the rear with Rootspring, Ivypool was fascinated by the way Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap moved. They weren't as light and nimble as the Clan cats, but their muscles rippled under their tabby fur as they set their massive paws down with surprising grace. When the cats turned off the path onto the rough ground that led to the cliff edge, they were more confident, as if the gritty soil and the occasional jutting rocks didn't bother them at all.

"You would think they were walking on really soft grass," Rootspring murmured to Ivypool.

"Maybe their pads are thicker than ours," Ivypool responded.

As the day wore on to sunhigh, Ivypool found her paw steps lagging; she was already tired from the chaotic rescue of the wildcats, and so far there had been no sign of prey. The air was clear and cold; there had been no rain since the storm, and the puddles had all dried up. Her companions, she could see, were struggling too, especially Stalk Purr, heavy with her kits.

"Icewing!" she called to the RiverClan cat. "We need to stop and rest, and hunt."

Every cat halted; Icewing came padding back to talk to Ivypool face-to-face. "I've been looking out for water," she mewed. "We need to drink, and if there's water, there's likely to be prey too. But we haven't seen any, and all I can smell is the sun-drown-water."

She was right, Ivypool realized. The acrid tang in the air drowned any other scents. "I suppose we just have to keep going," she mewed resignedly.

"We can find you fresh water," Tumble Leap declared. "At least, I think we can."

Ivypool exchanged glances with the other questing cats. She wondered whether the wildcats had been imprisoned for so long that they had lost their survival skills. "Please, give it a try," she urged, suppressing her doubts.

Both wildcats lifted their muzzles into the air and gradually turned in a circle, taking deep sniffs as they moved. Eventually Stalk Purr raised her tail, pointing. "Over there," she meowed.

Tumble Leap nodded agreement. "Follow us," he told the Clan cats.

Ivypool still wasn't sure she believed the wildcats, but she kept her doubts to herself. And a while later she was pleased that she had, when they led the way to the top of a rocky hollow with a pool of water at the bottom.

Every cat leaped down to lap and quench their thirst. When Ivypool had finished, and was shaking drops off her whiskers, she turned to her sister, who was crouched beside her.

"You know, this is seriously weird," she murmured. "We can scent water when it's nearby, but not this far away, and not when all we can smell is the sun-drown-water."

Dovewing nodded. "I'm really impressed," she purred.

"How did you do this?" Whistlepaw asked. "We had no idea there was water here, but you led us right to it."

Both wildcats ducked their heads in embarrassment. "We surprised ourselves a bit," Tumble Leap replied. "It's been so long since we've used these senses. But some things were so thoroughly ingrained in us since we were kits that I suppose there's no forgetting them."

Stalk Purr continued, "We were raised to believe that we're deeply connected to the elements—earth, water, and air—and that each element has spirits: the spirits of our ancestors. As long as you honor those spirits, the elements will present themselves to you when you need them, or the spirits will protect you from them."

"That's . . . so beautiful," Whistlepaw breathed out.

"It kind of reminds me of the Sisters," Rootspring meowed, "and how they raise their toms to connect to the earth. I used to think my father, Tree, was weird because of that, but now I'm starting to see there's something in it. I have so much respect for you wildcats."

"We respect you, too," Tumble Leap responded. "Even though we're called wildcats, it's been a long time since we've lived in the wild like you Clan cats do. To be honest, we feel unnerved being out here without walls to protect us and Twolegs to feed us."

"Hunting is an instinct, too," Dovewing reassured them. "It will come back to you in no time."

"But we Clan cats will do the first hunting," Icewing added. "Just until you get your hunting paws back."

Although the cats weren't thirsty anymore, they were still hungry, but there was no prey around the pool, and few places where prey might hide in this stretch of bare ground.

"We'll have to climb down the cliff and try hunting on the shore," Rootspring sighed.

Ivypool couldn't argue with that, although she was reluctant to do what the SkyClan tom suggested. The memory of the gulls and the crabs was still too vivid. "I suppose Icewing might catch a fish," she murmured.

Clouds had covered the sun by the time the cats reached the shore. The morning heat had faded, and a chilly wind was blowing, whipping the waves of the sun-drown-water into foaming white crests. Perhaps because of that there weren't as many

Twolegs playing on the sand. Still, the cats didn't want to be spotted, and Rootspring, taking the lead this time, chose a path at the very base of the cliff, slinking into cover behind rocks and hillocks of sand.

Eventually they reached the spiky black rocks they had spotted on their first visit: the rocks Whistlepaw had recognized from her vision. The sides were sheer, tapering to sharp points; water pooled around the bottom, and there was a stretch of damp sand between them and the water's edge.

"We have to go around them," the medicine cat mewed. "If the trail is the one I saw, then it's on the other side."

"Okay, then we'll need to keep an eye on the sun-drown-water," Icewing responded. "We don't want it to rise and cut us off."

"But it looks as if it's moving backward," Dovewing pointed out, angling her ears at the wet sand. "I suggest we hunt before we go any farther."

Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr settled down to watch while the Clan cats spread out to search for prey. Ivypool watched Icewing pad down to the water's edge, while Rootspring and Dovewing disappeared among the rocks. Whistlepaw began pawing at debris the waves had thrown up, sniffing carefully.

Ivypool turned to the nearest rock pool and crouched on the edge, hoping to spot some fish. She couldn't see any, but clinging to the rock below the water level were several pairs of dark shells, with some kind of fleshy creature inside.

"They're no more than a mouthful," she murmured to herself, "but they're better than nothing."

Reaching her paw into the water, she began clawing the shell creatures off the rock and scooping them out of the water. She had landed several when she heard a cry from Whistlepaw.

"Come and look at this!"

Ivypool raced over to where Whistlepaw was staring down at something among the debris. Dovewing and Rootspring joined them a heartbeat later, and even the wildcats padded up to take a look.

Whistlepaw was pointing at a round blob, so fragile that Ivypool could see through it to the sand underneath. It had a few long tendrils trailing from one side.

"What is it?" Dovewing asked.

Tumble Leap shook his head. "I can't remember ever seeing one of those before."

"More to the point, can you eat it?" Rootspring meowed. He crouched down and took a cautious nibble from one side. "Oh, yuck!" he exclaimed, springing up and passing his tongue across his jaws over and over again. "No, you can't eat it," he growled.

Icewing bounded up from the water's edge with a small fish in her jaws. She looked down at the blob thing curiously.

"Don't even try to eat it," Rootspring warned her.

"I wouldn't," Icewing mumbled around her catch. "It looks disgusting. Come on," she continued. "We can share this fish. I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do."

"I caught a bird," Dovewing announced. "I'll go fetch it." She raced off around the rocks.

"And I have some shell things." Ivypool led the way to her rock pool; she and Rootspring carried her catch back to the foot of the cliff, with the wildcats following.

When all the prey was laid out on the sand, it looked like a pitifully small collection, and not particularly tasty. Ivypool's belly ached with hunger, and she knew the others must feel the same, but no cat was going to get more than a couple of mouthfuls. And Stalk Purr especially would need more than that if she was going to give birth to healthy kits.

"Did you eat this kind of stuff when you lived in the wild?" Ivypool asked the wildcats.

Tumble Leap shook his head. "Not if we could help it," he replied. "Hunts like this were part of why we were reconciled to staying in the Twolegplace."

Suddenly a shadow passed over Ivypool's head. Looking up, she saw a flash of white wings as a gull swooped down and caught up Icewing's fish in its claws. Sheer terror throbbed through Ivypool, and she ducked into cover among the black rocks. The gulls, she thought, were more dangerous than any of the weird animals in the Twoleg cages.

Then Ivypool heard a strangled squawk and peered out of her refuge to see the seagull smashed beneath Stalk Purr's paw, her claws embedded in its belly. It had dropped the fish, which lay beside its thrashing wings. Stalk Purr bent her head and gave the seagull a killing bite to the neck.

"Wow!" Ivypool exclaimed. "*That* was impressive!"

The other Clan cats ventured out of their hiding places to stare at the seagull and echo Ivypool's astonished praise.

"That reminds me of how the Tribe of Rushing Water hunts," Icewing commented. "They sometimes use small prey to lure large birds, just like that, but none of us here would have taken on a gull."

"Seagulls are the worst," Rootspring agreed. "That was a serious hunter reflex, Stalk Purr. You haven't lost your skill."

Stalk Purr dipped her head. "Thank you," she murmured. "We taught ourselves to hunt seagulls back before we were captured by the Twolegs. You've seen how scarce prey is around here, except for the gulls. They're so large and aggressive, but we had to teach ourselves how to hunt them, or starve."

"Well, I'm glad you chose the first option," Dovewing meowed. "Now let's eat, before *I* starve!"

The Clan cats gathered around the lifeless seagull, but before they could take a bite, Stalk Purr held up a paw to stop them. "First we must bow our heads," she murmured.

"We need to give thanks to the air spirits for the gift of this seagull and the small bird," Tumble Leap explained, "and we'll thank the water spirits for giving us the fish and the shell creatures, and even that blob thing."

"*Thank* the spirits for the blob thing?" Rootspring muttered.

Ivypool exchanged an appreciative glance with Rootspring. *Maybe these cats aren't so different from us after all*, she thought. "We thank you, StarClan, for this prey," she added when the wildcats had pronounced their thanks to the spirits.

When she and her companions settled down to eat, chatting comfortably between mouthfuls, Ivypool couldn't feel any awkwardness between the two groups. For the first time since they'd freed the wildcats, she felt that they truly belonged together to face the next part of their journey.

Their bellies comfortably full, the cats padded around the outcrop of black rocks, now that the sun-drown-water had withdrawn, and they found a sheltered spot to make a nest in a mound of soft sand and sprawling stems of grass.

"Tell us more about Galestar," Tumble Leap suggested when they were all curled up together. "How did you find her?"

Icewing began the story of how they had passed through the Star Tree, and how two wildcats had led them to a valley where they found Galestar among many other cats, mostly wildcats, but a few that looked like Clan cats. "She told us how she was leader of WindClan, and fell in love with Stripestar, who led ThunderClan. Eventually they combined their Clans so they could be together; the new Clan was called—"

"StormClan," Stalk Purr interrupted, her eyes shining. "We grew up hearing that story, about how wildcats rescued her and she and her kits came to live with us."

Tumble Leap nodded. "At one time, several wildcats went to look for the Clan cats, hoping they might help restore our dwindling numbers. But they never found any. In the end, two young wildcats—trying to prove themselves, like young cats do—set off to search for the Clans, and never came back. And after that, we wildcats decided that Galestar never really existed, and that Clan cats were just a story that you tell kits."

"When you appeared outside our cage," Stalk Purr continued, "we couldn't believe what we were seeing. Clan cats? Real after all?"

Ivypool ducked her head, embarrassed. "I hope we don't disappoint you," she meowed.

"Not at all," Tumble Purr insisted. "You're just as clever and brave as all the old stories make you out to be."

"We Clan cats were just as surprised to meet you," Whistlepaw declared. "I'd been having visions for some time, and I had no idea what they meant. But meeting

you this way . . . the visions make sense, and I understand now what we have to do. We owe your kind a debt because you helped Galestar and her kits, so I'm glad that we can pay the debt by helping you now." She drew a deep, ecstatic breath. "Thank you, StarClan, for bringing us together!"

"And we thank the spirits of air, earth, and water," Tumble Leap purred. "Thank you for guiding our paws along the right paths."

The sun was going down as the cats drifted into sleep, yawning and wriggling deeper into the soft sand. But Ivypool felt that sleep was far away. Instead she gazed out at the brilliant yellow light and the fiery red that streaked the sky and was reflected in the water. "It's so beautiful . . .," she murmured to herself.

For some reason, the magnificent spectacle reminded her of Bristlefrost. With a jolt, she realized that she hadn't thought of her lost daughter all day; the escape from the Twoleg den and the trek to the sun-drown-water had occupied her whole mind.

Reflecting on the wildcats' belief that the spirits of their ancestors were in the air, in the water, in the earth, Ivypool wondered if it was possible that Bristlefrost was in that sunset. *Could she have sent it to me, to help comfort me in my grief?*

Then Ivypool shook her head, shaking off the idea like a troublesome fly. *Mouse-brain!* she scolded herself. As much as she would love to believe that Bristlefrost was part of the sunset, that was a wildcat belief, not hers.

But still, as sleep finally crept up on Ivypool, she kept her gaze fixed on the fiery sunset. "It is so lovely . . .," she breathed out. "Wherever it comes from."





## Chapter 22



*Ivypool halted, shaking her weary paws one by one and gazing at the steep slope ahead of her. A few days had passed since they'd reached the sun-drown-water; they had found the trail that cut through the cliffs and led the way into the mountains, just as Galestar had said they would. But Galestar had never mentioned how difficult the climb up the trail would be.*

*If she had, maybe we would have abandoned this mission before it began, Ivypool thought sourly, even though she knew deep in her heart that they would still have followed their quest to the end.*

The climb had been hardest for Stalk Purr, her belly growing even heavier, and they had stopped frequently to give her a chance to rest. Ivypool hoped that the kits wouldn't come until they had found the place they were looking for. Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap had already lost two litters, and Ivypool was desperate for these kits to be born healthy.

Now, finally, after what felt like moons of climbing and resting, they were nearing the top of the hill. The last few paw steps were the hardest, but at last they all stood together on the crest.

"That is . . . amazing!" Rootspring exclaimed.

Ivypool looked out upon an enormous woodland, a dense forest similar to ThunderClan territory but much vaster, lying nestled in a valley between two mountains. Even in leafbare, the view was beautiful. Ivypool opened her jaws to taste the air and picked up a mixture of scents: rotting vegetation, different animals, even a hint of Twoleg.

Among the trees she spotted flat pieces of wood with markings on them. They reminded her of the one they had seen by the lake. "Do you think these are Twoleg border markers?" she asked.

"Probably," Icewing responded with an irritable swish of her tail. "I hope that doesn't mean we'll be tripping over Twolegs wherever we're putting our paws."

"The Twoleg scent isn't very strong," Ivypool pointed out.

Icewing sniffed for herself. "Maybe," she admitted.

Cautiously, with Rootspring in the lead, the cats headed down the trail toward the forest. The slope was steep, with rocks poking up here and there; Ivypool noticed that Tumble Leap was padding close to Stalk Purr's side, guiding her and making sure she was safe.

"You seem extra worried today," Ivypool remarked softly. "Is everything okay?"

"We can cope," Stalk Purr responded, "but you're right that we're worried. As I said before, this isn't the first time I've been carrying kits. I've lost two litters before this. Back then, I felt that taking the Twoleg's food was my best chance of birthing

healthy kits, but I was wrong. And now you said that Galestar told you the Twoleg would have taken these kits away if they *did* survive . . .” She hesitated, blinking thoughtfully. “I just feel so guilty. What if I made the wrong choice for these kits? Or what if I made the wrong choice before, and doomed my previous litters?”

“It’s hard to know if you’re doing the right thing for your kits,” Ivypool meowed gently, thinking of her own kits and the way she had allowed Bristlefrost to enter the Dark Forest. That had been a disastrous decision. “That will always be true. Unfortunately, it’s just part of being a parent.”

Stalk Purr tilted her head. “That’s true. And I have to remember: Out here I don’t have a regular food supply, but at least I am *free*. If my kits are born healthy, no one can take them away from me. They’ll be free, too. That’s so important.”

Ivypool fell into a contemplative silence, the wildcat’s words repeating themselves in her mind. Tumble Leap drew ahead a couple of paces, leaving Stalk Purr to pad along beside Ivypool.

“Have I said something wrong?” Stalk Purr asked.

“No, of course not,” Ivypool reassured her. “It’s that . . . I’ve been thinking a lot about loss lately.”

“Have you lost kits too?” the wildcat asked.

Ivypool nodded. “One kit, and she was a grown cat. Her name was Bristlefrost. She was so brave, so bright . . . I thought I was past the worst of grieving. But the more my Clan seems to move on, the more I feel stuck in my pain.”

“I’ve felt that pain myself,” Stalk Purr responded, letting her tail stroke Ivypool’s side. Her eyes glowed with understanding. “Losing one’s kits hits so hard. I thought I would never get past it.”

“How were you able to move on, knowing your kits are gone forever?” Ivypool asked, struggling not to let her voice shake.

Stalk Purr blinked sympathetically. “I remind myself every morning: Just because my kits can’t be seen, that doesn’t mean they’re gone. I’m sure the same is true of your Bristlefrost.”

Ivypool winced as she felt a familiar pain in her heart. *It always seems to lead back to this point. . . .* “Unfortunately, in Bristlefrost’s case, that’s exactly what it means.” Stalk Purr tilted her head curiously, and now Ivypool found it harder still to get the words out. “She went into a place called the Dark Forest, to fight against an evil cat who was trying to destroy the Clans. She died there. And if a cat dies in the Dark Forest, their spirit dies too. So I don’t even have the hope of seeing Bristlefrost again in StarClan.”

For a few heartbeats Stalk Purr was silent, carefully picking her way down an uneven bit of the path. Once the surface smoothed out again, she turned back to Ivypool. “I know that’s what you’ve always known, and I don’t mean to question

what you believe. But before you came on this journey, did you know that there were wildcats in the world?"

Ivypool shook her head, wondering what that had to do with anything. "No."

"Had you ever seen rocky cliffs like the ones by the sun-drown-water?"

Ivypool thought back to the odd-smelling, rocky shore. She remembered the strange rock creatures and the white-feathered gulls . . . and Stalk Purr's triumphant kill. "No, never. And if you'd told me about some of the creatures we saw there, I wouldn't have believed you."

Stalk Purr nodded. "And did you ever see animals like the ones in that Twoleg den? Did you know that you could reach another afterlife by passing through a hollow tree?"

Ivypool was taken aback by the flood of questions. "No," she replied. "It was all new . . . I didn't know about any of that. What are you trying to tell me?"

Stalk Purr nodded, as if the answer was exactly what she had expected. "Then you can see that the world is bigger than you know."

Ivypool stared at the wildcat. She couldn't argue with that. "Okay . . ."

"And so is the afterlife," Stalk Purr meowed. "You're despairing over the loss of Bristlefrost based on what the Clans know. But the Clans don't know everything. It only took this one journey into the mountains to convince you of that."

Ivypool gasped in shock. *Stalk Purr is right!* What if her understanding of what happened after a cat died was only as big as the Clan territories when compared to the huge, wide world?

As she followed her companions down the hill and into the unknown woodland, Ivypool realized that she and her companions might be the first Clan cats ever to see this place. She had never known that it existed, and she would never have had reason to find it if they weren't leading the wildcats back to their own kind. And that meant that there were many other things she didn't know about. Many spaces and ways to exist that had never occurred to her. And in one of those places, she might find Bristlefrost. Perhaps not in the form that her kit had left her . . . but Bristlefrost's spirit, Ivypool now considered, could take any form.

Suddenly Ivypool saw the landscape ahead of her with new eyes. She could see the beauty of each tree, the shape of its branches and the color of its leaves. She could breathe deeply of its scents and enjoy the rustle of the breeze and the chirping of the birds. She wanted to run and jump like a kit and stick her nose into every bush and every clump of fern. She felt alive again!

Instead of the relentless grief she had borne for Bristlefrost, a new feeling emerged in Ivypool's heart: gratitude. She realized that she had been lucky to be one of the few cats who would ever get to see these beautiful hidden lands. *And I should be grateful, too, that I had Bristlefrost for as long as I did.*

Now Ivypool could see that she might never have known Bristlefrost at all. Being her mother had been a precious gift, even if it had only been for a short time. And

being on this quest was a gift too, so that she could meet Stalk Purr, a wildcat who helped her see things in a new way.

"Thank you," she murmured to Stalk Purr. "I can't tell you what that means to me."

The wildcat licked her ear in reply.

The trail led onward through the forest. The canopy was so dense that the cats couldn't see the sun, but from the change in the light Ivypool guessed that sunhigh was past. She was about to suggest stopping to rest and hunt when the path suddenly took an abrupt turn. Light poured down through a gap in the trees, and Ivypool saw that they had reached a Thunderpath.

Every cat lined up along the edge, exchanging anxious glances; they all knew how dangerous Thunderpaths could be. The harsh scent of monsters was strong and fresh, but even with her ears pricked, Ivypool couldn't hear the roar of their approach.

Icewing nodded. "It seems okay."

Ivypool set her forepaw on the hard black surface of the Thunderpath; the other cats began to cross, too.

"Stop!" The hoarse cry came from Rootspring, who stood with terror in his eyes, his shoulder fur bristling. "Stop!" he repeated. "Get back!"



## Chapter 23



*Ivypool couldn't see anything wrong. There was no sign of a monster, just the Thunderpath curving past them like a huge black snake. Every cat had halted, staring at Rootspring.*

"I said get back!" he yowled. He darted forward and grabbed Whistlepaw by the shoulder, dragging her into the long grass. "Now! Hurry!"

Catching his urgency, Ivypool sprang off the surface, stumbling into the shelter of a hazel bush. Her companions retreated too, all of them looking as bewildered as Ivypool felt.

As soon as they were safely out of the way, the familiar roar burst into the air, and a monster sped around the curve. It was going so fast that Ivypool barely had the chance to take in the glittering color before it had vanished again, its noise fading until all that remained was a cloud of evil-smelling smoke.

Trembling shook Ivypool in every limb. Without Rootspring's warning, none of the cats would have reached the other side of the Thunderpath. The monster would have crushed them all. An image sprang into Ivypool's mind of herself and her companions stretched lifeless on the black surface; she squeezed her eyes shut as if that could shut out the horror.

Tumble Leap's steady voice brought her back to reality. "That was . . . very strange," he meowed to Rootspring. "That rumble beast could have killed us all. How did you know it was coming?"

Rootspring hesitated, as if he was reluctant to reply, then seemed to gather himself. "I know this is going to sound strange, but . . . I can see the ghosts of cats who have died but haven't yet passed on to the afterlife," he explained. He was looking shaken, too, his whiskers quivering. "Yes, I've heard your warning," he continued, gazing at something Ivypool couldn't see. "We won't try to cross the Thunderpath here."

"Then the ghosts saved us!" Whistlepaw's voice was quivering. "Rootspring, please tell them how much we thank them!"

Rootspring nodded. "Thank you, from me and all my friends," he meowed to the empty air.

Tumble Leap blinked in astonishment. "I never heard of any cat able to see dead cats."

"I inherited the power from my father, Tree," Rootspring explained. "He was born outside the Clans to a group called the Sisters, who can see the dead."

This wasn't news to Ivypool or any of the Clan cats; she knew that they would all remember how Rootspring had seen Bramblestar's spirit after the usurper Ashfur

had stolen the Clan leader's body. But it was still weird enough to make them uneasy, shifting their paws and exchanging doubtful glances. Now Rootspring seemed to be bracing himself for the same reaction from the wildcats.

However, the wildcats couldn't get over their amazement. "When did you find out you had this power?" Stalk Purr asked.

"When I saw the spirit of the ThunderClan leader," Rootspring replied. "And he wasn't exactly dead. But that's a long story—maybe I'll tell it when we settle down for the night."

"Does it happen all the time?" Tumble Leap meowed curiously.

Rootspring gave a little shudder. "More often than I'm comfortable with," he admitted. "But it's useful, so I don't complain about it."

"So who were these ghost cats?" Tumble Leap continued. "Why haven't they spread and become one with the elements?"

"And are they here now?" Stalk Purr added.

"I don't know why they haven't 'spread,'" Rootspring replied. "But yes, they are still here—lots of them, just over there." He pointed with his tail to a spot a few fox-lengths farther along the Thunderpath. "They're warning me not to try to cross the Thunderpath here, because this is where they all lost their lives."

"All of them?" Icewing sounded shocked to the tips of her claws.

Rootspring nodded. "They explained it to me," he told her. "Because of the way the Thunderpath curves just here, the monsters can't see us crossing, and we can't see them until they're very close. And all these trees muffle the sound of the monsters' approach."

"Then what are we going to do?" Dovewing asked.

Rootspring seemed to listen for a moment. "They know a safer place, farther down the Thunderpath," he meowed, gesturing with his tail. "One of them is going to guide us there."

He set off along the edge of the Thunderpath, and the other cats followed. Ivypool strained her eyes to see if she could make out the ghost cat who was leading them, but there was nothing, not even the faintest glimmer.

*But do you really want to see it?* she asked herself.

"Can you ask the ghost if they know anything about the dangers that lie ahead on our path?" Icewing asked.

Rootspring relayed the question, then waited in silence as if he was listening to the answer. "The ghost can't tell me much about what lies ahead on our path," he told the others after a few moments. "He and the other spirits only crossed because they were chasing prey, and they never traveled far. Some of them were kittypets."

As they padded along the edge of the Thunderpath, several more monsters whipped by, in both directions; the small Thunderpaths around the lake were



nowhere near as dangerous. Ivypool flinched as the roaring echoed in her ears, and she gagged as she tasted the acrid stench.

Eventually Rootspring halted. "This is the safest place to cross," he announced. Turning to where Ivypool guessed he could see the ghost, he dipped his head respectfully, "Thank you again, and may StarClan light your path," he added.

The Thunderpath stretched out straight in both directions for such a long way that the cats would be able to see the monsters long before they were close enough to be dangerous. Lining up along the edge with her companions, Ivypool spotted a single monster, so far away that it looked like a beetle with glittering wing cases. Although at first it looked far away, it was traveling so fast that only a few heartbeats passed before it swept past the place where the cats waited.

When it was gone, the Thunderpath was clear in both directions. "Okay," Icewing meowed. "When I say, 'Run,' *run!*"

She glanced back and forth; everything was still clear. "Run!"

Ivypool leaped forward, her paws scarcely touching the hard black surface as she raced over it. She was aware of Whistlepaw beside her, and Dovewing at her other side. Then she hurled herself into the safety of a clump of fern; panting, she looked around to see that every cat had made it across safely.

They all stayed crouching among the ferns for several moments; Ivypool felt her pounding heart calm down and her fur lie flat once more.

Eventually Rootspring rose to his paws. "Thank StarClan that's over," he declared. "Come on, let's find our trail again."

For the next two days the cats trudged onward, moving steadily uphill into the mountains. The forest they were passing through was denser than the woods around the lake, the trees taller, with massive trunks. Bramble thickets and clumps of brown ferns covered the ground, so that they couldn't see far in any direction.

"This place feels so wild," Ivypool murmured, with a shiver that was part fear, part delicious anticipation. "And I can scent so much prey . . . and hear little creatures scuffling around in the undergrowth. We'll eat well tonight, when we stop to hunt."

"Do you think we're getting close to the end of this journey?" Icewing asked Whistlepaw. "I know what we're doing is important, but I'm worried about what might be happening in RiverClan. I need to go home!"

Whistlepaw nodded and touched the older she-cat on her shoulder. "I have a good feeling that we'll find other wildcats soon," she reassured her.

"So do I," Tumble Leap meowed, his voice a purr from deep in his chest.

"Yes, I can just sense that they must be nearby," Stalk Purr added happily.

The daylight was beginning to fade; the sun was low in the sky, casting deep shadow over the ground. Rootspring was leading the way through a wide swath of fern alongside one of the Twoleg paths that crisscrossed the forest. Then, up ahead, Ivypool spotted lights bobbing around in the dim light—like fireflies but bigger.

"What's that?" she asked, startled.

Rootspring halted. "Get down!" he growled. "Keep quiet!"

Ivypool and the rest of the cats lay flat; Ivypool felt her neck fur begin to rise at the sound of Twoleg voices drawing closer along with the lights. Peering through a gap in the ferns she caught sight of a group of Twolegs—two adults and two kits—approaching from the opposite direction, down the slope. In their paws they held what looked like fat sticks that gave out long beams of light.

"Weird," Dovewing whispered.

When the Twolegs had left, the cats carried on through the twilight. Trying to hide how weary her paws were feeling, Ivypool admired the powerful movements of the wildcats. Though they were only a little larger than the Clan cats, they seemed stronger and faster and better able to endure. Stalk Purr's belly had grown much bigger, but she still kept going without complaint.

The sun was just dipping below the horizon when the cats emerged from the woods and found themselves at the top of the hill. In front of them, a sharp slope led down toward a river, with a waterfall cascading down the slope opposite.

"It's so beautiful!" Ivypool murmured.

Beside the river were outcrops of rocks that would be good for shelter, trees shading the water, and a thick growth of vegetation on the riverbank.

"We should spend the night down there," Dovewing suggested.

Rootspring nodded agreement. "It looks like there should be plenty of prey," he meowed, passing his tongue around his jaws.

He had hardly finished speaking when the air was suddenly full of the sound of Twoleg voices. Another of their paths led along the ridge; the cats had been concentrating so hard on the scenery below that they hadn't noticed the Twolegs' approach with their light sticks, and the rush of the waterfall had drowned the sounds they made.

Ivypool spun around to face the Twolegs. This was a larger group, with more kits; she froze, forcing back panic, when she saw that they had a dog. One of the kits pointed with its forepaws, and the whole group broke into loud exclamations. A tall male Twoleg stepped forward, heading straight for Stalk Purr.

"Run!" Ivypool yowled.

She streaked down the slope toward the river, forcing her muscles to bunch and stretch, until she stumbled over a dent in the ground and went rolling over and over, her legs and tail waving in the air. She could hear the Twolegs calling and the dog letting out a flurry of loud barks.

Ivypool couldn't stop herself, and she slammed into a rock, all the breath driven out of her body. Panting, she scrambled to her paws to see that she was only a tail-length from the water; the rock had saved her. Glancing around, she saw that all her companions had made it down to the riverside; at the top of the slope the Twolegs were moving on, though the dog was still barking and straining at the end of the tendril its Twoleg owner held.

"Thank StarClan we're all safe!" she breathed out.

Then she heard a gasp of pain and turned to see that it had come from Stalk Purr, who was lying on her side next to the river. Her jaws were wide in a soundless wail of pain. At first Ivypool thought that she had been injured from falling down the slope, until she noticed that strong ripples were passing all along her body.

“Oh, my kits!” Stalk Purr gasped.

*Oh, no!* Ivypool thought. *Stalk Purr’s kits are coming now!*



## Chapter 24



*"Whistlepaw!" Ivypool yowled.*

The young medicine cat was already bounding along the riverbank toward the pregnant wildcat. Stalk Purr panted rapidly as Whistlepaw examined her, running her paws over the wildcat's belly and sniffing her from ears to tail-tip.

"Is it really happening?" Stalk Purr asked, her whiskers twitching nervously.

"Yes, these kits are on their way," Whistlepaw announced at last, her voice cheerful.

Tumble Leap had hurried up while Whistlepaw was checking Stalk Purr out; now he crouched beside his mate, licking her ears. "Will she be okay?" he asked anxiously. "Will our kits be born alive?"

"I can't bear it if they die like my first two litters." Stalk Purr's voice was shaking.

"I don't see why they should," Whistlepaw replied. "I can feel the kits moving, and you're a strong and healthy cat. Your body is doing what it's supposed to do. But this isn't the best place for you to give birth. If we can find somewhere better, everything should work out."

Looking around, Ivypool could see what she meant. Stalk Purr was lying on the bank of the river, perilously close to the water's edge. She was also in the open, easily seen by any Twolegs or predators that might be prowling around.

"Come on," Ivypool urged Icewing, Rootspring, and Dovewing. "Let's find somewhere safer."

"Okay, let's split up," Rootspring suggested.

Dovewing nodded. "We'll find somewhere quicker that way."

All four cats scattered. Ivypool headed upstream, closer to the waterfall. Where the path began to rise steeply, she spotted a gap in the rocks, half hidden by underbrush and fern; poking her head inside, she found that it stretched back two or three tail-lengths and was wide enough to have space at least for Stalk Purr, Tumble Leap, and Whistlepaw. It was sheltered from the weather and hidden from any predators.

"Over here!" she called, waving her tail, then began biting off some fern stems and grass to make a cozy nest. Icewing, Dovewing, and Rootspring came back to assist her, while Tumble Leap and Whistlepaw helped Stalk Purr to her paws and supported her as she stumbled along to the makeshift nursery.

"Thanks, Ivypool," Stalk Purr panted. "This is such a good place! Far better than giving birth in that filthy den with the Twoleg banging around and all the animals howling." She drew in a deep breath, taking in the scent of the grass stalks of her nest. "It's ideal," she continued, "being so close to the grass and the water. It gives me hope

that the spirits of earth and water will watch over us, and this time my kits will be fine."

As she sank into her nest, she puffed out a breath of relief that turned to a yowl of pain as a stronger pulse traveled along her side.

"She's in so much pain." Tumble Leap's gaze was fearful as he settled down beside his mate. "Do you think that means she'll lose this litter too?"

"Not at all," Icewing reassured him. "It's perfectly normal to feel pain giving birth. I've had two healthy litters myself, and kitting *hurts*, even when it's going well."

Rootspring peered into the cave, then recoiled a pace; Ivypool stifled amusement at the look of embarrassment on his face. "I'll . . . er . . . keep watch out here," he muttered awkwardly.

"Great idea, Rootspring!" Ivypool called after him. "Tell us if you see any Twolegs, or foxes."

Whistlepaw ducked down to join the wildcats in the cave, then checked and turned back to the Clan she-cats. "Please stay," she murmured, careful that Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr couldn't hear her. "I've assisted Kestrelflight with kittings, but I've never delivered kits on my own before. I really need your help."

"Of course we'll stay," Ivypool assured her; she suspected that Whistlepaw would manage perfectly well, except that she lacked confidence. So far the apprentice had coped efficiently with all the demands of their journey.

"I'll find some moss and soak it so Stalk Purr can have a drink," Icewing meowed, padding off toward the river.

"And I'll bring her a stick to bite on when the pain comes," Dovewing added.

Whistlepaw nodded her thanks and slipped inside the cave to examine Stalk Purr once again. Meanwhile Ivypool began collecting more fern, grass, and moss to make a more comfortable nest, and to have extra bedding ready for when they cleaned up Stalk Purr after the birth.

"I remember giving birth to my kits in the big Twolegplace," Dovewing remarked when she returned carrying a good stout stick. "I was so scared, being away from the Clans. But there was a cat there who was almost as good as a medicine cat, and it all turned out fine in the end."

"I can't imagine doing what you did," Ivypool responded, admiration in her tone. "It was a happy time for me, having my kits in ThunderClan, with Fernsong right there, being so helpful. Jayfeather and Alderheart brought me all the herbs I needed, and I knew I would be safe when Alderheart was there to deliver them. Fernsong and I couldn't believe how beautiful they were." A dark wave of sorrow crashed over the happy memory as she thought of Bristlefrost, the kit she would never see again. But Ivypool tried to force herself to think another way. She had seen Bristlefrost born; she had raised her heroic daughter for many moons. *And I wouldn't give up that time for anything*, she mused. *I would do it all over again, even if I knew I would lose her in the end.*

Dovewing blinked sympathetically. "Yes, giving birth in a Clan feels so safe. So different from when I had my kits in the Twolegplace. I was very happy with all the resources and love of my Clan around me. So happy to meet Birchkit and Rowankit."

She caught her breath as she named the kit who had died, and Ivypool saw sadness in her eyes. Her heart ached with sympathy for her sister. *Like me, she's thinking of how she lost him, not how sweet it was to have him—even for a short time.* She leaned closer to her sister, giving her ear a comforting lick. "Rowankit knew how much you loved him," she whispered, too low for the other cats to overhear. "How lucky he was to have you for a mother."

Dovewing's eyes glistened as she rubbed her cheek against Ivypool's. "Thank you, sister," she whispered back.

As Icewing padded up with a mouthful of dripping moss, Ivypool remembered, *She has lost kits, too. We all have reason to grieve.*

Once again, Ivypool recalled Icewing's son Beetlewhisker, who had died in the Dark Forest; she herself had seen his death when she was a Dark Forest warrior. Just like Bristlefrost, his spirit was lost, never to find its way to StarClan.

"Are you okay, Icewing?" Ivypool asked. "I'm happy for the wildcats, but it brings up sad memories."

Icewing set her moss down. "You're talking about Beetlewhisker? As I told you before, I try to live my life to honor his memory. And no cat was ever kitted who didn't have to deal with some sadness."

*She's so wise,* Ivypool thought. It seemed like Icewing already understood what it had taken Ivypool moons to figure out. *I still have reason to be grateful, and I'm not alone.*

It was comforting to know that these mothers also shared her grief. For a moment she felt as though there were unseen tendrils binding them together, making them stronger. *We can always lean on each other.* Ivypool made a promise to herself to remember that.

Then Icewing meowed, "Well, standing here won't help these kits get born," and the three she-cats broke apart to deliver their offerings to Stalk Purr.

The last of the daylight was long gone, and the moon had risen. Ivypool, drowsing with Dovewing and Icewing at the mouth of the cave, could see Rootspring's outline, his ears pricked alertly, as he sat on watch beside the river. The night was peaceful, the splash of the waterfall the only sound except for soft voices and movement inside the cave. Ivypool guessed that Stalk Purr's labor was going well, and wondered how long it would be before her kits made an appearance.

Then an earsplitting yowl burst into the peaceful night. All three she-cats startled awake and peered into the cave. Ivypool could see Whistlepaw bending over something small among the ferns, and heartbeats later she nudged the tiny shape up to Stalk Purr's belly.

"You have a son," she meowed.

Ivypool could just make out the little tom, vigorously sucking his mother's milk. He looked strong and healthy, with the wildcat tabby fur.

"He's alive!" Tumble Leap exclaimed. "Oh, look at him go! Hungry little rascal! Thank you, Whistlepaw."

"I was so scared, but now . . ." Stalk Purr let out a long purr. "He's so beautiful!"

Tumble Leap's eyes shone with happiness; he bent his head and gave the kit a gentle lick. "Hunt," he managed to say at last. "His name is Hunt."

Moments later another strong ripple passed along Stalk Purr's belly, and a second kit slipped out among the ferns. "This one is a she-cat," Whistlepaw announced.

Stalk Purr stretched out a paw and gathered the new kit in beside her brother. "Look how long and skinny she is! Leave some milk for your sister, little one. This one is Stretch," she announced. "Oh, look at them! I never imagined how wonderful they would be!"

Tumble Leap gave her a nuzzle. "You're doing such a great job!"

Ivypool knew there would be a third kit, because of what Galestar had told them, but for a long time, nothing more happened. Stalk Purr was straining, but no kit emerged.

Tumble Leap blinked uncertainly at Whistlepaw, who was looking worried. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. There's definitely another kit in there," Whistlepaw mewed, massaging Stalk Purr's belly. "Come on, sweet kit, the world is waiting for you."

Eventually Stalk Purr made a massive effort, and a third bundle, even smaller than the first two, slid out into the nest. Cold claws gripped Ivypool's heart as she saw that this kit wasn't moving or making any sound. *No! Not after all the loss these two have endured already . . .* Panic thrummed through her, and it took all her self-control to remain still at the entrance to the cave.

*I can't watch another mother lose a kit. This was supposed to be a happy occasion!*

"Is he . . . breathing?" Stalk Purr asked, then let out a tiny whimper. Tumble Leap seemed frozen, staring at the motionless kit, his eyes glazed with horror.

"This happens sometimes," Whistlepaw mewed, obviously trying to sound positive. "Don't worry. We're not finished yet."

Gently she pressed the motionless kit's jaws open and cleared something from his mouth with her forepaw. Then she began to rub him with her paws, and lick his fur roughly from tail to head, trying to get his blood flowing. When the kit still didn't move, Whistlepaw glanced desperately at Ivypool as if asking for help. Ivypool wished she knew what to do, but she didn't have any ideas that the trained medicine cat wasn't doing already.

"This can't be happening," Icewing muttered into Ivypool's ear.



Ivypool murmured agreement, still struggling with panic at the thought of seeing another lost kit.

"There *have* to be three kits," Icewing continued. "Galestar said so. His name will be Pounce."

Ivypool felt a start of surprise. What Icewing said was true, but for a while she had forgotten about the quest. *Maybe even the StormClan spirits don't see everything.*

At last Stalk Purr let out a hopeless wail. "It's no use! Maybe it was too much to hope for. Maybe there's something wrong with me, and I'll never be able to birth a full litter. Oh, little Pounce, I'm so sorry. . . ."

"Wait! There's one more thing I can try," Whistlepaw meowed. "I just remembered. I've seen Kestrelflight do it, but I've never done it myself."

Rising to her paws, she bent her head and gripped the unresponsive kit by the loose skin at the base of his tail. A shocked gasp rose from every cat as Whistlepaw began to swing the kit to and fro in wide arcs.

*Why is she doing that to the kit? Isn't Stalk Purr suffering enough? It can never—oh!*

Ivypool's thought was interrupted as little Pounce suddenly let out a squeak and began waving his tiny paws in the air. Whistlepaw gently set him down beside his littermates and he began to suck.

Stalk Purr bent over him, licking his tabby fur, while Tumble Leap stretched out one paw and gently stroked Pounce's head. Both wildcats looked as if they could hardly believe what they were seeing.

"Oh, Pounce, Pounce . . .," Stalk Purr whispered, then looked up at Whistlepaw. Her eyes were full of joy, and her voice was shaking wildly. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Ivypool found that her heart was pounding and her breath coming short, as if she was experiencing an even greater surge of panic. She knew that she should feel happy and relieved, but she couldn't help herself. Her whole body was filled with such terror that she could hardly move, but she knew it didn't have anything to do with the new kits.

*It's about Bristlefoot.*

Dovewing too was crouched rigid, staring into the cave. Ivypool touched her shoulder and angled her ears backward, signaling her to withdraw. Dovewing gave a little start, then, without any cat noticing, she followed Ivypool to sit beside her on the riverbank.

"I can't stop thinking about Rowankit," she whispered. "He died of greencough, and I had to watch him struggling to breathe. And there was nothing our medicine cats could do for him—nothing I or Tigerstar could do."

Ivypool pressed herself comfortingly against Dovewing's side. For the first time she could feel her sister's grief without comparing her loss of Rowankit with her own

loss of Bristlefrost. *At least Bristlefrost died quickly, and I didn't have to sit with her day after day, feeling helpless as she grew weaker.* What Dovewing had suffered must have been devastating.

"It's good that we have each other," she mewed, and Dovewing let out an assenting murmur.



## Chapter 25



*Ivypool padded along the lakeshore, past the horseplace, toward the RiverClan border.* Just ahead of her she could see another cat; at first it was no more than a misty outline, but gradually it grew more solid, and Ivypool recognized Icewing.

Reaching the border stream, she was surprised that the scent markers were faint and stale, swamped by another scent: the harsh, acrid tang of blood. Looking down into the stream, Ivypool could see that the water level had dropped to a trickle, while clots of blood were lodged among the stones of the riverbed. The waterside plants were parched and drooping, and their leaves were spattered with dark red drops. A shudder shook Ivypool from ears to tail-tip as she wondered where so much blood had come from.

Icewing had crossed the stream and was heading for the RiverClan camp. Ivypool followed, hopping from one stone to another until she reached the far bank, then headed up the slope to the thickly growing bushes that surrounded the clearing where the RiverClan cats made their camp.

Pushing her way through the bushes, Ivypool spotted Icewing standing a few tail-lengths away, staring down into the camp.

"Icewing?" Ivypool mewed.

Icewing made no response; it was as though she didn't know that Ivypool was there.

Following her gaze, Ivypool drew in a gasp of shock at the devastation that had once been a happy, busy camp. The dens had been torn apart, branches scattered across the open ground in the center. Flies buzzed over the remains of the fresh-kill pile. Streaks of blood and tufts of fur covered everything. Not a single cat was in sight.

Glancing again at Icewing, Ivypool saw that the RiverClan she-cat seemed frozen with horror. Moving as if each paw step was an effort, she crossed the camp and headed up the opposite slope toward the overhanging thornbush and the cave where Mothwing and her apprentice, Frostpaw, had their den. Ivypool bounded after her and leaped down onto the stretch of pebbles beside the stream.

Frostpaw was lying on her side, half in and half out of the water. Blood was flowing out of a gash in her belly and trickled down to be carried away by the current. At first Ivypool thought she was dead until she saw the rise and fall of her chest with each shallow breath.

As Icewing approached, Frostpaw raised her head. "Too late!" she gasped out.

Her head fell back, the movement of her chest ceased, and the light died from her eyes.

Icewing threw back her head. "No!" she wailed, the sound of her grief and despair echoing around the devastated camp.

Ivypool awoke with a jerk and found herself in her nest under the bush where she had spent the night. Pale dawn light was filtering through the leaves. For a moment she lay there shivering, still overwhelmed by the horrible images of her dream.

Soon she realized that the other Clan cats were stirring around her; they had all slept in the bushes so that the wildcat family could have a safe and peaceful night in the cave.

Rootspring sat up, shaking his head as if he had just dragged himself out of deep water. "Great StarClan, that was bad!" he exclaimed. "If I never have another dream like that, it'll be too soon."

Ivypool's heart began to pound. "You had a dream too? What was it?" she asked, though she thought she already knew the answer.

Rootspring took a few deep breaths, as if he was reluctant to answer. "I was back beside the lake," he began at last, "following Icewing into RiverClan territory. There was blood in the stream, and the camp was wrecked. And Frostpaw . . ." His voice choked.

"Frostpaw died," Ivypool finished for him. "I had that dream too," she continued, aware of the shocked look Rootspring gave her. "I followed Icewing, but I didn't see you."

"I had the same dream," Dovewing put in; her eyes were wide with fear and horror.

Whistlepaw, behind her, couldn't manage to speak; she just nodded. She was crouching with her legs and tail drawn tightly in, as if she was trying to make herself as small as possible.

"Then Icewing—" Ivypool broke off as she realized that the nest where the RiverClan she-cat had settled down to sleep was empty now. Every hair on her pelt spiked with apprehension. *She must have had the dream. So where has she gone? What will she do?*

Ivypool slipped out through the branches of the bush into the chilly dawn mist. Relief washed over her like a torrent of rain as she saw Icewing with her back to her, sitting on a rock that jutted out over the stream.

"Icewing . . ." Ivypool mewed tentatively, padding up to her.

Icewing didn't turn to look at her. "My Clan is gone." Her voice was shaking with mingled sorrow and anger. "Frostpaw said it was too late. I should have been there. I had no right to come on this quest."

Ivypool wanted to comfort her, but she couldn't find anything to say. The memory of the dream was too strong. It was Rootspring, silently appearing beside her, who spoke first.

"Icewing, you shouldn't despair. It was a dream. Who knows if it was true?"

At that, Icewing turned her head and looked at him. "You know about the dream?" she asked.

"We all had it," Ivypool told her. "We all followed you into the RiverClan camp, but we didn't see each other."

"It was a true dream," Icewing meowed, her voice hollow with despair. "It was clear enough. 'Too late,' Frostpaw said. There is no more RiverClan."

"Icewing, I'm not sure about that." It was Whistlepaw who spoke, approaching through the mist with Dovewing at her shoulder. Her eyes were timid but determined. "Why would StarClan send us a dream if all it told us was to give up hope? StarClan's dreams are meant to guide us."

"So what is StarClan telling us to do?" Ivypool asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Rootspring spoke out boldly. "In the dream, StarClan showed us what *will* happen if we don't stop it. And what's the way to stop it happening? To repay the debt. Whistlepaw, don't you think I'm right?"

Whistlepaw nodded hesitantly. "I do. Otherwise, what was the point of sending us on this quest at all?"

Ivypool's heart was almost breaking as she saw Icewing struggling to allow herself to hope. The RiverClan she-cat opened her jaws to speak, swallowed, and finally managed to get the words out.

"In that case, we have to find the other wildcats as quickly as we can. There's no time to lose."

The rising sun sparkled on the river and slanted into the cave where Stalk Purr lay curled up with her three new kits. Tumble Leap sat next to her; both wildcats looked ready to burst with happiness and pride, beaming as they nuzzled the tiny newborns.

The Clan cats did their best to put aside the horror of the dream. Whistlepaw checked out the mother cat and her kits, and Ivypool and Dovewing helped Stalk Purr clean up and replaced her bedding. While she was happy for the new family, Ivypool still found it hard to see the joy of the wildcats without thinking of her own kit, and how her own joy at kitting had led to grief. She was sure that Dovewing must feel the same, but both she-cats were pushing past their sorrow to help the cats who needed them. Ivypool reminded herself that the kits' safe delivery was a miracle, no matter what had happened to her own kit, Dovewing's, or Icewing's. Forcing herself to hide her churning emotions, she made herself concentrate on the practical tasks she needed to do.

Icewing and Rootspring had gone off to hunt, bringing back enough fresh-kill for them all to share. Comfortably full, Ivypool felt she could relax for the first time since Stalk Purr's kitting had begun.

"Now I understand why you Clan cats urged us to escape from the Twolegs in that vile den," Stalk Purr began. "I can't imagine how I would have felt if the Twolegs had taken these kits away from me. I'm so grateful to you for making sure that I didn't have to find out."

"And we have to thank you for going to find Galestar," Tumble Leap added. "I think it's wonderful that she knew the names we had been planning all along: Pounce, Stretch, and Hunt. It's good to know that our ancestors are still watching over us, since we felt so alone for so long. I can't wait to present our kits to the ancestral spirits so that they can receive their full names."

"What do you mean?" Whistlepaw asked, looking puzzled. "I thought their names were Pounce, Stretch, and Hunt. Are the names you've given them incomplete?"

Tumble Leap nodded. "Our custom is that we give new kits their first names. Then we present the kits to the ancestors, and depending on which ancestor they seem to be tied to, they get the second part of their name."

"Yes," Stalk Purr continued, gazing lovingly at her three kits. "We thought we would have to make do with just half a name, but now that we're free and have a chance of reconnecting with our ancestors, our kits will receive the full names they deserve."

Even though she was enjoying the time spent with the wildcats and their new litter, Ivypool was conscious of time passing as the sun rose higher in the sky. She began to think about the stark warning in the dream they had all shared, and how it was time to be moving on, but it was Icewing who spoke first.

"We need to discuss our next steps," the RiverClan she-cat announced. "I'm glad our escape plan worked, and the kits were born safely. But I left my Clan in a terrible state, and I really need to get back home as soon as possible. The kits are gorgeous," she added, blinking affectionately at the three little fluff-balls. "But they do give us a problem. We simply don't have time to wait for them to be weaned and get old enough to travel. I'm sorry if that sounds harsh."

"No, we understand," Tumble Leap responded. "We appreciate everything you've done for us already, and wouldn't expect you to hang around. Why not send just two cats ahead to find the other wildcats—the descendants of StormClan? That way the quest can continue, and the kits won't have to travel anywhere just yet. I'll go, if you want me to."

"That's a great idea," Ivypool responded immediately. "But not for you to go, Tumble Leap. Your family needs you to stay, and Whistlepaw's vision made clear that it's *our* debt that must be repaid. We Clan cats can deal with this. I'll go, for one. My paws would be itching if I had to sit around here and wait for word."

*That's true enough,* she added to herself. *But it's not the only reason. It hurts so much, seeing Stalk Purr happy with her kits.*

"I'll go too," Icewing meowed. "I'll feel better about my Clan if I can do something to get back to them sooner."

Ivypool thought that they were making a good choice. Whistlepaw had to stay, and in Dovewing she had an experienced mother cat to help her. As for Rootspring . . . Ivypool looked away to hide her amusement. After his initial embarrassment, the SkyClan tom could hardly take his eyes off the kits. He would be a good protector, too, if dogs or predators showed up.

*And he would have been a really good father,* she mused regretfully. Then she forced herself to confront another thought. *He might still be, in the future.*

Ivypool angled her ears to beckon her sister to one side. "Are you okay with staying?" she asked in an undertone that the others wouldn't hear. "Being around these young kits that must remind you of Rowankit? I'll switch places with you if you like."

Dovewing let out a purr and gave her sister's ear a lick. "No, but thank you," she responded. "It's sweet of you to offer. The kits are so different from Rowankit, and they look less like him with every day that passes. To tell you the truth, I enjoy helping take care of them. Perhaps I really am healing."

"That's great. I'm so happy for you," Ivypool mewed. She could only hope that one day she would feel the same.

"So that's decided." Dovewing's tone was brisk. "Ivypool, Icewing, you should eat again before you leave. You'll need all your strength for traveling. Rootspring and I will hunt."

Prey was plentiful beside the river. Icewing caught a fish, while Rootspring and Dovewing hunted together and came back with a couple of plump voles. It wasn't long before Ivypool and Icewing were fed again and ready to leave.

Meanwhile, Whistlepaw had been searching among the vegetation beside the stream, and she came back with a bundle of leaves in her jaws. "Traveling herbs," she announced happily, dropping them in front of Ivypool and Icewing. "I hardly dared hope I'd find them here, so far away from the lake."

"Thank you," Ivypool mewed as she licked up her share. "Maybe that means StarClan is watching over us, even here."

"Good luck!" Tumble Leap called, coming to the cave entrance to wish them goodbye. "I just hope that I can take care of the kits properly while you're away. I've wanted to be a father for so long—but will I be any good at it?"

"Of course you will," Ivypool assured him. "You are already! You adore those kits, and they adore you. And Dovewing is an experienced mother who will be able to help," she added, flicking her tail at her sister.

"We'll ask the spirits to watch over you," Stalk Purr promised, looking up from the furry bundles pressed into her belly.

"And may StarClan light your path!" Rootspring added.

Dovewing padded up to Ivypool and nuzzled her ear. "Take care," she murmured. "I'll worry until you're back safe."



"We'll be fine," Ivypool responded. She glanced over her shoulder to where Icewing was waiting, flexing her claws impatiently.

"We're wasting daylight!" the RiverClan she-cat meowed.

"Okay, I'm coming!" she called. "Goodbye, Dovewing. Take care of yourself—and these others."

Icewing had spotted a place where stepping-stones made it safe to cross the river. The trail led directly into the mountains, steep but easy to follow through the unfamiliar terrain. Without needing to stop so that Stalk Purr could rest, the two she-cats made good time, only pausing briefly to make dirt or check the air for scents. There were plenty of signs of prey, and the rich aroma of growing things, but only faint traces of predators, and none at all of Twolegs.

Ivypool found her muscles aching as she labored to keep up with Icewing. *Great StarClan, she wasn't kidding about being in a hurry to get back to her Clan! And I don't blame her, after that dream.*

"Are you okay?" she asked Icewing during one of their infrequent stops. "That awful dream was bad enough for the rest of us, but seeing your camp wrecked like that, and Frostpaw dying, must have been devastating for you."

"It was, but I'll be okay, as long as we can carry out our quest and get home soon," Icewing growled. "I'm just trying to believe what Whistlepaw said: that the dream was a warning, not an image of what has really happened." She shook her head. "Everything has gone wrong since Mistystar died. I wanted RiverClan to have a real leader, but not a mange-pelt like Splashtail. I'm never going to call him Splashstar," she added fiercely. "I always knew he was an ambitious cat, but I never dreamed he would do what he's done to gain power and then to hold on to it. He's shown himself to be cruel . . . and dangerous."

"If all the Clans turn on him, Splashtail will get what he deserves," Ivypool mused.

"That would be satisfying, I suppose," Icewing responded with a nod of gratitude. "But I'm less concerned about getting revenge on him, and more about RiverClan surviving his leadership. I don't really care what happens to Splashtail. I just want him out of RiverClan so that we can thrive. If Mistystar can see what he has done to RiverClan, she must be furious." She paused, sighing. "I'm determined to restore the Clan to what it was under Mistystar's leadership," she continued at last. "I know we can get there, and I won't give up on my Clan."

Ivypool was impressed by the maturity and determination Icewing showed. She understood more clearly now why the RiverClan she-cat was so anxious to return home. "It must be so hard for you, being away like this when you know your Clan is in trouble," she mewed.

Icewing's tone was bleak. "It is. But the truth is, all my efforts to hurry might be no use at all. I want to believe Whistlepaw, but I still can't get that dream out of my mind. For all I know, RiverClan doesn't even exist anymore. I can only hope that

Sunbeam, Frostpaw, and Nightheart have managed to keep Mothwing and Duskfur safe." Her voice choked, and she had to force out her last few words. "And that my Clan is okay."

Ivypool was surprised to hear Icewing sound so upset. Usually she was so self-possessed and calm. Guilt tingled in every hair on her pelt as she realized that the RiverClan cat might have unburdened herself before this, if Ivypool had only bothered to ask how she was. Her own grief had blinded her to the suffering of all the cats around her.

*But from now on I won't let that happen.*

"There may not be much I can do to help your Clan right now," she told Icewing. "But I'm happy to listen if you want to talk, or just rant to a sympathetic cat. Whatever you say will stay between the two of us."

Icewing's eyes glowed with gratitude. "Thank you," she responded. "Just knowing that helps. But for the time being, what I want most is to complete this quest so I can go home—no matter what home looks like now." She gave her pelt a shake as though filled with a new sense of urgency. "Hurry up, Ivypool," she meowed as she bounded off up the trail. "We have some wildcats to find!"



## Chapter 26



*The sun was slipping down the sky* by the time the two questing cats reached the top of the hill and began to make their way down the other side. The ground was thickly covered by bushes and fern, and down below Ivypool could hear the rushing of a river.

"This is a perfect place for prey," she meowed, pausing to taste the air. Prey-scents flowed between her jaws, and she could hear the rustling of small creatures in the undergrowth. "I think we should stop and hunt before it gets dark."

Icewing didn't look too pleased at the idea of stopping, but she gave a grunt of assent. "I suppose we can't travel without food," she admitted. "Thank StarClan there are no seagulls to bother us!"

Leaving the trail, Icewing led the way through the bushes, her ears pricked and her paws seeming to float over the ground. Ivypool followed, all her senses alert.

Before long, they emerged into a stretch of open ground. Icewing raised her tail to signal for silence; looking over her shoulder, Ivypool spotted a rabbit, its back to them, nibbling at a patch of dock leaves.

"We need to catch it before it runs too far away from our trail." Icewing's voice was barely a whisper. "Where do you think it will go for safety when it's scared?"

Ivypool glanced around. She couldn't see any sign of the rabbit's burrow, but not far away was a thick holly bush with branches growing close to the ground. "In there," she murmured, angling her ears toward it.

Icewing nodded. "Okay, go and hide there. I'll chase it right up to you."

Flattening herself to the earth, Ivypool crept toward the bush and worked her way into it, wincing as the holly prickles caught in her fur. When she peered out between the leaves, she spotted Icewing stealthily making her way through the edge of the undergrowth until she was positioned on the other side of the rabbit. Fortunately, there was no breeze to carry their scent, and the rabbit seemed quite unaware of the danger.

Though she was expecting it, Ivypool still jumped, startled, when Icewing let out an earsplitting yowl. The rabbit sat erect, staring at Icewing as she hurled herself toward it, then fled straight for the bush. Ivypool could hear the soft thud of its paws, then the rustle of leaves as it dived into shelter. It let out a thin shriek that was abruptly cut off as she slammed a paw down on its neck and bit down to give it a quick death.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," she mewed.

Icewing came bounding up as Ivypool dragged her prey out into the open. "Great catch!" she purred.

"We make a brilliant team," Ivypool responded.

As they crouched down to share the fresh-kill, she reflected that although she couldn't approve of the way two Clans had joined to create StormClan, she liked the idea of being in the same Clan with Icewing. She was a strong, clever warrior with a good head on her shoulders.

*RiverClan is lucky to have her*, Ivypool thought. *What's left of RiverClan, anyway.*

By the time they had eaten the rabbit, the sun was gone, and twilight covered the forest.

"We need to find somewhere to spend the night," Icewing declared as they made their way back to the trail. "I haven't scented Twolegs since we left the others, but I'm sure there will be foxes and badgers about."

Ivypool suppressed a shiver. "Let's hurry," she meowed. "There might be a place beside the river."

The gurgling of the water grew louder as they bounded down the trail. But before they reached it, Icewing, who was a pace or two in the lead, yowled out, "Stop!"

Ivypool skidded to a halt by her side to see that the trail came to an abrupt end. There seemed nothing ahead but empty air. Creeping forward cautiously, she saw that they were standing at the top of a precipice; the path did continue, zigzagging back and forth across the cliff face until it reached the bottom, near the river. Pine trees covered the opposite slope.

Icewing puffed out a long breath. "That was close. Come on, there's just about enough light to get down."

Ivypool wasn't sure she agreed. The last of the daylight was fading fast; she could barely see her own paws as she ventured down the path in Icewing's paw steps. The path was gritty, with loose stones here and there; Ivypool was terrified of slipping and falling over the edge to crash onto the ground below. With every step she tried to dig her claws into the ground and be certain of her paw hold before she trusted her weight to it.

To her relief, the moon appeared above the trees before they reached the bottom of the cliff, and the last few fox-lengths were much easier until they could leap down onto the stretch of smooth grass between the base of the cliff and the river.

"Thank StarClan!" she gasped, when all four of her paws were safely on solid ground again. "I wouldn't want to do that again!"

"We might have to, when we come back," Icewing pointed out. "But we'll make sure to do it in daylight."

*She's right*, Ivypool realized. The thought of doing this journey again made her even more aware of her weary muscles.

"I'm exhausted," she admitted. "Let's find somewhere to sleep." Glancing around, she spotted a dark cave opening, gaping several tail-lengths farther along the cliff. "That might do," she suggested, pointing with her tail.

Icewing twitched her whiskers doubtfully. "I don't like the look of it," she meowed. "I'm worried that something else might have gotten there first. There's a very odd smell coming out of it."

Ivypool took a deep sniff of the air and nodded in agreement. "You're right. I have no idea what that is, but I know I don't like it."

"Let's look closer to the river." Icewing was already turning in that direction. "I feel more at home there."

Ivypool's paws felt so weary that she felt she could fall asleep where she stood. But she followed Icewing and searched along the riverbank until she discovered a sheltered spot among tall stems of watermint, shielded too by the reeds that grew in the river.

"Icewing, over here!" she called.

The RiverClan she-cat came bounding up and gave a nod of approval at the place Ivypool had found. "Great!" she meowed. "Now we can . . ." Her voice trailed off as she parted her jaws in an enormous yawn. ". . . sleep."

Ivypool curled up in the nest, soothed by the gurgling of the current close by. But for all her exhaustion she found it hard to fall asleep. Eventually she rose to her paws and padded beside the river until she reached a forest, with trees so close together and undergrowth so thick that she couldn't see more than a tail-length in any direction.

Tasting the air, she picked up a familiar scent, and a pang of loss pierced her, so sharp that she let out a desperate cry. "Bristlefrost!"

Yearning gave strength to her paws, and she fought her way through clinging ivy tendrils and bramble thickets, following the elusive scent. Sometimes she thought she spotted a flash of gray fur just ahead, but she could never catch up, and there was no response to her desolate cries.

At last her paw caught in a knot of bramble. She lost her balance, but instead of thumping down onto the forest floor, she felt herself falling, falling into soft darkness, until she jerked awake in her nest by the riverside. The sky was gray with the first light of dawn.

For a few moments Ivypool lay there shuddering, trying to free herself from the tangles of her dream. Then she realized that Icewing wasn't sleeping there beside her. Anxious, she dragged herself to her paws and ventured out into the open.

Ivypool drew a huge breath of relief when she spotted the RiverClan she-cat sitting at the edge of the river, her head bowed as if she was staring down into the water. As Ivypool drew closer, she saw two silver fish lying on the bank beside her.

Padding up to her, Ivypool realized that she wasn't fishing anymore. Her gaze was withdrawn, distant, as if she was seeing something far away. Without speaking, Ivypool settled down beside her. She could see fish darting through the water; the breeze created ripples that looked like rings of glimmering light. She let out a sigh and tried to relax into the peace of her surroundings.

After a few moments Icewing turned to her. "You didn't sleep well," she meowed.

Ivypool shook her head. "I hope I didn't disturb you."

"No, I couldn't sleep either," Icewing told her. "I'm too worried about RiverClan. So as soon as I could see my own paws I got up and caught some fish for us, and then I tried to meditate. Is that something you ThunderClan cats do?"

"No," Ivypool replied. "But I've heard that you do it in RiverClan."

"The younger cats have rather lost the habit," Icewing meowed. "But I've always found it helpful to center myself." She paused, then added, "I could show you how, if you want. You might find it calms your mind when you're feeling overwhelmed."

"Thank you. It couldn't hurt," Ivypool responded. *I'll try anything if it will help me cope with this awful despair.*

"Okay, then." Icewing's voice was brisk. "Start by taking in your surroundings with all your senses. Smell the scent of those pine trees across the river, listen to the babbling of the water, look at the colors in the sky as the dawn light grows, and—"

Suddenly she broke off. Ivypool saw that she was peering up at the sky with a puzzled expression.

"What is it, Icewing?" she asked.

"There's a dark cloud coming our way," Icewing replied. "But it's traveling fast, and I can't understand why, when the breeze is so mild."

Ivypool followed her gaze and saw the massive black cloud; it grew even bigger as it drew closer, and parts of it seemed to be moving separately. *Not just moving . . . flapping!*

"That's no cloud!" she cried, unsheathing her claws. "They're bats!"

Now and again, she had seen bats in the forest, flitting above the trees, but never so many of them together. "Do you get bats in RiverClan?" she asked.

"A few," Icewing replied. "Not a crowd of them like this, though."

Before either cat could brace herself for battle, or flee for cover, the bat cloud was upon them, swirling all around as the creatures headed for the cave. Ivypool gagged on their stench; she could hear their high-pitched shrieking and the beating of their wings.

Most of the bats passed by harmlessly, but one headed straight for the cats, its tiny mouth open in a silent scream, its wings extended like an eagle's. Reacting instinctively, Ivypool raised a paw and batted it from the sky, sending it reeling to the ground.

When the rest of the cloud had disappeared into the cave, the two she-cats crept forward cautiously to get a closer look at the fallen creature. Its body was small and plump, covered in gray fur; it had black, berry-bright eyes and thin wings that felt like snakeskin to Ivypool when she stretched out a paw and hesitantly touched one.

"It's so strange . . . I've never seen one so close," Icewing meowed. "Have you?"

Ivypool shook her head. She leaned forward to sniff it, then backed away, wrinkling her nose.

Icewing let out a *mrrow* of amusement. "I dare you to taste it!"

Ivypool's belly roiled at the very idea, but she didn't want to seem like a coward in front of a cat from another Clan. Creeping forward again, she dipped her head to nibble at the creature's belly.

*Yuck!*

"It's not so bad," she managed to choke out as she backed off again. "Kind of like a mouse with wings."

A long purr of laughter came from Icewing, and after a couple of heartbeats Ivypool found herself joining in. The laughter felt good, as if they had both needed that for a long time. It released something in Ivypool's chest: a kind of heaviness she had been holding on to, and—if only for the moment—it felt amazing to let it go.

"Come on," Icewing mewed at last. "We have some fish; we don't need to eat this thing."

Ivypool settled beside Icewing at the riverside and began to eat her fish, reflecting how used she was becoming to this unfamiliar prey. She remembered the conversation she had shared with Stalk Purr about how the world was bigger than she knew, and how there was never an end to learning. Once more she was overcome by the beauty around her. She had thought that as an experienced warrior she had seen and done it all. She'd thought she was past being surprised by anything. But her journey had taught her that that wasn't true.

She knew that she would never revisit the world she once loved so much—the world that contained the living Bristlefrost—but she began to believe that perhaps there were new worlds awaiting her, and new wonders that would unfold.

Once they had eaten, Ivypool and Icewing continued their journey. They followed the riverbank as far as they could, until the path curved away and they found their route blocked by a steep cliff, too sheer for them to find paw holds. Ivypool halted, gazing up at the distant cliff top.

"Now what do we do?" she asked, her shoulder fur beginning to bristle with frustration.

Icewing padded up to her side. "We can't climb up there, and the river is too wide and fierce to cross here," she pointed out. "We'll have to go this way." She angled her ears to where a narrow track led along the bottom of the cliff and into dense woodland.

"Okay," Ivypool meowed. "I just hope we're not going in the wrong direction."

As they headed beneath the outermost trees, she paused to taste the air. "Foxes," she murmured, half to herself. "The scent's stale, but still . . . We need to stay alert."

She and Icewing both kept their ears pricked and let their gaze flick into the undergrowth as they continued deeper into the forest. To their dismay they picked up the fox scent more and more often, sometimes stale, sometimes fresh, and gradually much stronger. Once Ivypool spotted fox dung by the side of the track.

"Trouble with foxes is all we need," Icewing sighed.

They could still hear the river, faint in the distance, before Ivypool halted, drawing in a long breath that carried a familiar and much more welcome scent. "Is



that . . . ,” she began.

“Wildcats!” Icewing finished. “This was the right way after all.”

They pressed on, following the scent. Ivypool felt new energy flowing through her and excitement raising every hair on her pelt at the thought that they were so close to the place they were seeking.

Before long they found the path blocked by a huge fallen tree, the trunk so wide that it stretched more than a tail-length above their heads. Both cats halted, staring up at the barrier. The scent of wildcat was stronger than ever.

“Come on!” Icewing urged.

She began to scramble over the trunk; Ivypool clawed her way up beside her. But before they could reach the top, a pair of hostile green eyes appeared above them, and a deep growl reverberated through the forest.

Digging her claws into the bark, forcing herself not to flee, Ivypool found herself looking into the face of a large wildcat. His eyes were narrowed and his teeth bared menacingly.

*Mouse dung! He really doesn't look as if he welcomes visitors!*



## Chapter 27



*Looming over them, the wildcat flexed rippling muscles, knocked their paws off the tree, and jumped down to face them, forcing them to back up. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" he demanded. "It's a long time since we've seen strangecats in our territory. Are you trying to steal prey?"*

Ivypool remembered that Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr had called the Clan cats "strangecats" when they first met them in the Twoleg den. "We might be strange to you," she retorted. "But that's no excuse for accusing us of stealing!"

The wildcat turned his head toward her, a growl rumbling deep in his chest. "I'll say what I like, worthless little thieves—"

"Keep your fur on," Icewing interrupted, facing up to him boldly. "No cat is trying to steal anything."

"As for what we're doing here," Ivypool added, "it's a long story. If you let us pass, we can sit down and tell it to you."

"I'm not interested in your stories," the wildcat snarled. "You're trespassing little mange-pelts, and you need to leave!"

"How dare you?" Icewing bristled indignantly. "Who do you think you are?"

The wildcat took a pace toward Icewing, thrusting his neck forward so that his face was right next to hers. "You're about to find out," he growled, hunching his muscular shoulders as if he was about to attack.

Ivypool felt her heart pounding. She wasn't sure that even working together she and Icewing could defeat this powerful cat. And if they did, this wasn't the way they wanted to introduce themselves to the wildcats.

"Wait!" she called out, as Icewing gathered herself, ready to lash out. "Don't you want to hear what Galestar told us?"

The wildcat froze; obviously the name meant something to him. "What do you know about Galestar?" he demanded.

"As I said, it's a long story," Ivypool quickly replied. "But it includes how we found two wildcats who were imprisoned in a horrible Twolegplace. They told us they thought they were the last of their kind. We were able to rescue them and get them to safety. And the she-cat has just given birth to three healthy kits."

The wildcat, who had been so aggressive moments before, seemed to relax a little. His expression softened, and there was a new eagerness in his eyes. "Kits?" he asked.

Ivypool nodded, reflecting that wildcat kits must be precious to this group, no matter where they came from. "Yes, three of them. And now they're going to need a

larger family to keep them safe. Their parents need help presenting them to their ancestors. They need a Clan."

The wildcat started with surprise, glancing from Ivypool to Icewing and back again. "Are you Clan cats?" he asked. "It has been many, many seasons since Clan cats came here."

"We are," Icewing mewed.

Ivypool nodded. "Do you know about the Clans?"

"I do," the wildcat replied. "I'm not a Clan cat myself, but I do have Clan blood. I'm a descendant of StormClan."

"We know all about StormClan . . . now," Icewing told him. "It doesn't exist anymore, but Ivypool here is a descendant of those cats too."

The wildcat let out a dismissive snort. "Maybe she is, and maybe she isn't. I don't have to believe a word you're saying."

Instead of replying in words, Icewing cleared some twigs and leaf debris from the ground in front of her and drew the symbol of lightning-pierced cloud and vines, the symbol that Whistlepaw had seen in her vision, that Galestar had drawn for them when they visited her in her afterlife.

The wildcat's eyes stretched wide in astonishment. For a few heartbeats he stood still, gaping at the symbol. Ivypool and Icewing stood back and waited for him to speak.

"Where did you see that?" he demanded at last. "How could you possibly know it?"

"Our medicine cat saw it in a vision," Ivypool interrupted. "And then Galestar explained what it meant."

Now the wildcat looked even more stunned. "You . . . you spoke with Galestar?" he stammered.

Icewing nodded. "The wildcats we just told you about gave us directions to find Galestar in her afterlife," she explained.

The wildcat gazed at Ivypool, blinking as if he couldn't accept what he was seeing. "And you're a descendant of StormClan?" he murmured, seeming more prepared to accept it now. "Then we share blood. . . ." He let his voice trail off.

Ivypool exchanged a glance with Icewing, who was flicking her tail-tip impatiently. She could read the RiverClan cat's thoughts as if she had spoken aloud. *Can we please get on with this?*

"I have to believe you now," the wildcat meowed at last. "And I'm sorry for the way I greeted you. But it's my job to keep the others safe."

Ivypool nodded. "It's okay." She reflected that Clan cats on a border patrol would have reacted in much the same way if they found a cat from a rival Clan about to trespass on their territory.

"My name is Strike Slash," the wildcat tom continued. "You need to come and tell our elders what you have just told me."

"I'm Ivypool, and this is Icewing," Ivypool responded. "And we really want to meet your elders. Lead on!"

The two Clan cats scrambled over the fallen tree and followed Strike Slash, who wasn't hostile anymore, though Ivypool wouldn't have called him friendly, either. His manner was brusque, and his eyes still held a trace of suspicion, as if he still suspected they might have just been telling him a very good story.

Ivypool still noticed the scent of foxes as they traveled deeper into the forest, and she exchanged a doubtful glance with Icewing. *Have the wildcats had trouble with foxes? Is that why Strike Slash is so short-tempered?*

Eventually they came to two large boulders that blocked their way except for a narrow passage between them. When Strike Slash passed through, his fur brushed the rock walls on either side, though the slimmer Clan cats slipped through more easily.

Beyond the boulders lay a large clearing, surrounded by a ring of trees with thick undergrowth in the gaps between them. At the far side Ivypool could see a group of wildcats sharing prey, while others were stretched out in the shade or sharing tongues together. As she and Icewing entered, Ivypool became aware of lifted heads and curious glances directed toward them.

"It's not too different from a Clan camp," Ivypool murmured into Icewing's ear.

"It's not," Icewing agreed, "except that all the cats look like Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr. Strong bodies and tabby pelts. They seem healthier and even stronger, though, and their fur is long and glossy."

*Maybe our wildcats will look like that when they've lived free for a while, with proper food and care,* Ivypool thought.

Meanwhile, Strike Slash had greeted a she-cat near the camp entrance, nuzzling her ear. Ivypool realized she must be his mate. "This is Wish Stalk," Strike Slash introduced her.

Wish Stalk glanced from her mate to the two Clan cats and back again, clearly longing to ask questions. But she said nothing, merely following the others as Strike Slash led the way across the clearing to where three cats were sitting together on the bank of a small stream that trickled through the camp.

Before he reached them, Strike Slash paused. "We wildcats always have three elders who are responsible for communing with our ancestors and making important decisions for our group."

Ivypool felt a jolt of surprise on hearing this. "In the Clans, our elders mostly tell stories and help with the kits," she told him. "They have earned their rest by the way they served the Clan in their younger seasons."

Strike Slash shook his head. "That's very strange. . . . Here, the power to connect with our ancestors only gets stronger as the cats grow older. Without our elders, we would be lost. So show them the deepest respect, please."

"Like we don't know how to behave," Ivypool muttered to Icewing.

But even though she had briefly taken offense, Ivypool was touched by the wildcats' reverence for their elders. Though the Clans valued them, the elders had no part in controlling Clan life anymore. She wondered what a Clan would be like if the elders made the decisions. Would it be better, since they had more life experience?

They followed Strike Slash and Wish Stalk across the clearing until they stood in front of the elders. All three of them had once been powerful cats, but now Ivypool could see their age in their shrinking muscles and the gray streaks in their tabby fur. In the center was a she-cat whose proud bearing impressed Ivypool; on one side of her was a tom with a slashed ear, and on the other side another tom with a pelt that was darker than most of the other wildcats.

Strike Slash and Wish Stalk both bowed their heads to the elders; Ivypool and Icewing did the same.

"I came upon these cats trying to enter our territory," Strike Slash explained. "They have told me something that you need to hear."

The elders all gave the Clan cats a brief nod of greeting. "My name is Prowl Sleek," the she-cat meowed, giving the two Clan cats a wary look. "This is Hunt Growl"—she pointed with her tail at the tom with the slashed ear—"and this is Spring Claw."

Ivypool dipped her head. "My name is Ivypool," she mewed, "and this is Icewing. We've come a long way to find you."

"They claim to be Clan cats," Strike Slash added. "They know the StormClan symbol."

Ivypool expected shock from the three elders; instead, they exchanged glances, their eyes still doubtful. Hunt Growl looked downright hostile.

"Do they indeed," Prowl Sleek murmured eventually. She held out a paw. "Proceed."

Together Ivypool and Icewing told their story, about Whistlepaw's vision, about their journey and their discovery of Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr in the horrible Twoleg den, and how the wildcats had guided them to the Star Tree, where they were able to travel to meet Galestar. They finished with the story of how they had rescued the wildcats from the cruel Twoleg, and how Stalk Purr had given birth to three healthy kits.

The elders listened in silence as the story was told. Ivypool had expected them to be instantly welcoming, especially when they heard about the kits. Instead all three remained reserved, still with a doubtful look, as if they didn't believe what the Clan cats had related to them.

"Why would you Clan cats come all this way to free a pair of wildcats?" Spring Claw asked. "The Clans haven't visited us wildcats in a very long time. We believed you had all forgotten us."

"That's true," Ivypool admitted, her pelt hot with embarrassment. "Until our medicine cat had her vision, and we received the quest directly from Galestar," she

assured the elders. "We aren't sure what it all means yet, but so far the visions Whistlepaw saw have all come to pass. These wildcats and their kits are destined to live among you."

"We'll be the judge of that," Hunt Growl mewed, his voice sour. "We had given up hope long ago that any other wildcats existed in the world. Now we have to confirm that this is true. And whether we believe the rest of your story."

"In the meantime, you Clan cats will wait, under guard," Prowl Sleek ordered.

Ivypool exchanged a bewildered glance with Icewing. Her fur was prickling with the beginning of fear, and she could tell that the RiverClan cat felt the same. She had expected that the wildcats would welcome them as heroes when they brought such happy news. Instead it looked as if they were being held captive.





## Chapter 28



*Strike Slash* led the two Clan cats across the camp to a sheltered spot almost surrounded by a bramble thicket. "Wait there," he ordered curtly, and stalked off.

Ivypool gazed anxiously out at the wildcats in the clearing. None of them were paying any attention to her or Icewing, but they couldn't reach the passage between the two boulders without being seen, and the brambles were too dense to push their way through.

"I don't like this," she murmured to Icewing. "I never expected the wildcats to be so unfriendly."

Icewing simply shrugged. "Give them time," she mewed. "We Clan cats would act the same way if wildcats turned up in our camp with outlandish stories."

Ivypool had to agree. Other cats, like the Sisters, had been greeted with suspicion when they first appeared in Clan territories.

Looking at the RiverClan she-cat, Ivypool saw that Icewing had settled into a comfortable crouch with her paws tucked under her; Ivypool didn't know how she could look so calm.

"We've come so far," she continued, flexing her claws in frustration. "What are we going to do if these wildcats don't let Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap and their family join them? Where else can the wildcat family be safe? And if the wildcats don't agree, how are we ever going to get home to help RiverClan?"

She was aware of her voice rising in agitation, and she took a deep breath, trying to imitate Icewing's unruffled demeanor.

"It will be fine," Icewing reassured her. "The elders will surely talk to their ancestors about us, and it was their ancestors who sent us to find the wildcats and bring them here, wasn't it? You already know what the answer will be."

Ivypool hoped she was right, but she knew from her experience with StarClan's prophecies how easily everything could go wrong. The outcome Star Clan intended might not be what happened—or it might happen in a way they would never have chosen.

Gazing around, she realized that there weren't all that many wildcats in the camp, even though they looked so powerful and fierce. *If worse comes to worst, we might be able to escape.*

"I wonder if these are all the wildcats left in the world," she mewed. "If they are, taking in Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr and their kits would be good for them too, not just for our lost wildcats."

"That could be true," Icewing agreed. "Though, if so, they might be a bit friendlier."

Since Strike Slash had left them by the brambles, none of the other wildcats had come to talk to them, until a single kit turned away from playing with her mother, gave the Clan cats a wide-eyed green stare, then came scurrying across the camp to stand in front of them.

"Hi!" she squeaked. "I'm Hop Scratch. What are your names? Where did you come from? How did you find us? Why is your fur that funny color?"

Ivypool was startled by the cascade of questions, while Icewing let out a soft purr. "We've come a long way, little one," she replied. "Many cats in our home have fur like ours."

"I'm Ivypool and this is Icewing," Ivypool added.

Hop Scratch let out a *mrrrow* of laughter. "What weird names!" She let her gaze travel from one Clan cat to the other, still round-eyed with amazement. "Are you kits?" she asked eventually. "Do you want to play with me?"

For a moment Ivypool was startled, until she realized that this half-grown wildcat was almost as big as them.

"No, we are full-grown cats, and warriors," Icewing replied. "We wish we could play with you, but we're here on important business. We have to concentrate on that."

Hop Scratch's ears drooped. "My littermate died, and now I'm the only kit. Sometimes the adults will play with me, but I really wish there were other kits to play with."

Pain clawed at Ivypool's heart to think of the lost kit, and the loneliness of the survivor. *Soon there will be more kits*, she thought. *If all goes well.*

Icewing stretched out her neck and gave the sad kit a lick around her ear. "Never mind. Suppose we tell you all about our home, and all the adventures we had on our way here?"

The kit brightened up immediately. "Yes, please! Are you really Clan cats? Do you live in mountains like these?"

"Well," Icewing began, "back home we live around a lake. . . ."

As Icewing began to describe the Clans and their lakeside home, Hop Scratch's mother padded over and dipped her head to the Clan cats.

"Greetings," she meowed. "My name is Claw Stretch. I hope Hop Scratch isn't bothering you."

"Not at all," Ivypool replied. "She's a great kit."

"They're telling me stories!" Hop Scratch exclaimed, her eyes shining. "They're Clan cats, and they come from really far away!"

"That's very kind of them," Claw Stretch purred. "I've heard of Clan cats, but I've never met any before now. May I stay and listen too?"

"Of course," Ivypool replied. She wasn't sure whether Claw Stretch really wanted to hear what Icewing was telling, or whether she wanted to keep a close eye on her kit

next to these unfamiliar cats, but it didn't really matter. She seemed friendly, and that had to be good.

Gradually two or three other wildcats drifted over to join the group and listen to Icewing. They froze, scarcely breathing, when Icewing recounted the discovery of the two wildcats imprisoned in the Twoleg's cage, and they let out *mrrows* of laughter as Icewing described how they had opened the cages and how the big furry dog had attacked the cruel Twoleg.

"I think that's enough for now," one of the wildcats mewed when they had settled down again. "You must be tired from all that talking. Why don't you join us for some prey, and you can tell us the rest later?"

"Thank you." Icewing rose to her paws and gave herself a good long stretch. "Are you coming, Ivypool?"

"No, thanks." Ivypool noticed how the daylight was dying and shadows were gathering at the sides of the camp. She hadn't realized how long they had spent talking; she felt weary to the bone, in need of rest far more than food. "I'll catch up with you later."

The other wildcats led Icewing away, but Claw Stretch stayed behind with Ivypool and Hop Scratch, who began batting a scrap of twig around the camp floor. The two she-cats watched her for a while, until Claw Stretch asked, "Do you have kits of your own, Ivypool?"

"Yes, though they're grown warriors now," Ivypool told her. "Thriftear, who is a she-cat, and Flipclaw, who is a tom. And then there was . . ." Her voice died away into sadness.

Claw Stretch let out a small encouraging *mrrow*.

"I had a third kit, Bristlefrost," Ivypool managed to continue. "But she died, fighting against a great enemy of the Clans."

"I'm so sorry," Claw Stretch murmured. "Losing a kit is the hardest thing a mother cat can endure."

Ivypool suddenly felt that she could confide in this sympathetic wildcat. "I've had trouble breaking out of my grief," she confessed. "Bristlefrost died in a kind of afterlife that we call the Dark Forest. And cats who die there are gone forever. Her spirit will never travel to StarClan, where I might hope to meet her again after my death. Based on what we Clan cats believe, nothing remains of her, and I will never see her again."

Her voice broke, and she bowed her head onto her paws.

Claw Stretch was silent for a while, as if respectful of Ivypool's grief. When she continued, her voice was puzzled. "I know we live in very different groups, but that's not how I understand the afterlife at all," she mewed. "We wildcats believe that we go to an afterlife when we die, just as you Clan cats do. But when those cats are eventually forgotten by all the living wildcats, they become part of the earth, the air,

the water—they spread out to become part of the whole world. Nothing is ever really lost. Ivypool, can't you sense, if you reach out, that Bristlefrost is still all around you?"

While the wildcat was speaking, Ivypool raised her head to listen. She wanted very badly to believe what Claw Stretch was telling her. It aligned with what Stalk Purr had pointed out to her—that perhaps Ivypool, perhaps all the Clan cats, didn't know everything there was to know about what happened to cats after they died. But still, Claw Stretch was a wildcat, and that was *her* belief. It was hard for Ivypool to accept that it might be the same for Clan cats. *It would comfort me if it were true, but it goes against everything we Clan cats know.* Bristlefrost, and the cats who had died in the Dark Forest when she was a spy for ThunderClan—weren't they all gone forever? Hadn't Ivypool seen that with her own eyes when she had fought in the Dark Forest?

But then Ivypool spotted a patch of sky among the branches above the camp; it was the exact shade of blue-green of Bristlefrost's eyes. At the same moment the faintest trace of a familiar scent drifted into her nose, and she remembered the dream where she had smelled Bristlefrost's scent.

She froze, desperate to believe, but hardly able to. *Could the wildcats possibly be right? Has Bristlefrost sent me some kind of sign? Or am I imagining it, because I want so much for it to be true?*

Before Ivypool could really think through what had just happened, the three wildcat elders appeared, padding solemnly across the camp toward her. Ivypool rose to face them, while Icewing hurried back to her side.

The elders halted in front of the Clan cats. Ivypool felt a sudden chill as she saw the cold expression in all three pairs of eyes.

Prowl Sleek raised her head and spoke. "We have meditated on the tale you told us, and discussed it together. And we all find it hard to imagine how you ever expected us to believe you."

Icewing stared at her. "You *don't* believe us?"

"But we met with Galestar!" Ivypool protested. "We showed you the StormClan symbol."

"And you expect that to win our confidence?" Hunt Growl asked with a disdainful sniff. "We respect Galestar as one of our ancestors, but we have no reason to respect StormClan. They *abandoned* Galestar. They left her and her kits to die."

"And now you come to us with a tale of other wildcats," Spring Claw continued. "That proves you're lying to us. There *are* no other wildcats."

"We promise you there are," Ivypool retorted, desperate to make the elders believe. "Five of them. Two adults and three healthy kits. Don't tell me that your group doesn't need them!"

"And why would we lie to you?" Icewing added. "We only want to help you—all of you. Please, ask your ancestors. They'll know that we're telling the truth,"

For a moment Ivypool thought she detected a look of longing in Prowl Sleek's eyes, but a heartbeat later it was gone. "There is no point in troubling the ancestors," the elder meowed. "We have told you our decision."

"For all we know," Hunt Growl added, his lips drawn back in the beginning of a snarl, "you could be in league with those spirit-cursed foxes that have moved into these woods."

Ivypool felt her fur bristling up as a hot surge of anger thrummed through her. It took a massive effort not to leap on Hunt Growl and claw the hostile expression off his face. *If he's not careful, I'll shred his other ear!*

"How dare you!" she choked out, fury making it hard for her to speak. "We are Clan cats! Honorable cats! We would never be in league with any other animals, much less foxes!"

*Not like those mange-pelts in the barn,* she added to herself.

"We left our Clans and risked our lives to help you," Icewing snapped.

Hunt Growl was about to retort, but Prowl Sleek raised her tail and he lapsed into sullen silence.

"Whether that accusation is true or false, it makes no difference," Prowl Sleek meowed. "We cannot accept your story."

Spring Claw raked the two Clan cats with a malevolent glance. "Drive them out!" he snarled. "Now!"

Prowl Sleek turned to him. "We wildcats do not behave like that," she rebuked him. To the Clan cats she added, "We would not turn even thieves and liars out in these woods at night, but at sunrise tomorrow you must be gone."



## Chapter 29



*The three elders stalked away, leaving Ivypool and Icewing to stare at each other in the gathering twilight.*

"I don't *believe* this!" Icewing growled, working her claws in the earth of the camp floor. "Do they have bees in their brains? Why would we trek all the way up here just to tell lies? What do they think we would get out of it?"

Ivypool shared her frustration, but in a way she could see the elders' point of view. "We were too confident," she mewed after a while. "We thought they would welcome us because we had spoken to Galestar, and we knew the StormClan symbol. But they obviously think of StormClan as enemies, because they didn't stay to rescue Galestar and her kits."

Icewing seemed to calm down, letting out a long sigh. "We should have realized what story Galestar would have told the wildcats who rescued her. She felt that StormClan had betrayed her."

"I suppose we can try again in the morning to convince them," Ivypool meowed. "But if we can't—what are we going to tell Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap? What will happen to them now?"

"And what will happen to RiverClan if we haven't paid the debt?" Icewing added grimly.

Ivypool tried to sleep, knowing she would need all her strength for the journey back, but worry kept her awake. *I suppose we could wait until the kits are fit to travel, and then bring the wildcat family back here, she thought. Prowl Sleek and the others would have to believe us then. But that would take at least a moon—and what would happen to RiverClan?*

She gazed up at the sky, hoping that the warriors of StarClan would look down and help them, but the sky was dark, with only a fitful glimpse of moonlight through occasional gaps in the cloud.

The camp was silent except for the gentle gurgling of the stream; Ivypool guessed all the wildcats were asleep. Breathing in the fragrance of the forest, she was slipping into a doze when she was suddenly overwhelmed by a hot reek that swamped all other scents.

Fully awake, she sprang to her paws. "Fox!" she hissed.

At the same moment she spotted slim, wiry shapes, silent as shadows, slipping through the gap between the boulders and into the camp. A sudden gleam of moonlight caught their teeth and claws, and the malevolent glint of their eyes.

"Foxes!" Ivypool yowled. "Foxes in the camp!"

As Icewing leaped up at her side, there came another yowl from the other side of the camp, as the wildcats began to rouse. Answering snarls came from the foxes, and

before Ivypool could take another breath, the camp erupted into battle.

A huge dog fox loomed over her; Ivypool lashed out, swiping her claws across its nose, then darted away out of range. As the fox swung around to follow her, Icewing sprang up on its other side, slashing at its shoulder with a double blow from both forepaws. The fox, dark blood staining its pelt, backed off and disappeared into the turmoil.

"We make a great team!" Icewing meowed.

All over the camp, wildcats were struggling with the foxes. Ivypool spotted Strike Slash trying to drive a fox back to the camp entrance; a moment later his paws slipped and the fox pinned him down, its jaws snapping at his throat.

"No!" Ivypool screeched.

Lunging forward, she reached the fox and jumped up onto its back, stretching down to claw at the creature's eyes. The fox rolled over, trying to shake her off, and the moment's respite allowed Strike Slash to regain his paws.

"Thanks!" he gasped.

Unable to shake Ivypool off, the fox thumped down on top of her, trying to crush her under its greater weight. Ivypool thrust herself at it, trying to scramble free, while managing to rake her claws down its side. Blood welled up from the gash, and the fox, deciding it had suffered enough, fled yelping through the gap between the boulders.

"You fight well!" Strike Slash exclaimed, admiration shining in his amber eyes.

"I'm a warrior," Ivypool responded.

While the fight was going on, the cloud cover had thinned out, and now moonlight shone down on the camp. By the pale beams, among the heaving knots of battling wildcats and foxes, Ivypool spotted the kit, Hop Scratch, being driven backward by a fox until she ran into the barrier of thorns that surrounded the camp. Unable to retreat farther, she pulled back her lips into a snarl and stretched out one forepaw, claws extended. The fox ignored her attempt to defend herself and gathered itself to leap upon her.

By then, Ivypool was racing across the camp. She barreled into the fox, driving it off its paws, and flung herself on top of it, battering at its belly with her strong hind paws. The fox twisted underneath her, its jaws snapping at her neck. Ivypool felt its teeth meet in her fur, but at the same time a wildcat slammed into it from behind. The fox's grip on Ivypool suddenly loosened; with a massive heave it threw her off, shoved the wildcat out of its way, and fled.

Panting, Ivypool regained her paws and found she was facing Claw Stretch. "You saved my kit!" the wildcat gasped. "I can never thank you enough." She turned to Hop Scratch and gave the kit a gentle shake. "I told you to climb a tree and stay out of the way!"

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to help," Hop Scratch mewed in a small voice. "Thank you, Ivypool. You were great!"

By now the fighting was dying down. Wildcats were driving the remaining foxes out of the camp; they streamed between the boulders, their scent and the sound of their paw steps dying away into the night. "And don't come back!" Strike Slash



screeched, snapping at the hindquarters of the last fox as it limped between the boulders.

Ivypool looked around for Icewing and saw her bounding across the camp to join her. She had a scratch on her forehead, and blood was trickling down her face, but Ivypool couldn't see any other injuries.

"Well, that was . . . lively," Icewing remarked as she halted beside Ivypool. "Do you often have trouble with foxes?" she asked Claw Stretch.

"Not until they moved into this part of the forest about a moon ago," Claw Stretch replied. "But it's never been as bad as this. It's like they wanted to take over our camp."

Ivypool wasn't surprised. The camp was a good size, with plenty of undergrowth around the sides to make dens, and the stream to provide water.

"Are you hurt?" Claw Stretch asked, with a worried look. "Our elders are healers too. I can take you to them."

Ivypool exchanged a doubtful glance with Icewing: at their last encounter the elders had been so hostile, they might not want to help. "I'm fine," she responded. "That last fox took a bit of my fur, that's all. But you should get that scratch looked at," she added to Icewing.

"It's this way," Claw Stretch beckoned to them and led the way across the camp with Hop Scratch, now completely over her fright, bouncing along in their paw steps.

The three elders were sitting beside the stream at the point where it flowed into the camp. Spring Claw was dabbing some kind of herbal poultice onto Wish Stalk's shoulder, while Hunt Growl was examining another wildcat's paw, and more wildcats were waiting their turn.

Prowl Sleek had risen to her paws and was watching Ivypool and Icewing as they crossed the camp toward her. Eventually she paced forward a few paw steps to meet them. To Ivypool's surprise, before any cat could speak, she bowed her head to them in profound respect.

"I owe you an apology," Prowl Sleek meowed. "I saw how bravely you fought against the foxes—"

"Ivypool saved my life!" Hop Scratch squeaked, obviously not bothered at all about interrupting an elder.

"Shh!" her mother mewed, giving Hop Scratch a gentle tap on her ear with claws sheathed.

Prowl Sleek seemed unperturbed. "We owe you both a great debt," she continued. "And I have to confess that I and the other elders were wrong. No liar, no thief, would have risked so much to fight for cats who had shown no friendship. Especially when we had accused you of being in league with the very creatures you fought against."

"We couldn't just stand by and watch," Icewing meowed.

"I hope the foxes have learned their lesson, and they won't trouble you again," Ivypool added.

"Let us hope so," Prowl Sleek declared. "But whatever happens, you have earned our trust, our gratitude, and our deepest apologies, so we have decided to invite you Clan cats to witness our communication with our ancestors. If they guided you here because of a connection between your kind and ours, then you should be part of this."

Ivypool felt as though every stinging scratch, all the aches in her muscles were worth it to hear the elder's change of mind. "Thank you," she breathed out, the words coming from the bottom of her heart.

"For the remainder of the night you must rest and heal," Prowl Sleek told them. "And tomorrow we will show you how we meet with our ancestors."

Ivypool opened her eyes to see sunlight shining through the ferns where the wildcats had made nests for them. Rising to her paws, she rolled her shoulders to work the stiffness out of them, then stood tall and arched her back to stretch every muscle from her neck to her paws. She felt thoroughly rested and ready for whatever the elders would show her.

Slipping out between the fern fronds, she realized that the wildcats had allowed her to sleep as long as she needed; sunhigh was not far off. A couple of tail-lengths away from the den Icewing was grooming herself, and she looked up as Ivypool approached.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Fine," Ivypool replied, bouncing a little on her paws. She felt that she had regained all the energy she had spent in the long trek through the mountains and the battle the night before. "How is your wound?"

"Spring Claw put some stinging stuff on it," Icewing told her. "It smells good, but I don't think it's one of the herbs our medicine cats use. Before we go, I must ask him what it is."

As she was speaking, Ivypool spotted the three elders making their way across the camp toward them. Icewing rose, gave her pelt a shake, and turned to face them. "This is it," she murmured.

"Greetings," Prowl Sleek meowed. "I trust you slept well. Are you ready for us to commune with our ancestors and learn their will for you?"

The two Clan cats nodded, dipping their heads.

"Then come with us now," Hunt Growl directed.

The elders led the way between the boulders and followed a track that wound its way through the trees, leading steeply upward. Ivypool noticed that all the fox scent she picked up was fading and growing stale, as though the creatures had decided to move on to somewhere safer for them, somewhere without cats who knew how to use their teeth and claws.

Ivypool's paws were growing tired by the time they broke out of the forest onto a grassy hilltop. Chilly gusts of wind ruffled her fur, carrying sharp, clear scents. A

spring bubbled up between two boulders and went gurgling off down the hill. She exchanged a nervous glance with Icewing, wondering what was going to happen here.

"Look around," Prowl Sleek instructed the Clan cats. "This is a place where the elements combine. Clear air in the open sky, the bubbling spring and fast-running stream, and soft earth beneath our paws. Our ancestors are all around us."

The three elders sat down, close together and facing outward. "We call on our ancestors to speak through us," Spring Claw meowed. "Show us what to do with these strangecats who have arrived in our territory, and with the other wildcats they told us of."

Gradually the elders stiffened; their eyes became wide and blank. When Prowl Sleek spoke again, her voice echoed, sounding as if it came from a long way away. A shiver passed through Ivypool from ears to tail-tip, and she felt the hairs on her shoulders beginning to rise. She guessed that now an ancestor was speaking through Prowl Sleek.

"Ivypool, Icewing," the ancestor began. Even though the voice sounded strange, Ivypool thought she could detect warmth there. "We remember you from when you traveled to our lands through the Star Tree."

Aware that somehow the ancestors could see her, Ivypool lowered her head in the deepest respect; Icewing did the same.

"The lost wildcats and their newborn kits should travel here and join their kin," a second ancestor continued, speaking through Hunt Growl. "They carry the spirits of their ancestors with them. It will be a joyful homecoming."

"The family of lost cats will be accepted here." Spring Claw gave voice to a third ancestor. "But first . . . there is something that you Clan cats need to know."



## Chapter 30



*Ivypool and Icewing shared a surprised glance as they waited for the ancestors to tell them more. Maybe this would be the knowledge they needed to prevent the river running with blood.*

*Does this mean there's still time to save RiverClan?* Ivypool asked herself.

But instead the wildcat elders gradually relaxed and gave their pelts a shake. Obviously the ancestors had departed.

"Why did they leave?" Ivypool asked, bewildered. "How can we find out what we need to know if they won't tell us?"

"To learn that, you must travel to the ancestors' own land," Prowl Sleek replied.

At the very thought of trekking back to the Star Tree, Ivypool felt as though her paws were going to fall off. "Why can't you tell us?" she asked.

Prowl Sleek blinked. "Because the ancestors have not shared this with us," she told her. "What the ancestors want to reveal is something only you Clan cats need to know."

"But we're not medicine cats," Icewing protested. "We don't know how to enter the afterlife without Whistlepaw."

"You must go into the afterlife alone, but we will help you find your way," Spring Claw reassured them.

"Back to the Star Tree?" Ivypool asked.

Hunt Growl shook his head. "No," he responded. "There are many different ways into the afterlife. We will show you one much closer than that. Come, follow us."

The elders headed back down the same track they had used to reach the hilltop. Not long after the forest closed around them again, they veered off the path and padded through the trees until they reached a small clearing. In the center lay a huge hollow log; Ivypool blinked at the size of it. It must have been a magnificent tree.

The elders guided them to one end of the log. Prowl Sleek stepped forward and brushed away the dead leaves that had drifted into the entrance at one end. "Go inside," she directed the Clan cats. "Clear your minds and prepare yourselves for what will come. We will wait for you here."

Ivypool exchanged a doubtful glance with Icewing. Her pads were prickling with apprehension; for the first time she realized that she hadn't heard any birdsong or prey scurrying since she'd emerged from the trees into the clearing.

"Come on," Icewing muttered. "Don't let them see it's bothering us."

Ivypool nodded. "This is what we've come for, after all."

Together the two she-cats stepped forward and entered the tree. At first everything in front of them was dark; the only light filtered in from where they had

come in, and their own bodies were blocking most of that. Although the log was big, inside there was only just enough space for the two cats; Ivypool's fur brushed one side while on the other she was pressed against Icewing.

Ivypool closed her eyes and thought about her family in ThunderClan. She longed so much to see them again and make sure they were safe. But after a heartbeat's yearning she did as Prowl Sleek had said and tried to clear her mind.

Hardly any time passed before Ivypool could sense light shining onto her closed eyelids. She opened her eyes to see an icy radiance pouring through the end of the log that had previously been blocked. She couldn't repress a gasp of surprise.

Icewing had opened her eyes, too, and was looking equally astonished. They exchanged a glance, then stepped forward side by side.

Ivypool had expected that they would meet the wildcat ancestors as soon as they emerged from the log. Instead they were alone. The forest around them reminded her of the wilderness they had seen when they'd passed through the Star Tree with Whistlepaw and Rootspring. A chilly wind was blowing, sharper and colder than back home. The trees were larger, growing more thickly, than any in the lakeside territories or StarClan's hunting grounds. Shaggy moss covered the trunks and dangled like vines from the branches. Undergrowth cut off their vision in most directions; Ivypool could hear something large moving through it not far away. *I don't want to meet that!* she thought. *Let's get out of here.*

Straight ahead a forest trail led through the trees until it came to an end at the bank of a river. "It looks like we have to go this way," Icewing murmured.

The two cats padded forward until they reached the water's edge. Looking down, Ivypool could see huge fish circling. Icewing passed her tongue over her jaws; Ivypool hoped she wasn't thinking of hunting here.

Before she could say anything, a voice spoke behind her. "Greetings." Both Clan cats spun around; standing face-to-face with them was Galestar.

"Greetings," Ivypool and Icewing responded together, dipping their head to the spirit cat. "We hoped we would see you again."

"You are welcome to my territory," Galestar began. "I was hoping I would have the chance to see *you*. Your coming through the Star Tree stirred up feelings inside me that I thought I had put aside for good."

Ivypool exchanged a puzzled glance with Icewing. She had believed that the ancestors had called her and Icewing into their land because of Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap, but it sounded as if this was something to do with Galestar personally.

Clearly Galestar could see how bewildered the two Clan cats felt. "Ever since I met you, I have been thinking of the past," she explained. "I have been feeling the pain that I put behind me many seasons ago, after I was abandoned by Stripestar and StormClan. What am I supposed to do with it? I can't change what happened so long ago."

Silence fell, and once again Ivypool and Icewing glanced at each other. Ivypool could see her own sympathy and confusion reflected in her friend's eyes. Eventually it

was Icewing who spoke.

"Perhaps you need to face your pain," she suggested. "Once you accept what happened, instead of just trying to pretend that it's all over with, you'll probably feel better."

This time it was Galestar who looked bewildered. "How am I supposed to do that?" she asked. "All the cats who were involved are long dead. Even StormClan doesn't seem to exist anymore."

For a few heartbeats Ivypool felt there was no cat who could possibly answer that question. Then, with a gasp of astonishment, she realized the truth.

"You have to travel to StarClan and find Stripestar," she declared.

Galestar stared at her as if she thought Ivypool had bees in her brain. "I can't do that!" she exclaimed. "No cat can do that!"

"Have you even tried?" Icewing asked. "Can't you travel to StarClan as well as the wildcats' afterlife?"

Galestar was silent; Ivypool could pick up her fear-scent.

"If you can travel to StarClan and find Stripestar," Ivypool continued, "if you can bring him back, you can finally talk to him and learn why he left you and your kits to die."

"I can't . . .," Galestar began, and let her voice trail off.

"Stripestar has disappeared from StarClan because no cat remembers him," Ivypool continued. "No cat can fully remember what happened to StormClan. But *you* remember him, Galestar, and you could bring him back. And then you could force the Clans to remember what happened to StormClan. I don't know why we need to do that, but I'm sure we do. And you could get the answers you need."

Galestar listened to Ivypool's words with a fierce intensity, but when Ivypool finished speaking, she remained silent. Ivypool said nothing more to persuade her. This was a decision Galestar had to make by herself.

Eventually the spirit cat took in a deep breath and let it out as a long sigh. "Very well," she mewed. "I will go to StarClan and find Stripestar, if you will come with me."

Panic jolted through Ivypool. Glancing at Icewing, she saw that the RiverClan she-cat looked just as terrified as she felt. "We have no idea how to get to StarClan from here," Ivypool objected. "We're not medicine cats, and we're not supposed to visit StarClan at all." *Just like Bristlefrost never belonged in the Dark Forest.*

"Oh, I know *that*," Galestar responded, sounding more confident now that her decision was made. She gestured with her tail toward the wide river in front of them. "Getting there is easy. All afterlives are connected by the River of Spirits. If we float down the river, we'll eventually come to StarClan's territory. And it doesn't matter that you're not medicine cats," she added. "You're the cats who came here to help me, and that means you must be allowed to go to StarClan."

Ivypool felt worms of apprehension writhing in her belly. The river was wide, the current flowing strongly, and she had no idea how they were supposed to travel on it. "What do you think?" she asked Icewing.

The white she-cat hesitated for a long moment. "I suppose we should do it for the sake of our Clans," she mewed at last. "If River Ripple hadn't been brave enough to travel down a river, RiverClan would never have existed."

Reluctantly, Ivypool nodded, remembering the prophecy of the river of blood. Strange and twisty as their journey had been, there was no denying that it had led them here, and there seemed to be only one way out. *And didn't I come here because I was willing to risk anything to save the Clans from danger?* "Okay," she responded. "I'm up for it."

Eager now, Galestar bounded to the water's edge and hopped down onto a log that was floating where the current had scoured out a small bay under the bank. Turning back toward the Clan cats, she looked up at them expectantly.

"Come on," she meowed. "It's time to go!"





## Chapter 31



*The current seemed determined to drive* the end of the floating log into the soft earth of the riverbank. Ivypool, with Galestar at her side, pushed hard with her forepaws against the bank, while Icewing tried to guide the other end of the log out into the current. Finally the log gave a massive lurch and swung out of the little bay. Ivypool barely managed to keep her balance, digging her claws hard into the bark and struggling not to show how utterly terrified she was.

Galestar seemed much more at ease on the water, and Ivypool reflected that this was probably less frightening for Icewing, who was a RiverClan cat. But she herself could barely swim—she knew she would be no match for this torrent.

“Don’t be scared,” Icewing reassured her. “You won’t fall in, and if you do, one of us will pull you out.”

Ivypool wasn’t sure she shared Icewing’s confidence, but gradually her pounding heart settled down and she was able to look around her.

On either side of the river the land was covered in mist; occasionally the dark shapes of trees and bushes would loom out of the fog and disappear again. Here and there Ivypool could just make out the ghostly outlines of what looked like cats, slipping in and out of sight as if they were prowling through their territory.

“Who are they?” she asked Galestar, pointing with her tail at one of the misty shapes.

“They are the spirits of wildcats,” Galestar explained. “They have been forgotten, or almost forgotten. Soon they will disappear completely from the afterlife and become part of the natural world.”

Farther down the river, the mist cleared as they drifted past a distant, mountainous landscape, where birds of prey hovered over snow-covered peaks.

“That must be the territory of the Tribe of Endless Hunting!” Ivypool exclaimed. “The Tribe of Rushing Water lives in mountains just like that, so I would expect to see snow-covered mountains in their afterlife.”

“Concentrate your gaze on it,” Galestar told her, “and it will become clearer.”

Ivypool stared unblinkingly at the mountains, and let out a small meow of amazement as the snowy slopes seemed to fold themselves around her. She thought she was standing on snow, but she couldn’t feel the cold striking up through her pads.

In front of her she could see the lip of a precipice, and a waterfall cascading down into a pool below. She let out a gasp. *It’s terrifying, but so beautiful!* Then she noticed a small dark shape—a cat—trekking along a ledge about halfway up the waterfall. As she watched, it disappeared behind the falling water, and she realized it must have entered the cave where the Tribe lived. A shiver of delight passed through her; she

had never visited the Tribe in the waking world, and it was wonderful to see their home in the afterlife.

"Close your eyes when you've seen enough," Galestar instructed her.

After one more enchanted glance, Ivypool did as she said, and opened her eyes to find herself once more on the log, floating down the River of Spirits with the mountains in the distance.

Icewing, she realized, had done the same; her eyes were full of wonder as she met Ivypool's gaze. "That was splendid!" she breathed out.

As they passed other terrains—some covered in forest, some bleak moorland, islands in lakes, or meandering streams—Ivypool began to wonder wistfully if somewhere out there might be a wispy, ghostlike version of Bristlefoot. Maybe she would be almost transparent like these mostly forgotten wildcat ancestors, but still *there*. Ivypool's small hope grew stronger as they drew closer to StarClan.

Then the mist parted once again, and she spotted in the distance what looked like a dark stain on the surrounding landscape, a place where twisted trees grew out of a swamp, with bare branches or withered leaves, and pallid fungus growing from their trunks.

"The Dark Forest!" she whispered.

"I never knew that StarClan's Endless Hunting Grounds and the Dark Forest were connected by a river," Icewing was saying.

"It isn't a river that Clan cats can access," Galestar replied. "It isn't easy to travel between afterlives. The wildcats have accumulated this knowledge over generations and generations."

But Ivypool was only half-listening. A hunger woke inside her, fierce as a fox's fangs, to draw the Dark Forest toward her and enter it to look for Bristlefoot.

*Maybe she isn't truly gone. Maybe I can find her, even after all this time. . . .*

"Ivypool!" Icewing's voice was sharp, as if she understood what was going through Ivypool's mind. "You can't . . . it isn't allowed. If you enter the Dark Forest, how would you ever get out?"

"I wouldn't care," Ivypool choked out. "Not if I could find Bristlefoot."

"Bristlefoot is *gone*," Icewing's tone was brutal. "Gone from the living world, gone from the afterlife. Ivypool, you *know* this."

Ivypool shuddered. She knew that Icewing was right, but she couldn't accept it in her heart. She felt as though continuing to float down the River of Spirits would be leaving Bristlefoot behind, losing the last wisp of a chance to find her lost kit. Her limbs shook with the force of her temptation.

Then a voice seemed to speak in her mind. It was cool and quiet, and infinitely comforting.

"You have a mate, and kits, who love you. You have a Clan that respects you. You are Clan deputy. You are needed. There would be such grief and loss if you never returned."

*Could that be Bristlefrost?*

"And I have a duty," Ivypool managed to whisper, as if in response to the voice. "I must finish the quest. If there are only four cats, the debt will never be repaid."

She shuddered again and let out a long sigh. "It's okay," she mewed. "Let's get going."

As the log floated farther into the mist, Icewing rested her tail on Ivypool's shoulders. There was no need for words.

At last the mist finally cleared away, and the log nudged gently up against the riverbank, where a sunny meadow stretched out before the cats. As Ivypool leaped up onto solid ground, relishing the warmth of the sun's rays on her fur, she realized that they had reached the hunting grounds of StarClan. Overcome with wonder, she glanced around as Icewing and Galestar jumped up to join her.

A warm breeze rippled the grass and gently rustled the branches of the nearby trees. The air was full of fresh scents; Ivypool felt new energy flowing through her limbs, as if she could run all the way to the wildcats' territory and back again.

"I can't believe this!" she whispered to Icewing. "We're actually in StarClan!"

Icewing nodded. "Not many living cats see what we're seeing now. It's an enormous privilege."

Sudden doubts assailed Ivypool. She thought of how she had given way to her grief, neglected her duties, failed to be a supportive Clanmate . . . She thought of her training in the Dark Forest, and how she had killed Antpelt's spirit. "I don't feel I deserve it," she mewed, her voice shaking. "This can't be for me."

"We don't *deserve* it." Icewing's face, so often tense or worried, was suddenly flooded with happiness. "It's a gift."

Two cats were making their way toward them across the grass; starshine glimmered at their paws and around their ears. In the lead was a black-and-white tom with a long tail held high in the air; Ivypool recognized him at once from the stories the elders told. *Tallstar!* The former WindClan leader looked strong again, not the frail cat who had barely made it to the end of the Great Journey. With him was a wiry brown she-cat Ivypool had never seen before; her yellow eyes held the wisdom of many seasons.

"Greetings," Tallstar meowed as he halted in front of Ivypool and Icewing. As they bowed their heads in deepest respect, he added, "This is Windstar."

*The first leader of WindClan!* Ivypool barely knew how to express the reverence she felt for the cat from the far past who was standing in front of her.

"G-greetings," she stammered. "We're honored to be here."

Icewing bent her head low in front of the ancient leader. "It's wonderful to meet you," she murmured. "Your Clan still honors you."

"They—and all of you—are welcome," Windstar responded.

Meanwhile, a few other spirit cats headed toward them, curious to see what was going on. Ivypool's heart leaped as she recognized Mistystar.

"She looks so strong and healthy again," Icewing mewed, her eyes shining with delight. "I can't tell you how good it is to see her again."

Mistystar was followed by an enormous orange tom with white paws.

"I think that must be Thunderstar," Ivypool whispered to Icewing. "The first cat to lead ThunderClan." Her heart pounded as she dipped her head to him.

"And that's Riverstar," Icewing whispered, angling her ears at the long-furred tom who padded along in Thunderstar's paw steps. "I can't believe I'm actually seeing him. Wait till I tell my Clanmates!"

While the former Clan leaders were assembling, Ivypool noticed three kits playing together in the sunshine, pouncing on each other or leaping up to catch a butterfly that fluttered above their heads. One of them looked familiar; after a moment she realized he was Dovewing's lost Rowankit, his tabby fur fluffed up and his eyes sparkling.

Watching over them was a gray she-cat who was also familiar to Ivypool: Ferncloud, her own kin who had lost her life in the Great Battle against the cats of the Dark Forest.

"Ferncloud!" Ivypool called out warmly. Ferncloud had helped look after Ivypool when she was a kit in the nursery.

Ferncloud turned and froze for a moment in surprise, then flicked her tail in cheerful greeting and padded over to join the other cats. "Ivypool, it's so good to see you again," she meowed. "You look well! But—have you died?"

Ivypool shook her head. "No. It's a long story, why I'm here. It's good to see you, too. And I'm really glad to see Rowankit playing so happily," she added as she touched noses with her former Clanmate. "I must tell Dovewing about it as soon as I can."

As she spoke, Thunderstar let out a loud *mrow*, calling for every cat's attention. "You are welcome to StarClan, young warriors," he told Ivypool and Icewing, "but who is the cat you have brought with you? I don't recognize her."

"This is Galestar," Ivypool explained. "She and her mate once led StormClan together."

"StormClan?" Tallstar asked, looking puzzled.

Mistystar seemed equally confused. "You and your mate led a Clan *together*?"

Doubtful murmurs rose from the StarClan spirits, and they exchanged shocked glances.

"This is . . . so hard to understand," Tallstar mewed.

"Yes," Riverstar agreed. "If there was once another Clan named StormClan, why has it been so completely forgotten?"

At last Windstar spoke, flexing her claws uneasily in the grass. "Now that we speak of it, there's *something* at the back of my mind," she admitted. "I *almost*

remember two Clans combining and calling themselves StormClan. I feel something terrible must have happened."

"*How* could you all have forgotten?" Icewing asked, disbelieving.

"As the last living cat forgets a cat who has died," Windstar explained solemnly, "we in StarClan begin to forget them as well. And this would have happened much more quickly if the living Clans were determined not to talk about StormClan and Galestar." Turning to Galestar, she added, "Perhaps now it's time for your story to be remembered."

Galestar nodded, taking a deep breath. "It began when I, WindClan's leader, and Stripestar, leader of ThunderClan, began to fall in love."

Some cat drew in a sharp breath, but Galestar paid no attention as she continued. "At first we were friends, as far back as when we were apprentices and first went to Gatherings with our Clans. Then, as we grew older and became respected warriors, deputies, and finally Clan leaders, we became closer friends than ever. For a long time it was only friendship, but as we spoke together about our loyalty to our Clans, and the burdens of leadership, we began to feel something new for each other: love."

"How *could* you?" Ferncloud asked, her eyes horrified. "How did you keep it secret from your Clans?"

"It wasn't easy," Galestar confessed with a sigh. "We tried hard to put our feelings aside, because it seemed as if we had to either betray our Clans or lose each other. But then we realized there was another way: We decided to form a new Clan, one we could lead together."

"Did you have bees in your brain?" Thunderstar asked, a soft growl in his voice.

Galestar shook her head impatiently. "We knew it wasn't ideal," she responded, "and some of the cats in both Clans spoke against it. I remember that Whitebreeze and Swiftwing of my Clan, and Shadebush of ThunderClan, were particularly hostile, but finally we combined, and after some argument all the cats of ThunderClan and WindClan came to believe and trust in StormClan."

"And the other Clans?" Riverstar asked.

"Of course they didn't like it." There was a kind of tired acceptance in Galestar's voice. "In a season when prey was scarce, they blamed us; they wouldn't believe that we were short of food just like the rest of them. They grew so hostile that we decided to leave. It was a tough decision: Joining the two Clans had been one thing, but leaving the other Clans altogether was something else entirely. But we felt we had no choice.

"We went a long way, looking for a new home where we could settle. It was harder than we had ever imagined. We encountered so many dangers: predators, storms, rogue cats . . . For a while we thought about returning home, but then something happened that changed our minds. I learned that Stripestar and I were going to have kits. That was everything I'd ever dreamed of."

While she was speaking, Ivypool noticed that wispy ghost cats were beginning to materialize around her. Their features remained indistinct, but she became aware that they were listening intently to the story Galestar was telling.

“Who are these cats?” she asked.

Galestar cast a glance around her. Her eyes widened in surprise, and her fur began to bristle with anger. She let out a furious hiss, but a heartbeat later she clamped her jaws shut, clearly struggling to control herself. Eventually she let out a sad sigh.

“These are the cats of StormClan,” she explained. “These are the cats who betrayed me.”





## Chapter 32



*As Galestar spoke her accusation, the ghostly cats seemed to grow agitated. Several of them drew back, their movements suggesting they were hurt or surprised, while others pressed up against Galestar as if they were trying to reassure her. All the while their shapes were growing more solid; Ivypool could see individual features forming out of the mist.*

"Why are they reappearing now?" she asked.

It was Tallstar who replied. "It's only a guess, but now that we are starting to remember them, they're able to return to their life in StarClan."

"I'm beginning to remember watching all this unfold from StarClan," Windstar meowed. "That's Whitebreeze—and there's Swiftwing." She pointed with her tail at a gray-and-white she-cat and a black tom. They were almost completely solidified; Ivypool guessed they had formed so quickly because Galestar had spoken of them by name.

"And Rosebush," Riverstar added, angling his ears at a plump ginger tom. "I remember watching him, seeing how he would always stick a paw in any argument."

As they and others became complete StarClan cats, with the glitter of stars in their fur, Ivypool grew aware of Galestar standing stiff-legged, with her pelt bristling and her furious gaze fixed on a brown tabby tom who stared back at her, his amber eyes full of distress.

"Who's that?" Ivypool asked.

"Stripestar," Galestar hissed. "The joint leader of StormClan, my loving, honorable mate—who abandoned me!"

As Stripestar became completely solid, Ivypool hesitated for a moment, then stepped up to his side. "Where were you, before you appeared here just now?" she asked with a respectful dip of her head. Her belly was roiling with nervousness; she wasn't sure what she hoped the answer would be. "Where were all of you while you were forgotten?"

Stripestar hesitated, as if he wasn't sure how to answer. "I wasn't here," he replied, slowly, as if he was feeling his way. "I was kind of everywhere, I suppose. I was part of the wind, the grass, the trees . . . everything. I wasn't watching over the Clans like StarClan does, but I was . . . aware of them. It was sort of . . . wonderful."

Ivypool needed a moment to take all that in; then, as hope surged over her, she could barely catch her breath.

*Does that mean that something of Bristlefrost could have survived? Does it prove that the wildcats are right, and no cat is ever truly lost?*

Ivypool wanted to share this new understanding with Icewing: maybe something of both Bristlefrost and Beetlewhisker survived. Then she saw that Icewing was

gazing at Stripestar with shining eyes; maybe she too had reached this same realization.

Before Ivypool could speak, Galestar took a pace forward, coming face-to-face with Stripestar. Her pelt was bushed up so that she looked twice her size, and her lips were drawn back in a snarl.

"How *nice* for you," she hissed, "that you had something wonderful. What you *deserved* was the Dark Forest. Was our whole life together a lie? Did you abandon me and our kits so you could take control of both Clans? We were trapped in the dark, alone, and you *left* us!"

Galestar was so angry that Ivypool was afraid a real, furious fight would begin, with claws unsheathed. *Is that even possible?* she asked herself. StarClan ought to be a place of peace; she couldn't imagine what would happen if a battle broke out.

Stripestar's eyes were wide with horror. "No!" he protested. "I loved you, Galestar. I still love you, and I would never have done anything to harm you. I would have given anything to have saved you and our kits. But the storm would have swept us all away if I had stayed. I had to lead the other StormClan cats to safety. We never wanted to leave you."

Some of Galestar's hostility died away, but she still didn't look as if she believed Stripestar. Her only response was a grunt.

"We came back as soon as the storm died down," Stripestar continued, "but by then you were gone. I knew you were dead, and I couldn't bear for you to have died that way. For the rest of my life . . ." His voice broke, and he was silent for a few heartbeats, his chest heaving, before he could go on. "For the rest of my life I mourned for you and our family. All of us, all of StormClan, tried so hard to find you."

Galestar's gaze softened a little. "I didn't die," she told him.

Stripestar froze with shock; he looked like a cat made of stone. Several heartbeats passed until he could speak. "You . . . survived?" he choked out.

"I did," Galestar responded. "I was rescued by a group of wildcats, and our kits lived to grow up. If I had known where StormClan had gone, I would have looked for you, but instead . . ." She hesitated and then continued. "We settled among the tribe of wildcats. I fell in love with the cat who had led our rescuers. His name was Bound Hunt. We became mates and lived a long, happy life together."

Ivypool could see the hurt in Stripestar's eyes as Galestar told him about her new mate. Then she saw him make an effort to push the hurt away. He let out a long sigh of relief. "It's hard to know that you loved another cat," he mewed. "I loved you so much, and I never got to see my kits grow up. But I'm glad, too," he continued. "I couldn't bear the thought that you and our kits had suffered and died because I couldn't save you. None of StormClan could."

As he spoke, more wispy shapes appeared and gradually took solid form until they emerged as complete ancestral spirits of StarClan. Ivypool realized that they were all

StormClan cats. They crowded around Galestar, licking her and pressing close to her as they told her how sorry they were, and how guilty they had felt since she had been lost to them.

The StarClan cats watched, awe and confusion in their faces.

"How could we have forgotten this whole Clan?" Thunderstar asked. "This whole era of the Clans' past?"

"Maybe StarClan *wanted* to forget the shameful moment in Clan history when the Clans were so divided that they drove out two Clans," Windstar suggested. "Maybe we—StarClan ourselves—wanted to forget that these cats ever existed."

"We almost haven't existed," Stripestar pointed out. "We've been part of everything, but barely ourselves."

At his words Thunderstar stepped forward, his eyes wide with wonder. "I'm beginning to remember too," he meowed. "We did watch all this happen, but we couldn't influence the Clans enough to keep them together." He paused, and then added, "But there was much more to StormClan's history, wasn't there? More reasons their memories were buried."

No cat spoke, as StormClan and StarClan regarded each other thoughtfully.

Ivypool and Icewing glanced at each other, puzzled at first over what Thunderstar had said. Then Ivypool gradually realized that they had had to bring StormClan back to StarClan because their wisdom, their experience, would be needed soon.

Icewing too seemed to have come to the same realization. "Will your wisdom be needed to save RiverClan?" she asked hopefully.

A chill seemed to fall over the lands of StarClan, as if a cloud had covered the sun. The expressions of the spirit cats grew suddenly somber.

"I hope it will help us save *all* the Clans," Stripestar responded.

Ivypool felt as though a cold claw had gripped her heart. "*All* the Clans?" she repeated. "Oh, StarClan, what has happened while we've been gone?"

"Has the warning in Whistlepaw's vision come true?" Icewing turned to Riverstar in desperate appeal. "Has the river run red with blood, in spite of all we've been able to do?"

Riverstar did not answer directly but dipped his head and regarded Icewing with eyes filled with warmth and wisdom. "Remember all you have learned," he told her, "and hurry back to the lake. There is still time."

"Time for what?" Icewing asked.

But already the outlines of the cats around them were growing blurred, and Ivypool could make out the grassy riverbank through their shapes. StarClan's hunting grounds were growing dark.

Alarmed, she looked at Icewing to see her own fear reflected in her friend's face. *We did what StarClan wanted us to do, but at what cost? she wondered. What have we missed back home?*



## Chapter 33



*Darkness enveloped the two she-cats. For a moment Ivypool felt that she was drifting in a void, her heart ready to stop with terror. Then she picked up the scents of rotting wood and leaf-mold and felt Icewing's fur pressing against her side. She realized that they were back in the hollow log; the far end was blocked up again, and the only light trickled in from behind them. Scrambling backward, they squeezed through the open end and out into the clearing.*

The three elders were sitting a few tail-lengths away from the log, their heads close together in low-voiced conversation. Ivypool was surprised that they had waited there for so long while she and Icewing were traveling in the spirit lands. Then she remembered that when they'd entered the log, the sun had been setting, casting a reddish light over the forest; now twilight enfolded the trees. Hardly any time had passed in the living world.

As Ivypool shook the debris from the log's interior from her pelt, the elders rose and padded over to them.

"Did you find the answers you sought?" Prowl Sleek asked.

"I think so," Ivypool replied. "But there are still more questions for the future."

"And we have to be on our way now," Icewing added, her whiskers twitching with impatience.

Prowl Sleek blinked wisely. "Perhaps all will be revealed in time," she mewed.

The wildcats led the way through the forest, back to their camp. As soon as Ivypool and Icewing slid through the gap between the boulders, Strike Slash padded up to them, closely followed by his mate, Wish Stalk, and Claw Stretch, the mother wildcat who had told Ivypool that nothing was ever lost. Hop Scratch scurried after her mother.

"There you are!" Strike Slash exclaimed. "Did everything go well?"

"Everything was fine," Ivypool responded. *There's no reason to go into our fears about what's happening among the Clans.* "We're ready to go back to the lake now."

Strike Slash let out an approving purr. "Wish Stalk and I are coming with you to the cave where you left the wildcat family. We're going to bring them home."

"And me," Claw Stretch added cheerfully. "Some of my kin will look after Hop Scratch while I'm away. I want to reassure the parent wildcats that their kits will be welcome and cared for here."

"And I'll have kits to play with!" Hop Scratch squealed.

Prowl Sleek gave the kit an affectionate nuzzle. "I'm coming with you, too," she announced calmly. "I want to welcome the kits properly."

Icewing gave the elder a doubtful glance. "I'm sorry, but we need to move swiftly," she meowed. "We're needed at home."

Prowl Sleek dipped her head in acknowledgment, quite unoffended. "You don't need to worry about that," she declared. "For now you must eat and rest. We will begin our journey at dawn."

At sunhigh on the second day of their journey the cats rounded a bend in the trail and emerged above the river near the waterfall where they had left the wildcat family and the other Clan cats. They had traveled fast enough even for Icewing; far from holding them back, Prowl Sleek set the pace, padding tirelessly over rocks and through undergrowth.

All the cats were outside the cave, relaxing in the sunlight. Whistlepaw and Dovewing were sharing tongues, while Tumble Leap sat close by, his head raised alertly and his ears pricked; clearly he was on watch. Stalk Purr sprawled lazily beside him: two of her kits were sucking at her belly, while Rootspring groomed the third, chatting with the two adult wildcats between licks. Ivypool thought that the SkyClan tom looked more content than she had seen him since Bristlefrost died.

As Ivypool and the rest of her group headed down the trail toward the stepping-stones, Whistlepaw leaped to her paws and let out a joyful yowl. "They're back! Look, they're here—and they've brought more wildcats with them."

Every cat jumped up and bounded over to meet Ivypool and the others as they crossed the river. The three kits, their eyes open now, scampered around them; Rootspring held little Pounce back with his tail to stop him from diving into the water.

"It's great to see you back safely," Dovewing purred, touching noses with Ivypool. "And all these wildcats! You've done a great job."

Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap looked a little intimidated as Prowl Sleek introduced herself and the rest of the wildcats. Ivypool realized that it was because so many seasons had passed since they had seen any others of their kind, and for most of that time they had believed they were the only ones left. But soon they began to relax under the approving gazes of the other wildcats.

*And so they should,* Ivypool thought. *They're strong, intelligent, and proud. Any group of cats should be glad to have them.*

"Your kits are so beautiful!" Claw Stretch told them. "I have a kit, Hop Scratch, and I know how happy she will be to have new friends to play with."

Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr glanced at each other, clearly relieved that the wildcats were happy to accept them. "We thought we were the last of our kind," Tumble Leap meowed. "It's wonderful to meet you."

"We're really looking forward to joining you," Stalk Purr added.

Prowl Sleek motioned for all the wildcats to join together in a circle, while the Clan cats stood back. Then the elder's gaze seemed to become fixed on something a long way off.

"Ancestral spirits," she began, "we thank you for guiding our new family's paw steps to this place, and for sheltering them in the cave. We thank you too for sending your message to these Clan cats, and for their help in rescuing our family and bringing us all together."

"We thank you," the other wildcats repeated.

Prowl Sleek gave a satisfied nod. "Now," she continued, speaking to all the living cats, "before we travel back to meet the rest of the wildcat family, we must make contact with the ancestors and ask for their blessing, to find out who will be the guide for each kit."

"Do you assign mentors to train the kits when they're so young?" Dovewing asked, blinking in surprise.

The wildcats exchanged puzzled glances. "What are mentors?" Wish Stalk asked.

"In the Clans, when kits are six moons old," Ivypool explained, "they become apprentices. Our Clan leader will choose a cat to be their mentor, and they will train their apprentice in hunting and fighting and the warrior code, until the apprentice is ready to become a full warrior."

"Well, we kind of do that," Strike Slash responded. "Other cats will help the kits learn when they're older, though they aren't apprenticed to one specific cat. But a guide is a spirit cat, an ancestor who will walk beside that kit for their whole life."

"It's a wonderful thing," Tumble Leap declared. "I remember having a spirit cat who guided me when I was young, but I never even hoped that our kits would have the same, since we were cut off from our ancestors."

Ivypool noticed that Whistlepaw was looking puzzled, flexing her claws nervously until she turned to Prowl Sleek. "How are you going to reach your ancestors?" she asked. "Do you have to go to the Star Tree?"

"Or the hollow log," Ivypool added, "where Icewing and I went to talk to Galestar?"

Prowl Sleek shook her head. "For new kits, the ancestors travel to *them*. No cat is more important than a kit, because they are the future of the wildcats. In this case, meeting with the ancestors in the afterlife isn't about a place; it's about your mind."

The ceremony, Prowl Sleek told them, had to take place in the darkest part of the night. Since Dovewing, Rootspring, and Tumble Leap weren't tired from traveling, they went out to hunt, and it wasn't long before they returned laden with prey.

"We've eaten well while you were away," Rootspring told Ivypool, setting down a huge rabbit at her paws. "I don't think there can be many predators around here. The prey is running well, and they don't seem as wary as the prey back home."

As the sun was going down, every cat settled down at the mouth of the cave and feasted on the catch.

"I'm glad to see you back safely," Dovewing mewed as she shared a squirrel with Ivypool. "But I had a wonderful time here, helping Stalk Purr with the newborn kits."

It reminded me of taking care of Birchkit and Rowankit when they were first born.”

Ivypool rubbed her muzzle against her sister’s shoulder, concerned that the wildcat kits might have stirred up all Dovewing’s grief at the death of Rowankit.

“It helped me feel better,” Dovewing continued, as if she understood what Ivypool hadn’t said. “It brought back lovely memories. I know that Rowankit was his own cat. His eyes were so bright and curious, and he seemed happy all the time, even when he was sick. He enjoyed his time with us, even though it was so short.”

“He was lucky to have you, and you were lucky to have him,” Ivypool replied gently, giving her sister a tender look. “The way he left us doesn’t change that. There’s so much I have to tell you, so much that we haven’t had time to share. But Icewing and I visited StarClan, and . . . we saw Rowankit there.”

Dovewing let out a gasp of astonishment and looked at her sister with wide, wondering eyes. “Truly? Oh, how was he? Tell me about him!”

“He was just like I remember him, and so happy,” Ivypool meowed. “Not struggling at all. He was frisking around with some other kits, and Ferncloud was taking care of him.”

“Ferncloud?” Dovewing purred. “Oh, that’s a comfort! She was such a good mother when she lived in ThunderClan. I know she’ll take good care of Rowankit.”

Ivypool blinked at Dovewing, her heart overflowing with affection. Though they were separated now by Clan boundaries, she had never stopped caring for her sister.

“And someday,” she mewed softly, “you’ll rejoin him in StarClan, and get to care for him once more. I can’t imagine how happy he’ll be to see you.”

Dovewing’s eyes shone as she nodded, gently touching her cheek to Ivypool’s. Though neither cat said it, Ivypool could feel her sister’s understanding that Ivypool would never experience that with Bristlefrost. *But I’m happy for Dovewing, she thought, that she’ll get that closure. I can say that sincerely now. I’m glad I could bring her good news about Rowankit. And I’m glad that she can think about him now with love instead of pain.*

When she had eaten, Ivypool drowsed for a little, and awoke to the sense of cats moving around her. Prowl Sleek was instructing the others to sit in a circle. The moon shone down on them, and the warriors of StarClan were glittering in the sky.

Ivypool joined the circle. At first no cat spoke, so she could hear clearly the rustle of wind in the branches and the gurgling of river water as it ran over the stones. She became very conscious of the earth beneath her paws: air, water, and earth, the elements the wildcats believed their ancestors inhabited.

“Clear your minds,” Prowl Sleek mewed after a few moments. “Open a way for the ancestors.”

Ivypool closed her eyes, conscious of her breathing in and out, and tried to wipe her mind clean of all the troubles that were still pressing on her.

After a while she heard a kind of sighing all around her and opened her eyes. At first she thought that she was still sitting beside the river and the cave where Stalk



Purr had given birth. Then she realized that there were subtle differences: the trees were larger, older, and the river tossed up foam as it gushed between steeper banks.

All around her were wildcat ancestors, and two who looked like Clan cats, though Ivypool didn't recognize them. She assumed that they were Galestar's kits, though Galestar herself wasn't with them. *Perhaps she's still visiting StarClan.*

The other Clan cats murmured in surprise, while Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap widened their eyes in amazement. Even the three kits were silent, pressing themselves close to their mother, while every cat bowed their heads in respect to the ancestors.

"This is the family who has joined us," Prowl Sleek announced, gesturing with her tail to where Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr sat together with their kits. "We ask our ancestors to watch over them, and for a guide to choose each kit to watch over and nurture."

One of the spirit cats stepped forward and beckoned to the smallest kit, Pounce, the one who had failed to breathe when he was born, until Whistlepaw brought him back to life. Pounce stepped forward on wobbly legs, his eyes huge but unafraid.

The ancestral spirit gently rested her muzzle on his head. "My name is Whisper Claw," she began, "and I have watched over these wildcats for many seasons, since I was one of them in the living world. I would be honored to guide the paw steps of this kit, and to give him my name to carry on. He will now be known as Pounce Whisper."

All the wildcats purred enthusiastically, while Pounce Whisper squeaked, "Thank you!"

Then, one after another, two more spirit cats stepped forward and claimed Stretch and Hunt in the same way, naming them Stretch Blink and Hunt Leap.

"We thank you for welcoming these new kits," Prowl Sleek meowed, "and we pledge that the living wildcats too will raise the kits with all the strength and wisdom we have."

While she was speaking, two more wildcats stepped out of the crowd. As they appeared, Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap both raised their heads, their ears pricked alertly and a look of utter confusion on their faces.

"I *know* that cat," Tumble Leap murmured.

"Greetings." The cat in the lead dipped his head. "My name is Leap Growl."

"And I am Purr Roll," the second cat, at his shoulder, added. "We promised to guide you when you were new kits, and we have watched over you, but we have been unable to reach you since you were quite young, because you two living wildcats had lost touch with your kin."

"Now we will watch over you once again," Leap Growl promised.

"We are more honored than we can say," Tumble Leap meowed.

Stalk Purr bowed her head. "You bring us such happiness," she murmured.

A shiver ran through Ivypool's fur at the sight of the joy in all four cats' eyes, showing how delighted they were to meet again after so long.

As she watched the reunion, Ivypool became aware that the spirit cats were fading, and the living world was gradually reappearing around the living cats. Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr turned to the Clan cats.

"We are so grateful for everything you have done for us," Stalk Purr murmured, the wonder of the meeting with the spirits still shining in her eyes.

"Yes," Tumble Leap agreed. "We can't imagine still being held captive by that Twoleg, and how unbearable it would have been to lose our kits. At first we just hoped to have a litter of healthy kits. We didn't dare expect more."

"And now we've found a true home with others of our kind, and reconnected with our spirit ancestors," Stalk Purr mewed, "and it's all thanks to you Clan cats."

"And I must thank you, too," Prowl Sleek added. "You have brought this new family and new life to us wildcats. Our ancestor, Galestar, resented the Clans for turning their backs on her and her kits, but now all of that is in the past. Any debt we were owed by the Clans has been more than repaid, and we will always be connected now. We promise that from now on we will be allies of the Clans, joined by blood and friendship."

"We promise that, too," Rootspring spoke for all the Clan cats. "And if you ever need more from the Clan cats, you can always reach us through StarClan. Clan cats and wildcats are family now."

Ivypool noticed that the SkyClan tom was looking at the kits with a bittersweet expression in his eyes. She knew that he had formed a bond with them while they stayed beside the river. It would be hard for him to say goodbye. Ivypool felt a lump in her throat as she suddenly realized: Rootspring should have the chance to be a father. It would hurt her to see him with a new mate, and to dream of the kits he might have had with Bristlefrost instead. *But it's not about me*, she mused. *He's a young cat with his whole life ahead of him, and I can't keep using him to keep my memories of Bristlefrost alive. We both have to move on. I should support him—and I will.*

Her heart thrummed in her chest as Clan cats and wildcats bowed their heads to each other in deepest respect.

"And now," Icewing murmured, half to herself, "maybe we can go home and see what Splashtail has done to our Clans."



## Chapter 3.4



*Rootspring and Dovewing had set out to hunt at dawn, and as the sun rose, all the cats were sharing prey for the last time in the cave camp. The juicy mouse Ivypool was eating tasted dry and stale when she thought of saying goodbye to the wildcats who had become such good friends.*

She and Icewing had already explained that now that their quest was fulfilled, they had to hurry home. She could see the tension in her friends' eyes, in their rapid movements as they gulped down fresh-kill. None of them knew exactly what StarClan's warning might mean. They had believed they were going on their journey to prevent a terrible outcome for all the Clans, but had the river run with blood anyway, in spite of what they had achieved?

*What if we're too late, Ivypool thought, and we get home to find all the Clans destroyed?*

When the last scrap of prey had been devoured, Prowl Sleek gathered the wildcats together, ready to travel back to their territory. Stalk Purr and Tumble Leap hoisted Stretch Blink and Hunt Leap onto their backs, while Claw Stretch carried Pounce Whisper.

Ivypool watched Rootspring as he looked sadly after them, then met his gaze as he turned away. As clearly as if he had spoken aloud, she recognized his need to be a father someday. Her pelt prickled with guilt that she had been holding him back, and she renewed her vow of the night before. From now on she would support him.

Prowl Sleek led the way downriver toward the stepping-stones, but for a moment Tumble Leap and Stalk Purr held back.

"Thank you again for all you've done for us." Stalk Purr shivered. "Sometimes I dream that I'm back in that awful den and my kits are gone."

Tumble Leap touched his nose to her ear. "That didn't happen," he purred. "And we owe it all to you," he added to the Clan cats. "We'll never forget you."

"I hope someday we'll see each other again," Stalk Purr added.

"I hope so, too," Ivypool meowed.

At a call from Prowl Sleek the two wildcats turned, waving their tails in a last gesture of farewell, and hurried to join their kin. Ivypool watched them as they crossed the river and climbed the opposite slope, until a curve in the track hid them from sight.

While she had been helping the wildcats, she had felt a sense of purpose and vigor. But now she struggled with feelings of loss and dread, realizing that she and her friends would have to face whatever was happening in the Clans. She knew that her Clan would need her more than ever; she would have to be just as brave and determined in her position as deputy.

*Oh, Fernsong, Thriftear, Flipclaw, I hope you're all okay.*

"Come on!" Icewing's brisk mew jerked her out of her thoughts. "We need to get going."

She led the way up the hill in the direction of the lakeside territories. At the top, Ivypool paused to take a last look at the beauty that surrounded the cave where the kits were born. She remembered the wildcat belief that Bristlefrost was in the air and water and everything she could see. *I want to believe that too, she told herself. Even if I'm not sure I can.*

"But I'll always remember this place," she murmured to herself, suppressing a sigh. "And the wildcats we got to know here."

The Clan cats made good time traveling through the hills. Nothing happened to delay them, and as the sun went down, they made a temporary den among bushes beneath the overhang of a cliff. Ivypool curled up among the thick layer of dead leaves that covered the ground and fell asleep almost immediately.

She opened her eyes to find herself in the Dark Forest, at the top of a muddy slope with decaying fungus around her paws. Yowls and screeches rose from a skirmish at the bottom of the slope, where a single living cat was fighting grimly against a horde of Dark Forest cats.

*Bristlefrost!*

Ivypool charged down the slope to hurl herself into the fight at her daughter's side. But as she reached Bristlefrost, the Dark Forest dissolved, and Ivypool found herself standing beside the lake in the quiet evening light with waves lapping peacefully at her paws. Bristlefrost purred as she pressed her cheek against her mother's. Her sweet scent wreathed all around Ivypool.

"Oh, Bristlefrost, I've missed you so much," she mewed, her heart breaking all over again. "I can't stand losing you!"

"You haven't lost me." Bristlefrost blinked at her affectionately. "I'm everywhere. You only need to look for me."

As she spoke, her body and the lake and woodland around her began to fade. Finally all that Ivypool could see was her daughter's blue-green gaze, calm and full of love. Then even that disappeared, and Ivypool opened her eyes to find herself in her nest under the bushes.

The pale light of early morning crept through the branches; Ivypool guessed that the sun hadn't yet risen, but sunrise couldn't be far off. Here and there, in other leafy nests, she could see the sleeping bodies of her companions.

For a moment Ivypool thought she could still smell Bristlefrost's scent against her cheek. She had carried a sense of comfort out of the dream with her, and she clung to the last image of Bristlefrost's peaceful gaze.

Ivypool could hear the sound of running water coming from somewhere close by. Rising from her nest, she slid out of the bushes and followed the sound until she reached the bank of a stream. The sun was just creeping up over the horizon; the way that its rays struck the water, and the plants growing on the bank, reminded her a

little of the place beside the lake where she and Rootspring sometimes met to remember Bristlefrost.

Just as Rootspring's name slipped into her mind, Ivypool heard a paw step behind her and turned to see the SkyClan tom padding up to her side.

"I dreamed about Bristlefrost," he meowed. "She was fighting in the Dark Forest, and then we were meeting by the lake. She looked just like she used to. She was safe and at peace." He sighed. "It made me feel better."

*We had the same dream!*

"I dreamed about her, just like you," Ivypool responded. "And it comforted me, too. Maybe the wildcats are right to say that Bristlefrost is all around us, even if she isn't in StarClan."

As she spoke, Ivypool heard rustling on the other side of the stream, and motion caught her eye. Turning, she saw a magnificent white stag emerge from the undergrowth; it picked its way slowly up to the water's edge and lowered its head to drink. Its hide shone in the sunlight, and its antlers were like snow-covered branches tipped with frost.

Ivypool froze, half alarmed, half wondering. She had never seen a creature as huge or as spectacular as this. It must be kin to the small brown deer that she spotted now and again in the forest, and yet it was nothing like them.

The stag lifted its head and looked at her, and for a moment she was reminded of Bristlefrost's calm, contented gaze. She realized that the creature was not a threat; she could draw a relaxing breath and admire its beauty.

*Perhaps it's the most beautiful of all the new things I've seen on this journey.*

After another long look at the two cats, the stag turned away and disappeared into the trees. Ivypool's breath caught in her throat as she suddenly believed, wholeheartedly and without a doubt, that the wildcats were right: Bristlefrost was not lost. She was everywhere. Seeing the stag was a gift from Bristlefrost to her and Rootspring, to let them know that something of her still survived.

"She was here, wasn't she?" Rootspring asked as Ivypool turned to him. He looked somehow lighter, as if the burden he had carried for the last few moons had lifted.

Ivypool let out a purr of relief; she too felt lighthearted. Going on this journey had helped her ease her grief and find her purpose again, but not in the way she had imagined. She and Icewing had restored the memory of lost cats to StarClan, but still she knew that she would never see her daughter again.

*Everything has changed, she realized. The dark void of my loss has vanished. It's filled now with the beauty of the world: trees and flowers and running water and the newly opened eyes of kits. All the places where Bristlefrost can be.*

"We've learned so much from this journey," Rootspring mewed thoughtfully. "I know now that I have to change, to move on."

"Do you think you'll find a mate?" Ivypool asked hesitantly, not knowing what she wanted the answer to be.

Rootspring was silent for several heartbeats, his eyes deep with thought. "I think perhaps I will," he replied at last. "Caring for the wildcat kits taught me that I really want a family of my own. But I don't know who the mother of those kits will be."

"Not Wrenflight?"

Rootspring shook his head, half regretful, half amused. "She's an attractive she-cat," he mewed, "but to be honest, I think she's a bit of a mouse-brain. The mate I choose," he continued earnestly, "can never *replace* Bristlefrost, but she has to be *worthy* of Bristlefrost."

*That's a heavy burden for a she-cat to bear,* Ivypool thought. *She would have to be an outstanding cat.* The thought comforted her, knowing that in the end Rootspring would choose the best.

"I want that future for you, too," Ivypool told him, "even though it breaks my heart that it won't be with Bristlefrost. But I know we need to look forward, not back."

Rootspring nodded agreement. "And maybe take a break from those meetings by the lake," he responded.

A pang of loss pierced Ivypool at Rootspring's words, but she knew that he was right. They didn't need those meetings anymore. "We'll still see each other at Gatherings," she meowed.

"Of course we will." Rootspring's voice was warm. "We'll always be friends."

Mentioning Gatherings drew Ivypool's thoughts back to the Clans. She didn't know what would await them when they returned to the turmoil at home, but she was looking forward to seeing her family again. And she was sure that she could be the strong deputy—and maybe, someday, leader—that she had always dreamed of being. Because now she knew that Bristlefrost wasn't gone, and that meant everything to her.

Bristlefrost was here, and at the lake, and everywhere around them. And she would be cheering Ivypool on as she and the other Clan cats returned home to face whatever was waiting for them.

## About the Author

**ERIN HUNTER** is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. She is the author of the Warriors, Seekers, Survivors, Bravelands, and Bamboo Kingdom series. Erin lives in the UK.

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