

WARRIORS

SUPER EDITION

RIVERSTAR'S HOME



ERIN HUNTER

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WARRIORS

SUPER EDITION

RIVERSTAR'S HOME

ERIN
HUNTER

HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

Special thanks to Kate Cary

Allegiances

CATS OF THE PARK

BARFACE—short-tailed dark brown tom

RIPPLE—stocky silver tom with sleek, long thick fur and green eyes

ARC—sleek, elegant black tom with green eyes

SHINE—cream she-cat with gray splotches

DART—brown-and-white tom

FLUTTER—pale orange she-cat with bright blue eyes and a long tail

MOTH—ginger she-cat

STOAT—black-and-white tom

SQUIRREL—ginger she-cat

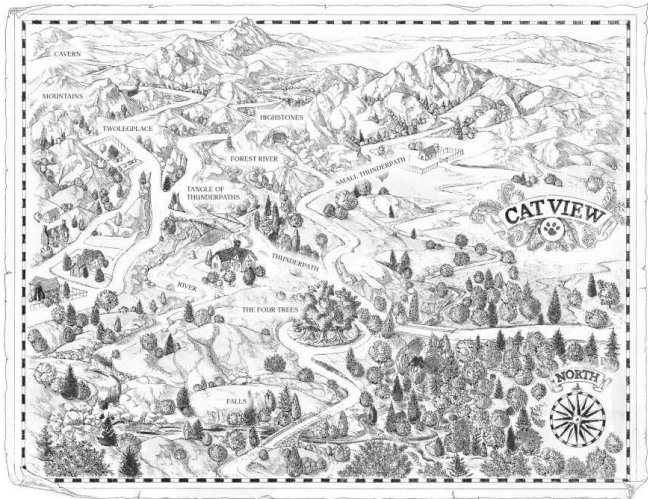
OWL—brown tom

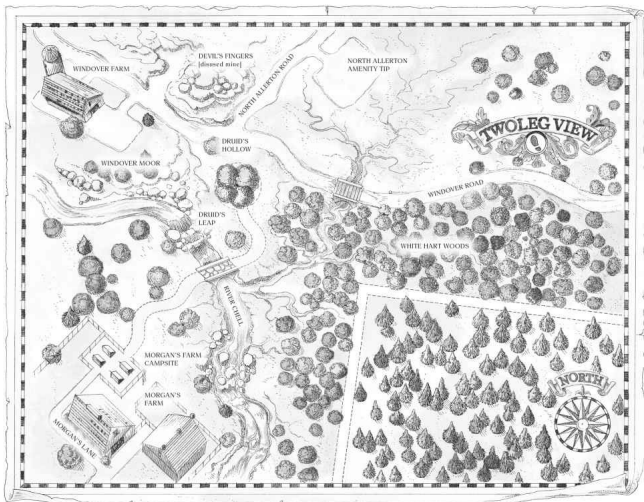
MAGDA—gray tabby she-cat

RUST—dark orange tom

MIDGE—black-and-white she-cat

Maps





Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Allegiances

Maps

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35

About the Author

Books by Erin Hunter

Back Ads

Copyright

About the Publisher



Prologue



Monsters growled like massive dogs at the gates of the park. Ripple saw them, his pelt spiking in fear. He had seen monsters before, of course—sleeping in the park’s monster camp or growling up and down the Thunderpaths that filled the Twolegplace. But never had he seen any like these: huge, hulking beasts with shining, sharp claws that spun fast enough to turn a cat into pulp.

“Get back, Ripple.” Arc moved in front of him.

Across the lawn, Shine and Dart had frozen. Behind them, Flutter stared disbelievingly.

“What are they—” Ripple didn’t get a chance to finish. With a snarl, the monsters broke into the park. Terror snaked through him and seemed to surge like twisting vines from his paws, rooting him to the ground. He flattened his ears, but that did nothing to soften the invaders’ roar.

“Move!” Arc pushed him hard, Ripple stumbled into a run, across the grass, over the flower bed, following Arc as he leaped onto the narrow wall that

ringed the park. Beyond it, the land fell away, a sheer drop to a river that churned between two tall rocks, its current moving fast. But Ripple didn't care about the water swirling below. His gaze was fixed on the monsters—on their muddied yellow pelts, on their great, round paws churning the earth, on their massive, spiked jaws ripping up the soft, green lawns. How could their eyes be so dull? Did they feel nothing as they tore apart the beautiful park?

Ripple's heart lurched. Flutter hadn't fled. She was staring at the monsters, her fur on end, her long tail no longer soft and sweeping but bushed like a thistle. Dash and Shine pressed against her, stiff with terror. "Flutter! Run!" he shrieked.

His yowl was swallowed by the monsters' roar. Fresh fear flared beneath his pelt as he saw Twolegs approaching the others. A small pack was stalking across the grass toward his friends. There was determination in their eyes as their gaze fixed on the three cats. Thick, dark webs dangled from their paws. Ripple swallowed. *They're hunting.* "Run!" he shrieked again, but again his cry was lost in the roar. Flutter, Shine, and Dart were backing toward the

Twolegs. *Look behind you!* The stench and howl of the monsters must be masking their approach. Ripple bunched his muscles, ready to leap down, but he was startled by a sharp pain in his tail. When he reared around, he saw that Arc's claws had hooked it.

"It's too dangerous!" Arc yanked him backward.

Ripple stared at Flutter, Shine, and Dart. "We can't leave them there!"

"We have no choice."

Ripple's blood ran cold as he saw defeat in his mentor's eyes. He turned and followed Arc's gaze.

The Twolegs had thrown their webs over Flutter, Shine, and Dart. They were scooping up the tangled and struggling cats. Shine thrashed in their grip. Dash flailed in panic. Ripple's breath caught as Flutter's gaze, wild with terror, flashed toward him. Her mouth opened, but the monsters drowned out her shriek as the Twoleg holding her turned and carried her away.

"We have to do something!" Ripple could hardly believe what he was seeing.

"There's nothing we *can* do." Arc's eyes were dark. "At least they're safe from the monsters now."

Ripple stared at him. "What about the Twolegs?"

“The Twolegs won’t hurt them,” Arc told him.

“How do you *know* that?” Ripple demanded. His paws shuffled restlessly on the wall. A huge part of Ripple longed to launch himself toward Flutter and the Twolegs, to do something, *anything*, to bring her back to him.

“They’ve left us food for seasons,” Arc reminded him. “And never harmed us.”

“But you’ve heard the stories,” Ripple pressed. “We all have. Cats who’ve been taken, families broken up, friends forced to live in Twoleg dens and never let out.”

Arc met Ripple’s gaze steadily. “We have to believe they’ll be okay.”

“We can’t just accept that we might never see them again!” Ripple’s heart was breaking. Flutter must be terrified. He couldn’t let her face this without him. His throat tightened. He mustn’t lose her. He loved her. She loved him. They’d planned a future together. *How can I live without her?*

Arc’s eyes glittered with alarm as a growl rumbled behind them. “Watch out!”

A monster was rolling toward them, less than a

tree-length away. It lifted its spiked yellow paw and gave a warning hiss.

Ripple leaped backward. Panic burst in his chest as his hind paw slipped. It shot downward. Rough brick scraped his leg as he wobbled and began to fall. He clawed at the top of the wall, but there was nothing to grip as the weight of his hindquarters dragged him over the edge. He was startled by a sudden glimpse of sky, which seemed to roll over him as he fell through the air, past the wall, just brushing the steep grassy bank with his hind leg before falling into the river.

He crashed through the water with such force that it knocked the breath from him. The river closed over his head, rushed into his ears, flooded his wide-open eyes. And still he kept falling, slower through the water, but deeper and deeper. Was there no riverbed to stop his fall? Would he sink forever?

He thrashed, kicking out, wild with terror, unsure which way was up, wanting to breathe, terrified of gulping the water that was pressing on every side. His mind sparked with fear as blackness pressed at the edges of his vision.

His paw struck something hard. A dark shape was

floating above him. He snatched at it desperately before it could bob out of reach, and his claws sank into heavy, sodden wood. *A log!* Light shimmered through the water around it as Ripple dragged himself upward. Striking out with his other forepaw, he gripped the log more firmly and hauled himself closer. He broke the surface like a rabbit bursting from a burrow. Relief swamped him as, gasping for air, he heaved himself out of the water and scrabbled onto the log.

It was wide enough to crouch on, rising and falling as it rode the current. Gripping tightly with every claw, Ripple coughed up water, his panic easing. But he wasn't safe. His eyes stung, and the world looked blurry and distorted. As his gaze cleared and he caught his breath, he looked back and saw the park wall shrinking into the distance. Arc was no more than a tiny shape on top, his expression impossible to read. And then Arc was gone, screened by trees as the river rounded a bend.

Ripple stared in dismay. *No!* He must get to shore before the park was too far away. He had to get home. Flutter needed him. He looked around, his belly tightening as he realized how wide the river was. The

shore was a half a tree-length away on either side.
Can I swim that far?

The current was fierce, hurrying the river faster and faster away from the park. Ripple had never swum before, and his legs were trembling, exhausted by terror. He barely had the strength to cling to the log. He knew he'd drown if he tried to swim.

Paralyzed by shock, he closed his eyes as darkness overwhelmed him.

Dreams filled Ripple's mind as he was swirled into another world. Suddenly, he was back home with Flutter, gazing up through the haze of Twoleg lights into a black, starry sky. Flutter pressed closer. The warmth of her scent and the softness of her pale orange fur soothed him. He looked at her, love filling his heart. She was so beautiful—her whiskers long and sweeping, her chin, with its soft curve, held high.

He couldn't hold the words in any longer. "Will you be my mate?" He was sure she'd say yes, and yet his heart clenched as he waited for her answer.

It came first in her eyes as she met his gaze. Love shone in them, and his heart ached with joy. "Of course I will," she mewed softly. In her eyes, he could

see the reflection of the moon and, along with it, the promise of the happy future they'd share.

He stretched his muzzle to touch the soft fur of her cheek with a sigh. "My Flutter."

He stiffened. Something was wrong. Her fur felt rough like bark. Her sweet scent had sharpened into the tang of water. He touched her pelt with his paw, shocked to find it cold and wet.

"Flutter?" He pulled away.

She was still staring back at him, but her gaze had grown sad.

"What's wrong?" He swallowed. Had she changed her mind?

Her eyes rounded with an apology. "I'm not here, Ripple," she whispered. "You'll never see me again."

Fear sliced through his chest, tearing at his heart, and he jerked himself awake. His paw was dragging through the water as the log raced downriver. He snatched it back and sat up sharply, disappointment crushing him as he saw the riverbanks. They were even farther away. Where had the river brought him? Where was it taking him? What if it grew wider and wider until there were no shores at all? He felt himself

shrink as despair took hold. Was he going to die on this log? Was he ever going to see his friends again? Was Flutter gone forever?

He realized he was holding his breath, too frightened to breathe.

The river was carrying him farther away from Flutter with every moment. *I must get home! I have to!*

Then a new, darker thought wormed its way into his mind.

He pictured the monsters tearing up the lawns and destroying the flower beds. Even if he could find his way back, would his home still be there?



Chapter 1



Day darkened into night, and somehow Ripple slept, clinging to the log. He woke with a jolt every few moments as he felt himself falling, curling his claws deeper into the wet bark, gripping tighter to the log. He hoped desperately that he could keep himself from slipping into the water before sliding back into sleep again, exhausted by fear and shock.

At last, he woke into daylight. Although the sun was barely above the horizon, the air was warm, and birds flitted along the riverbanks. The river was flowing through lush woodland now.

Ripple sat up, the log lurching beneath him. The water was choppy here, and he held on tight and looked around. He was relieved to see the shores were closer than yesterday, but they were still not so close that he could reach them.

At least the sunshine would dry his pelt, still damp from plunging into the river.

The log would find the shore soon. Perhaps there would be a bend in the river, or a spit of rocks jutting

out to catch it. Once he was on dry land, he could begin the journey home. He had no idea how far he'd traveled—it must have been a long way—but it would be simple enough to follow the river back, and even if the monsters had destroyed the park, Arc would be somewhere, and together they could track down and rescue Dart, Flutter, and Shine.

I'll find you, he promised her. She'd be waiting for him. *Don't lose hope.*

He leaned forward, scanning the river for somewhere the log might run aground, willing the river to change course or grow shallow. Surely he'd hit land soon!

In the distance he heard a rumble. He pricked his ears. Thunder? He frowned, puzzled. The sky was blue. The rumble grew to a roar, like a heavy downpour. But it wasn't raining. Was it the wind? Ripple glanced around. The trees stood stiffly along the bank, and there was barely a breeze to shake them.

Unnerved, Ripple crouched. The river had widened and flattened. The ripples had eased, and the log slid along as smoothly as a stone over ice. And yet the roaring grew louder and the river grew faster, and

Ripple realized, with a jolt of panic, that the river disappeared up ahead. Where did it go? There was no land beyond it. Only air.

Waterfall!

Ripple's pelt spiked. The log was heading straight for it, moving faster and faster. He had to steer it to shore. He reached a paw into the water and began to paddle, shifting his weight toward the water as he chopped at it furiously, trying to turn the log toward the bank. But the weight of the water falling over the edge was pulling the river after it, and Ripple was helpless against such power.

Time seemed to slow as he neared the drop. Terror choked him, and he stopped paddling. Instead he stared at the emptiness beyond the water. This moment felt like a dream. After all he'd been through, was this how his life would end?

And then, all at once, he could see over the edge. White water foamed below and roared like a monster, sending up a cloud of spray. Ripple stared in dread. The river had become a creature with jaws that could swallow him whole.

His heart seemed to burst as he felt the log tip

forward.

No! Please!

Dropping to his belly, Ripple clung on with all his might. Were there rocks below? Would he be smashed on them? Horror sparked at the back of his skull and crackled like ice along his spine, bushing his tail. He screwed up his eyes, bracing himself for the worst.

As he fell, the log tore loose from his grip and dropped beneath him, as though it wanted to find its own way of falling. Time seemed to stop for a moment, and Ripple hung in midair. Then he fell in a rush of wind before the spray enveloped him. He was falling through a cloud until, with a crash, he hit the foaming water and plunged deep beneath the surface.

The sudden silence surprised him, deadening his panic just long enough for him to realize he was still alive. Then he heard the roar and felt the churn of the water. It rolled and tugged him as though he were prey. He forced his eyes open and strained to see through the froth. Was that light? He struck out toward the clear, pale water ahead, pulling his way through the heave and swell as though he were tunneling from beneath the earth. Ignoring his panic, focusing on the

light, he hauled his way upward. His chest felt as though it was about to explode, desperate for breath, but the light grew brighter and brighter. Finally, with a gasp, he broke the surface.

Through streaming eyes he saw the log. It sat calmly in the water a tail-length away, as though it had been waiting for him. He reached for it, relief swamping him as he felt the familiar bark beneath his claws and clung on, first with one paw, then two. He had no strength to climb on top; he could only float limply behind it as the current caught it and began to guide it downstream once again.

Ripple wondered how long he could hold on. Water in his ears muffled the sound of the river; it stung his eyes and ran from his nose.

Don't let go, he told himself. His claws ached, the pain growing until they screamed for him to relax his paws. *You can do it. Just a few moments longer.* He held on. He'd survived the waterfall, hadn't he? He could do this. But the pain hardened and exhaustion begged him to give up.

And then the log stopped with a gentle thump. Ripple blinked open his eyes and saw that it had caught

among roots jutting from the riverbank. Gently, the current steered the log sideways, sweeping Ripple toward the shore. Relief washed over him as his hind paws scraped the riverbed. He let go of the log and splashed toward the bank, head underwater at first, then above it, and a moment later he was wading onto dry land.

How had he been so lucky, to make it just as his strength was giving out? He turned and glanced at the water, a wild theory occurring to him. Had the river somehow known he couldn't take any more? It seemed impossible, and yet it somehow felt true. His heart pounded with gratitude. *Thank you.* Exhausted, he stumbled across the pebbly shore and collapsed onto the grass.



Chapter 2



He didn't know how much time passed. He might have slept, or perhaps just closed his eyes long enough to catch his breath. His heart had slowed, and energy was beginning to seep back into his paws. He sat up to look around, his neck stiff as he tried to wiggle his head side to side, working out the kinks. On this shore of the river, water meadows stretched away into forest. On the far side, flower-specked pastureland rose toward a dark moor that looked like a badger's back arched against the sky. Farther downstream, rushes swallowed the shoreline and the river spilled between them, flooding reed beds.

The sun was still shining. It was beginning to slide toward the horizon, and he could see it would set beyond the moortop later, but, for now it still sat high in the sky. He knew the forest would be cooler, but Ripple was too exhausted to find his way there. Besides, the river had dropped him here. Perhaps this was where it wanted him to be. For now, at least.

And he was famished. Fear had masked his

hunger on the river, but now his belly was eager to let him know that he hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. A tail-length from the shore, scales glinted beneath the water. Ripple got to his paws and padded softly to the water's edge, surprised to see fish swimming close to the surface. They looked fat and sluggish in the sunshine. They would make easy prey.

Slowly, Ripple waded into the river, keeping downstream the same way he'd keep downwind from a mouse. The fish wouldn't know he was there until he was close enough to strike.

Back in the park, being soaked to the skin had made Ripple uncomfortable. After his adventure on the log, though, Ripple no longer feared the water's slickness. As he stalked through the shallows, the river tugged at his underside and trailed his tail behind him like waterweed. There were four fish, moving gently around each other, their silver scales bright beneath the surface.

Excited, Ripple bunched his muscles and leaped for the closest, but the river sucked at his paws, unbalancing him. Even before he hit the water, the fish had darted clear. By the time he splashed clumsily

down where they'd been basking, they were already a tail-length away, still keeping to the shallows as though taunting him to try again.

He paused and caught his breath, watching the fish grow sluggish once more. Had they forgotten so quickly that they were being hunted? Ripple licked his lips. They were fast, but they were mouse-brained. He crept toward them. He wouldn't jump this time. Even shallow water slowed him down. Instead he'd get so close, they'd have no chance of escape. He waded nearer, slowing with every paw step until he was less than a tail-length away. The fish hung in the flowing water as though snagged on the riverbed. *They don't even know I'm here!*

Ripple lashed out with a forepaw, moving it so quickly that no land prey could have outrun his grasp. It smacked the surface, sending up spray that stung his eyes. He blinked quickly, but the fish had already darted away. Frustration flared in his belly, and he waded after them, not caring this time about his approach. He was going to catch one. He hurled himself at them, flinging out his paws to grasp anything within reach. But his claws hooked nothing, and he

belly flopped into the water and bumped down onto the riverbed.

Mouse dung! Ripple straightened and shook out his fur. The river current swirled around his legs. The fish were swimming away, downstream, as though bored of teasing him. “Slippery mouse-hearts!” he hissed after them.

An amused snort sounded from the riverbank.

Ripple turned, stiffening. His pelt grew hot with embarrassment as he saw a black-and-white she-cat.

Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “You’re a natural,” she teased.

Ripple padded to the shore, scowling at her. “It’s my first time,” he growled.

“That’s obvious,” the she-cat purred, clearly enjoying his discomfort.

He dropped his gaze. He’d have been amused too if he’d seen another cat hunting so clumsily. “I guess I did look kind of bee-brained,” he conceded.

“Not bee-brained,” she mewed kindly. “Just inexperienced.”

Ripple sat down heavily. “Why does the water make the fish faster when it makes *me* slower?” he

asked the she-cat.

“If you had scales instead of fur, you’d move faster,” she told him. “But then you’d be a lizard, not a cat. And who wants to be a lizard instead of a cat?” She padded to meet him, stopping a tail-length away. “You’re new around here, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m Night.” She looked at him expectantly. “And you are?”

“Ri—” He paused.

Night looked strong and sure of herself. He could see every muscle beneath her sleek black fur, and her short, compact name seemed to accentuate her strength even more.

Ripple. His own name seemed suddenly trivial. It had suited him in the park, where he’d lived happily day after day, unworried by anything but the weather. But now he’d lost his home and the cats he’d been close to. He’d survived a perilous journey on a river and nearly died.

Night tipped her head to one side curiously. “You have a name, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Ripple came to a decision. His name here

would honor the river that had carried him to this place. “*River Ripple*,” he told her.

She dipped her head politely. “Welcome, *River Ripple*.”

River Ripple felt a shimmer of pleasure at the sound of his new name. And he was pleased by her friendly tone. “Is it okay if I stay for a while?” he asked. “I didn’t mean to come here, but this is where I’ve landed, and I need to rest. I’ll head home soon.”

Night blinked in surprise. “It’s not up to me where you stay or go,” she mewed. “Just don’t steal other cats’ prey while you’re here.”

Other cats? River Ripple looked around. “Are there *many* cats here?”

“A few,” Night told him. “But we keep our whiskers out of each other’s business.”

“Why?” River Ripple felt puzzled. The park cats had relished each other’s company. And it had been good to know there were friends he could rely on. Cats got sick; dogs escaped their Twolegs and ran wild; aggressive cats from beyond the park wall would try to start fights. “Wouldn’t it be better to help each other out?” he asked Night.

Night looked at him quizzically. "Help?" she mewed. "What with?"

River Ripple was surprised by her genuine bemusement. It must be peaceful here for her to feel so confident, and he felt a fresh wave of gratitude to the river for steering the log aground on this stretch of shore. But perhaps he was underestimating her. She might just be so good at hunting and fighting that she needed no help. He wished he were as competent. As though agreeing, his belly gave a loud rumble of hunger.

Night glanced at it.

"Is there anything to hunt here apart from fish?" River Ripple asked her.

"Sure." Night nodded toward what looked like reed beds. "There are frogs over there, and birds. But fish have the most meat. And there are plenty of them in the river."

"Yeah." River Ripple looked ruefully at the water. He could see a spotted fish moving in the shallows, its tail working as it browsed along the muddy riverbed. "I just wish they were easier to catch."

"I can show you how to hunt them, if you like."

Night's offer took River Ripple by surprise. "I thought cats around here kept their whiskers out of each other's business?"

"We do," she told him. "But it feels wrong to let another cat go hungry when I'm full." She nodded toward the brown fish. "I can teach you how to catch that trout," she mewed.

River Ripple blinked at her gratefully. "Please."

"Let me fetch my brother," Night told him and then turned to hop up the bank and disappeared into the long grass at the top.

She has a brother. Night wasn't as much of a loner as she appeared.

The greenleaf sunshine was beating down on River Ripple's pelt, warming his silver fur. He wondered whether to wade back into the water to cool himself, but he was frightened of disturbing the trout, which was still stirring up the mud in the nearby shallows. Instead he padded a little way along the shore, to where bulrushes clustered at the water's edge, sending shadows across the riverbank. Sheltering in it, River Ripple waited.

It wasn't long before Night returned, a black-and-

white tom following. His markings were different, and he was larger than Night, his forehead broader, but he had the same steady yellow gaze that met River Ripple's with a reassuring blink.

"I'm Mist," he mewed.

"I'm River Ripple."

"That's an impressive name." Amusement twinkled for a moment in Mist's eyes.

River Ripple gave a small purr, guessing what the tom was thinking. "I suppose you mean *for a cat who can't fish*."

Mist purred. "I wasn't going to say it."

Night slid past her brother. "We're going to fix that," she mewed. "Every cat should know how to fish." She looked up toward the moor. "Unless you'd rather live up there."

River Ripple followed her gaze. The heather was purple with flowers, but there were barely any trees there, and to River Ripple the wide-open space so close to the sky seemed bleak. The chatter of the river and the gentle swishing of the reed beds seemed far more inviting.

"The first rule of fishing," Night told him, padding

into the shallows. “Don’t chase. Wait.” She crouched so that her belly touched the riverbed and water streamed around her flanks. She stretched a forepaw ahead of her, into the faster current where the riverbed dipped, then grew still.

Mist tilted his head slightly. River Ripple followed the tom’s gaze and saw, beneath the rippling surface of the river, a silver fish swimming downriver. If it kept its course, it would pass close to Night’s outstretched claw.

“Is that a trout too?” he whispered.

“It’s a young carp,” Mist told him.

“How do you know?”

“Shape,” Mist breathed back. “And it’s alone rather than in a shoal.”

River Ripple had never thought about fish before, but now he realized that they must be as different and individual as birds. He watched, hardly breathing, as the fish neared Night.

The black-and-white she-cat hadn’t moved her gaze and was tracking the carp as it approached. River Ripple was impressed by her self-control, but also wondered if she was going to miss her chance. The

fish was moving fast, like light flashing beneath the surface. Then, suddenly, Night snatched at it. The rest of her body barely moved. Only after she'd hooked the carp on her sharp claws did she straighten. Water streamed from her pelt as she stood up and arched her neck to clamp her jaws around the carp's spine.

It flapped desperately for a moment, then fell still.

Night turned and padded to the shore. She dropped the carp at River Ripple's paws.

He licked his lips. It was as large as a rat and gleamed in the sunshine.

"Do you want to try catching one?" Night asked him.

River Ripple stared admiringly at the carp. "I'd rather eat this."

"You can," she told him. "But your reactions will be sharper if you hunt while you're hungry, and your own catch will taste sweeter."

River Ripple's belly still ached with longing. But he padded toward the shallows and waded in.

He crouched where Night had been, stretching out a paw as Night had done, then looked hopefully upstream. From this angle, his muzzle just above the

surface, it was hard to see through the sunshine flashing on the ripples. How had Night seen the carp approaching? Could she *smell* it? He opened his mouth and let the river's scents bathe his tongue. Water, weed, grass, mud, and Night's scent lingered in the air with Mist's. How could River Ripple possibly detect a fish through such a jumble? He focused once more on scanning the surface. Perhaps the carp's fin had made a ripple that gave it away.

"Here comes one!" Mist warned from the shore.

Where? Ripple pricked his ears eagerly and stretched his neck, glimpsing a brown spotted fish like the one he'd seen earlier. A trout?

"Quick!" Night urged from the riverbank as the trout slid past him.

River Ripple reached for the fish, his heart quickening with excitement, but by the time he'd curled his claws to grab it, the trout was gone, speeding away downstream.

"You need to be faster!" Mist called.

River Ripple sat up and glared at the black-and-white tom. "I *know*," he grunted crossly.

Night padded to the edge of the water. "You

weren't ready," she told him.

"How could I be?" River Ripple's fur twitched in frustration. "I couldn't see it until it was nearly on me." He frowned. "The sun's so bright on the water."

"Sunshine makes it harder to see the fish," Night agreed. "But it also makes it harder for the fish to see you. That trout wouldn't have known you were there until you hooked it. You just need to be quicker."

Mist nodded. "Moving a paw through water is slower than moving it through the air," he mewed. "Just react a moment sooner than you would if you were trying to hook a mouse."

River Ripple's shoulders sagged. He was too hungry to learn.

"You'll get better at it," Night encouraged. "It just takes practice."

"I can't even see the fish coming," he insisted. "Their silver scales make them look like water."

"Scales glimmer differently from water," Night told him. "You'll see it soon. For now, we'll tell you when one is heading toward you," Night promised.

Feeling clumsy and hopeless, River Ripple crouched down in the water once more. He stretched

out his paw and waited. Butterflies fluttered in his belly. Could a cat raised in a park ever learn to fish? Frightened he'd make a fool of himself again, he watched the glittering surface, his ears pricked for Night's signal.

A buzzard was circling above the moor; he could hear a distant chaffinch while the bulrushes shimmered at the edge of his vision. But he forced his attention to stay on the water. The river cooled him, streaming through his fur, lapping his pelt like a mother's tongue. He felt suddenly calm, his heart slowing as he focused on the river until he was only aware of the small stretch of water flowing toward him.

He saw something gleam beneath the water, a smoothness that stood out from the restless glitter of sunshine on the surface. Something else gleamed beside it, and in front of it, and behind it.

"There's a shoal of loaches approaching you," Night called.

River Ripple was already watching the shapes darting toward him like a swarm of mice. He held still, seeing them swim closer, relieved that there was more than one fish to snatch at. Surely, he'd catch *one*.

React a moment quicker. He repeated Mist's advice, waiting for the shoal to reach him, trying to judge the timing. A moment before he would have normally reacted, he thrust his paw toward the shoal, thrilled as he felt his claws hook flesh.

I've caught one! He dragged his catch toward him, lifting it from the water, ready to give the killing bite. But, as he jerked his head down, the loach flapped in his paw. With a strength that surprised him, it lifted free of his claws and thrashed in the air for a moment. *No!* Fumbling in panic, River Ripple grabbed at it, trying to hook it again. But it flipped clear of his grasp and fell with a *plop* back into the river.

His heart sank with it. Shame burned his pelt. He hardly dared look at Night and Mist but forced himself to face them. He was surprised to find them heading along the shore. Had they given up on him?

"I'll try again!" he called after them. "I'll get it right this time, I promise." He didn't want to be abandoned like this. Not with them thinking he was no better than a clumsy kit.

Night glanced back at him. "I should have started you somewhere easier."

“Easier?” He hesitated. What could be easier than the shallow water at the edge of the river?

“Follow us.” Night beckoned him to follow with a flick of her tail.

River Ripple felt a rush of relief. She seemed to want him to succeed.

Mist trotted at her heels, carrying the carp his sister had caught. The scent of it made River Ripple’s belly growl hungrily. He’d never tasted fish before, but he was so hungry that he’d eat anything right now. He hurried after the two cats hopefully. Perhaps he’d do better this time.

They ducked around the clump of reeds to where a short stretch of rocks edged the river. Pausing, Night turned and hopped into the water.

River Ripple blinked in surprise as she landed. Her paws didn’t sink into the shallows. Instead they seemed to rest on the surface, disturbing it a little but not falling through. Was she walking on water?

She leaped again, farther across the river. But still she didn’t sink.

Mist jumped after her.

He didn’t sink either!

“Why don’t you fall in?” River Ripple didn’t hide his surprise. Was this a trick all river cats knew? Would they be able to teach him?

Night stopped in the middle and blinked back at him, her eyes bright with amusement. But she didn’t explain.

River Ripple sniffed at the water where the two cats had waded in.

“Can you see them?” she asked him.

River Ripple frowned. *Them?* Then he saw it—a stone just beneath the surface. He purred with delight. “You’re standing on stones!”

“They go all the way to the far shore,” Night told him.

As if to show him, Mist hopped past her, crossing the river. He landed on the riverbank and laid the carp on the pebbles. “They’re useful if you want to cross the river without getting your pelt wet,” he mewed.

“And they’re useful to fish from,” Night added.

River Ripple hopped onto the first stone and scanned the water to find the next before he jumped onto it. The river rushed through the gaps between, channeled by the current. His ears twitched excitedly.

The fish would be channeled too! And they'd be easier to spot from up here. His heart lifted, Surely, even *he* could catch one. "Is this where you meant when you said you'd show me somewhere easier to fish?"

"Yes," she mewed. "But you'll need to react quicker than lightning. The water runs even faster between the stones."

"Be careful not to fall in," Mist warned. "The current's strong."

But River Ripple was hardly listening. He was scanning the river as it swirled past his paws. A small fish darted past, then another and another. His gaze tracked upstream. A carp was heading toward him. It was aiming for the gap beside his stepping stone. He tensed, his breath catching with excitement.

The carp quickened, sped on by the current, until it was darting through the water faster than a bird in the sky. River Ripple followed it with his gaze, every hair on his pelt bristling eagerly. A moment before it reached the rock and slid through the gap beside him, River Ripple thrust his paw into the water. Triumph surged through his pelt as he grasped it and, hooking his claws deep into its flank, plucked it into the air.

It was heavier than he expected, and his heart lurched as it flapped in his paw. But he gripped tight, ready this time for the struggle. Drawing it up to his mouth, he bit into it. It flapped around his jaws as his teeth sank into the sweet, cool flesh. He knew at once he'd missed the spine, and he winced as it struggled on and fought in his grip.

Night looked pleased with him and hopped, one stone at a time, to the far shore. He followed, watching her paws closely to see where the rocks were. The carp struggled between his jaws. Its tail slapped his cheek while its head battered his muzzle. But he wasn't going to let go until he reached shore. It was still flapping furiously as he landed beside Night. Only then did he drop it. Seeing now where its spine must be, he leaned down and nipped it neatly behind its head. At last it lay still.

He glanced at Night self-consciously. "It wasn't the neatest catch."

"The first catch never is." Night pushed the carp toward him. "Let's eat."

As she and Mist began to share the fish she'd caught earlier, River Ripple gave a purr. Even if he

hadn't killed it cleanly this time, he'd *caught* it. He'd do better next time, he promised himself.

Fluffing out his wet pelt proudly, River Ripple took a bite, delighted by the taste. It lived up to the promise of his killing bite. The flavor was more delicate than the food the Twolegs left in the park, the flesh softer than the nuggets he was used to crunching. It was delicious! He ate the head and tore the flesh from the carp's spine. Then he pushed the rest toward Night. "I can't eat a whole fish by myself." It wasn't true—he was terribly hungry—but it seemed the least he could do when Night had taught him so much.

She pushed it back. "I think you need it more than we do," she told him. She sat up and began to wash her face while Mist carried on eating.

Gratefully, River Ripple gulped down the rest of the carp. When the last morsel was gone, he sat up and licked his lips and dipped his head to the river. *Thanks*, he told it silently. Then he blinked at Night. "Thank you."

"I'm glad I could help." She half closed her eyes appreciatively. "No cat should watch another cat starve."

Crickets were chirruping in the meadow behind them, and the sunshine was losing some of its fierceness. River Ripple felt a sudden rush of happiness. After his adventure, he was grateful to be on safe ground and in friendly company.

Mist finished his meal and sat up. "I like carp," he mewed. "But I prefer trout."

"It tastes different?" River Ripple was astonished. He'd assumed fish from the same river would taste the same.

"Of course." Mist looked surprised. "A sparrow tastes different from a pigeon, and a mouse tastes different from a vole."

"I guess," River Ripple mewed. "I've never really thought about it."

"Was that the first fish you've ever eaten?" Night asked in surprise.

"There aren't any fish in the park," River Ripple told her.

"Is that where you're from?" Mist asked.

River Ripple nodded, feeling a sudden pang of loss. "I grew up there."

"I've never heard of it," Night mewed. "Is it far

away?”

“It took a day to get here,” River Ripple explained.

“Did you walk?” Mist asked.

“I rode on a log in the river.”

Mist blinked. “Why didn’t you swim?”

Swim? What a strange question. Did she mean like a fish? “I can’t,” River Ripple mewed. He tipped his head to one side. “Can you?”

“Of course,” Mist told him. “A cat who can’t swim shouldn’t live beside a river.”

“You can’t swim?” Night’s eyes had widened in alarm. “I wouldn’t have taken you on the stepping stones if I’d known that,” she mewed. “What if you’d fallen in?”

“I spent a day riding on a log and didn’t fall in,” River Ripple told her. The truth was, he’d been so eager to prove he could catch a fish on the stepping stones that he hadn’t even thought about falling in the river.

“*Why* did you travel here?” Mist asked suddenly.

“I had no choice,” River Ripple explained. “I fell into the river and grabbed the log because it was all I could reach. I had to stay on it because I couldn’t get

to shore.”

“That sounds scary,” Mist mewed.

“It was,” River Ripple confessed.

Night was gazing at him anxiously. “Your kin must be worried about you.”

“I don’t have any kin,” River Ripple explained. “But my parkmates will be worried.” His heart ached, longing for gentle Moth, plucky Stoat, and the warmth of Squirrel, his nestmate when he was a kit. And most of all . . . “And Flutter.”

“Was she your mate?” Mist asked.

“She was going to be.” River Ripple felt a lump forming in his throat. Talking about himself was making him sad. “Do you two have mates?”

Night looked away.

Mist rested his tail over hers. “She doesn’t like to talk about it,” he told River Ripple.

“I *had* a mate,” Night mewed huskily. “And kits.”

River Ripple wondered if the river had carried them away. But he didn’t ask. He didn’t want to upset Night after she’d been so kind. Instead he changed the subject. “Have you always lived beside the river?”

“Pretty much,” Mist told him. “It’s peaceful and

there's good hunting here." He paused, then added, "Were you thinking of staying?"

Night looked up. "He said he'll head home soon."

Mist blinked at him. "I guess you want to be back on familiar territory with your parkmates. And you must miss Flutter."

River Ripple looked away. "The park was destroyed," he mewed sadly. "And Twolegs took Flutter away." Panic seized his gut as he remembered the webbing that fell on Flutter, Dart, and Shine. Were they okay? Were the Twolegs treating them kindly? River Ripple desperately wished he could know where they were right then.

Night met his gaze sympathetically. "You've had a bad time," she mewed.

"I guess." River Ripple's throat tightened.

"If the park's destroyed and your mate is gone," Mist ventured, "why do you want to go back?"

"I want to find them."

"Do you think you will be able to?"

"I hope so." What if he couldn't? River Ripple's pelt twitched nervously.

Night got her paws. "Perhaps it's best to let them

go,” she mewed softly. “The park sounds like a dangerous place. And it’ll be a long journey to make by yourself. You’d be safer staying here.”

Her advice sounded wise. But how could he follow it? He’d left a whole life behind—a life he’d loved. Whatever had happened to the park, his friends would be waiting for him. He’d rest here for a few days and then find his way back, no matter what it took.



Chapter 3



River Ripple pushed his way through the thick grass choking the riverbank. The days were growing shorter, and the soft chill that hung in the air would soon bring a promise of frost. But the plants around the river were still lush, making the most of the last warm days. River Ripple had been used to the clipped lawns and sculpted flower beds of the park, and the unruly riverbanks had seemed strange at first. But over the past moon he'd come to like the wildness here. Tall grass and sprawling hedges promised plenty of prey, and he could have hunted mice in fields nearby. But River Ripple had developed a taste for fish.

The sun was sinking toward the moortop, and River Ripple was heading for the den he'd made among the reed beds. It meant crossing the stepping stones and following the path between the bulrushes to his nest. He slept there at night, and occasionally during the day, and it was dry and secluded. He meditated there too, closing his eyes each morning as Arc had taught him and letting his mind find a few

moments of stillness away from his thoughts, which chattered like the river for the rest of the day. It was one of the rituals, along with his dawn wash—*paws first, then face and ears . . . chest and belly next*—that he'd kept from his life in the park.

From his jaws hung a bunch of drooping watermint stems. He liked to keep a stock of them for bellyaches. He was getting better at fishing . . . which meant he sometimes overate. Building up his strength, he told himself, though he knew he was just indulging in the pleasure of eating sweet, fresh food after a lifetime of dry Twoleg nuggets. He'd discovered that nibbling a little watermint after meals helped him digest and that eating two or three stalks could ease the worst indigestion.

He nosed his way out of the tall grass and padded over the shore to the stepping stones. They showed now above the surface of the river, after one rainless day had followed another. The low water had made it easier for River Ripple to practice his fishing skills, but Night had warned him he'd have to learn to swim eventually. The coming moons would bring not only cold, but also rain; the river would swell and grow

angry, and the stepping stones would disappear along with the shallows. These shores would become perilous for a cat who couldn't swim. The thought unnerved River Ripple, but he'd be gone by then, wouldn't he?

He hopped over the stones gingerly. A twinge of pain tugged in his leg with every jump, but he ignored it and slid among the reeds, finding the path and following it to his den. His small clearing had begun to feel strangely like home, and he enjoyed having a place to call his own. But he wasn't staying. He'd already made several attempts to return to the park. That was how he'd injured his leg. A few days after meeting Night and Mist, he'd followed the river upstream as far as the waterfall. But getting beyond it had proved harder than he'd imagined. He hadn't realized how steep the cliffs were where the river tumbled over the edge. They towered several tree-lengths above him, and even when he'd found a possible route upward, following a series of ledges, he'd come to a dead end where overhanging rocks blocked his way. He'd tried to claw his way past them, but that took more strength than he possessed. Eventually he'd lost his grip and

fallen, slithering and bumping clumsily back down to the ground and jarring his hind leg so badly that he'd had to rest for a whole day before limping back to his makeshift nest.

Another time, still limping, he'd tried to find his way around the waterfall, but as soon as he strayed from the river, he became lost and found himself wandering in woods and meadows tainted with fox and badger scents. How could he fight off a dog pack or a hungry fox, alone and with an injured leg? He guessed it would be at least another moon until it was fully healed. Until then, rather than risk being killed trying to get back to the park, he'd decided to make himself as comfortable as possible beside the river.

He just hoped that Flutter wouldn't give up hope, that she knew he'd come for her eventually. He missed her, especially in the long evenings when the sun would set beyond the moor and the river would turn golden. *Flutter would love it here.* Sometimes he'd dream she was with him, that they were watching the sunset together, and he imagined them making a life for themselves here, in the reed bed, just the two of them.

Feeling the familiar pang of loss as he thought of her now, he laid the watermint beside his reed den. The moss he'd left there earlier was dry, and he picked it up and began to tuck it into his nest, ready for the night.

The reeds rustled behind him, and he turned, recognizing Night's scent. She and Mist made their dens on the other side of the river. From time to time he'd visit them, or they'd visit him. And sometimes they'd hunt, the three of them together. Now Night pushed her way, dripping, through the reed wall of River Ripple's small clearing and dropped a fat chub on the matted reeds that lined the ground. She shook out her pelt, splattering him with river water. She'd clearly swum here.

"Why don't you use the path?" River Ripple twitched her spray from his whiskers.

"Swimming's quicker," she mewed.

"The water must be cold."

"Not as cold as it will be in a moon or two," she told him. "You get used to it."

River Ripple looked past her, expecting her brother to follow her through the reeds. "Where's Mist?"

“He’s got bellyache,” Night told him.

“Too many loaches?” River Ripple asked.

“He ate one that had been lying out all night,” she mewed. “I told him it was risky, but he was too hungry to wait until we’d hunted.”

“Take this to him.” River Ripple pushed some of the watermint toward her.

She sniffed it cautiously. “Why?”

“If he eats it, his belly will feel better.”

“Are you sure?” She looked skeptical.

“It works for me,” River Ripple promised her.

“Okay.” She blinked at him. “Thanks.” She nodded toward the chub. “That’s for you.”

“Really?” River Ripple licked his lips. He’d never caught a chub—they only swam in the deepest part of the river—but he’d shared one with Mist before, and he knew how succulent their flesh was. “Thanks.”

She sat down and peered past him into his den. “It looks cozy,” she commented. “Mist and I prefer to sleep in the open, but when the really cold weather comes, we’ll have to find more sheltered dens.”

“There are plenty of small clearings among the reeds.” River Ripple nodded toward his small den. “Or

you could have this one when I'm gone."

Her gaze sharpened. "You're still determined to leave?"

River Ripple raised his chin. "I have to get back to Flutter."

"I thought you were worried about running into foxes and dogs," she mewed.

"I'll be okay when my leg's better," he told her. "Once it's strong again, I'll be able to outrun anything. I used to be one of the fastest cats in the park."

"What if a fox corners you?"

"I can fight." River Ripple lifted his chin, but his fur prickled nervously. Did she want to unnerve him? Perhaps she was trying to discourage him from leaving. Though they didn't see each other every day, the three cats had grown used to each other. River Ripple liked having Night and Mist around. They eased his loneliness even more than the river's chatter. Perhaps they liked having him around too.

Night began to wash her face. "It's not a journey I'd like to make."

"Have you ever left the river?"

"We've wandered a bit, but we always come

back.”

Did she know a route he could use? “Have you ever made it past the waterfall?” He looked at her hopefully.

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t even try.” She glanced at his injured hind leg. She’d been the one to fish for him when he’d returned too injured to hunt properly. “You could head over the moor. But I’m not sure how you’d find your way back to the river.”

River Ripple’s tail twitched uneasily. He privately wished that Night and Mist would offer to travel with him and help him find a way home. He’d even thought about asking. But what if they *did* meet dogs or foxes, or something even more dangerous? If Mist and Night were hurt—or worse, killed—trying to help him, he’d never forgive himself.

Night twisted her head around and gnawed at a flea near her tail. River Ripple gazed past the reeds toward the setting sun. Perhaps he could use it as a guide. *No*. He’d ventured far enough onto the moor to know that it was a maze of pathways through high walls of heather. He wouldn’t even be able to see the sun once he was deep among them. It would be easy

to get lost.

Night stood up suddenly. "I'd better go," she mewed, heading toward the reed wall.

River Ripple dipped his head. He was disappointed she was leaving so soon, but he'd known she wouldn't stay long. Even though she was friendly, she was a loner at heart. "Thanks again for the fish," he called after her as she disappeared through the reeds.

The chill hardened over the next few days. The leaves began to die back, surrendering at last to the coming cold. Rain was on its way.

He reached the shore, the wind ruffling his fur as he waded into the water. Rain began to spatter his face. Crouching in the current as Night had taught him, he felt his injured hind leg aching from the cold. Clearly it hadn't fully healed yet.

He liked fishing here. The riverbed was sandy, and it was easier to see fish than it was over the pebbly reaches farther downstream. The river streamed around him, gently pulling his fur, and he felt his heart slow. Fishing the shallows had become like meditation, and he enjoyed the peaceful moments spent waiting.

He pricked his ears as he spotted a carp swimming

at him. It steered toward deeper water, but River Ripple didn't move. He knew that in the middle of the river the current was too fast for fish to browse for food. His patience was rewarded when the carp drifted back in the direction of the shallows, gliding lazily above the riverbed, unaware he was there.

His paw was already stretched, ready to snatch as soon as it neared. He held his breath while it swam closer, bunching his muscles, ready to strike.

"What do you think you're doing?" An irritated mew sounded from the shore.

River Ripple ignored it. The carp was so close, he wasn't going to miss his chance.

"I asked you what you're doing!" The mew grew angrier.

River Ripple held his attention on the carp. As it came within reach, he hooked his claws into its belly and thrust his muzzle forward to snap its spine between his jaws. It thrashed for a moment, then fell still.

Pleased, River Ripple turned toward the shore.

A bedraggled-looking tom was glaring at him.

River Ripple waded from the water and dropped

the carp onto the sand. The rain was falling steadily now. He narrowed his eyes against it and flicked his gaze over the tom. His pelt was unkempt, matted at the base of his tail, and he was skinny—so skinny there seemed hardly any flesh on his bones. *This cat must be even worse at hunting than he is at grooming.* “You nearly made me lose my catch,” River Ripple mewed.

The tom’s eyes glittered. “What are you doing here?”

River Ripple met his gaze. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I mean what are you doing *here*?” the tom snapped. “This is my stretch of the river.”

River Ripple shook out his pelt. “I wasn’t aware the river belonged to any cat,” he told the tom.

“It belongs to me.”

“And who exactly are you?”

“My name’s Hawk,” the tom growled. “You’d better remember it.”

“Since you’re only the third cat I’ve met since I’ve been here, I’m unlikely to forget.” Why was this cat so hostile? There were plenty of fish in the river. In the park, cats didn’t care about territory. There was

enough for every cat and they were happy to share. “What right do you have to tell me where I can hunt?”

“I marked this territory,” Hawk snarled. “It’s mine.”

“I can’t smell your scent,” River Ripple told him. “If a cat’s scent could claim territory, then the whole of this riverbank would be mine. How can you say this land is yours? I’ve never even seen you before.”

“You’ve been lucky,” Hawk growled.

Is that a threat? River Ripple flicked his tail dismissively. “There’s plenty of fish for everyone.” *Although it’s hard to believe you’ve managed to catch much of it.* Hawk looked half-starved. Perhaps if River Ripple helped him out, Hawk would be less hostile. Arc had always told him that it was better to cure a wound than let it fester. River Ripple decided to try. He turned and waded back into the river, where a shoal of loaches was heading for the shallows. Ducking down quickly, he waited for it to wash past.

He could see out of the corner of his eye the tom glowering at him. *Do one thing at a time.* He remembered Arc’s advice. *Do it slowly. Do it completely.* He focused on the loaches. The shoal was

heading for him fast, and he hoped the swirl of his paw steps hadn't colored the water with his scent. The loaches didn't seem to notice. They kept their course, heading straight toward him. His heart quickened. The shoal would have to split around him. That would give him two chances.

He tensed as it swept nearer.

"They're *my* prey!" Hawk yowled from the shore.

River Ripple took no notice. As the shoal divided to pass him, he jabbed out his paw, hooked a fish and flung it onto the shore, then jerked around to hook another. He tossed it after the first and hopped from the water.

The loaches flapped on the shore, and before they could wriggle their way to the water's edge, he gave each one a killing bite.

"Here." He flicked one toward Hawk with his claw.

The scrawny tom pawed it back. "I don't want your help," he snapped. "I want you off my territory."

River Ripple's heart sank. Until now, the peacefulness of the river had made the separation from his home and his friends bearable. Was he going

to have to fight to keep hunting rights in a place he'd never chosen to be? Perhaps he should try to find his way home now rather than wait for his leg to fully heal. Wearily, he bent to gather up the fish he'd caught, nipping them by the tails.

Hawk watched, his eyes sparkling nastily, as River Ripple padded past him. He was trying hard not to limp despite the twinge in his injured leg. If the aggressive tom was going to cause trouble, River Ripple wanted to appear strong enough to face him.

The rain grew heavier through the night and carried on the next day. River Ripple decided to hunt from the stepping stones for a while. He wasn't going to be bullied by Hawk, but Arc had taught him that doing nothing could sometimes be more effective than doing something. If he stayed away from the shallows for a few days, Hawk might grow bored and move on.

The rain fell all day, and by the next the river was washing over the stones. A day later and it had risen so much that River Ripple didn't dare set paw on them. He'd have to return to the shallows—if they were still shallows—and fish there.

He trekked through the pouring rain and was

relieved to find that, although the river had overflowed the shore, it had created new fishable shallows closer to the bushes. They were the only shallows left along this stretch of the river, and River Ripple was pleased that Hawk wasn't here.

The current was stronger than usual, as though it wanted to drag him out to the deeper water churning in the middle. River Ripple shimmied his paws a little further into the sandy riverbed to anchor himself and scanned the water ahead.

"I thought I told you to stay away from my shore."

River Ripple's heart sank as he heard Hawk's snarl. He turned his head and glanced at the tom, then turned back to his fishing. He wasn't going to do anything to provoke a fight. But Hawk stopped at the water's edge and began watching the river. *Is he fishing?* River Ripple turned to examine the water.

Minnows were swarming beneath the surface. River Ripple had never fished for minnows—they were too small to bother with—but Hawk splashed his paw into the water, sending the tiny fish scattering. *Perhaps he isn't fishing. Perhaps he's trying to scare them away.* Hawk watched the water again. He

seemed to be waiting for the minnows to regroup. When they did, he splashed his paw in again, and again they scattered. If Hawk *was* fishing, he was doing it very clumsily.

Hawk's gaze flashed angrily toward River Ripple and River Ripple looked away. He didn't want to embarrass the tom, but when Hawk turned back to the minnows, River Ripple watched him again. He was curious to see just how inept this cat was. Hawk tried again and again to hook one of the tiny fish. *He's lucky they're so mouse-brained*, River Ripple thought as the minnows continued to regroup at the water's edge. *Or perhaps they realize he's more mouse-brained than they are.*

After a few more attempts, Hawk finally managed to grab one. He snatched it eagerly from the water and dropped it on the shore, but the minnow was barely bigger than a blade of grass.

He might as well hunt crickets and leave the river to me, River Ripple thought. Hawk clearly needed help. Surely, being embarrassed was better than starving. "I can show you how to catch bigger fish," he offered.

“I don’t want help,” Hawk growled. “I want you to go away.” The tom glared at him with undisguised hostility, but he didn’t arch his back or bush his tail, and River Ripple realized that he was too scared to fight. *I bet he’s scared of the water, too.*

River Ripple turned his attention back to the river. Hawk could glare all he liked; the tom wasn’t going to stop River Ripple from hunting here.

He caught a fat chub and a carp, and as he waded from the river, he wondered whether to leave one for the skinny tom. Hawk was still snatching at minnows at the water’s edge. He’d caught two. They were tiny. But River Ripple didn’t share his catch. *He’d probably be insulted.*

The next day, River Ripple ignored the tom again, even when Hawk spat at him and flexed his claws. By now River Ripple was sure that, even with an injured leg, he could easily beat Hawk in a fight. But there was no pleasure left in fishing. The river was swollen and angry, and Hawk was always there, snarling and hissing every time he saw River Ripple.

“You’d better not come here again,” the tom threatened as River Ripple left one afternoon, carrying

a large trout between his jaws.

River Ripple ignored him as usual.

The next morning, the cold nearly persuaded River Ripple to stay in his den. Rain was falling again, and the reeds around his clearing drooped as though finally defeated by the weather. The river had swallowed half of River Ripple's clearing. He should visit Night and Mist and find a new den on their side of the river, clear of the water's reach. But, with the stepping stones deep underwater now, he was stranded on this side.

His belly growled hungrily, and River Ripple reluctantly hauled himself from the warmth of his nest and followed the path toward the shallows. Even they would be cold today, and growing more uncomfortable to fish in each day until leaf-bare passed. He hoped the weather had kept Hawk away. He wasn't in the mood to be glared at again. Then he wondered how long he'd be able to fish there. Not because of that bee-brained fleabag, but because what remained of the shallows might soon be flooded too. He should catch as much fish as he could today, just in case.

As he neared the shallows and began to nose his way through the bushes, unfamiliar scents touched his

nose. These were stronger than Hawk's, and unmistakable. River Ripple's hackles lifted and he padded onto the shore.

Three toms lined up beside Hawk. The scrawny rogue had brought friends. They were bigger than Hawk. One—a brown tabby—was as broad as a dog. The other two—one ginger, one black—were even bulkier, with wide brows and tattered ear tips.

Hawk lifted his tail, clearly pleased with himself. "I warned you to stay away," he growled at River Ripple.

River Ripple fought the urge to back up. He uncurled his claws. If they wanted to fight, he'd face them head-on.

Hawk hung back while the three toms padded toward River Ripple.

The mangy coward was going to let the others fight for him.

"Mouse-heart," River Ripple hissed. Anger pulsed through him. "You're scared of water. You can't catch more than a minnow, and now you bring friends to fight for you. Call yourself a cat?"

"At least I *have* friends," Hawk snarled. "I'm not a loner like you."

“I have friends!” River Ripple spat back.

“Where are they?”

River Ripple hesitated. Night and Mist were on the other side of the river. He *thought* they were friends, but would they fight for him? *Arc* would, and so would Shine and Dart. Flutter, too, if she had to. But his parkmates were so far away, they couldn’t come even if he yowled for help. A chill ran through his fur as he realized how alone he was here.

“Why don’t you leave me in peace?” he snapped.

“Because we want to teach you what happens to trespassers.” Hawk signaled to the brown tabby with a nod.

River Ripple stiffened, narrowing his eyes defensively as the tabby took a step toward him. The tabby bared sharp yellow teeth. River Ripple’s heart quickened. He was aware of the blood pulsing beneath his pelt as he braced himself for the tabby’s attack.

The tabby lunged. River Ripple tried to sidestep, but he was too slow. The tom swiped River Ripple’s cheek with a blow so hefty it sent him reeling away, shock throbbing through his body.

Why was this happening? Why couldn’t the river

stay the peaceful place it had been when he'd landed?

As he struggled to keep his balance, the ginger tom leaped at him and thumped into him with outstretched paws. Swinging a deft blow at River Ripple, the ginger tom sliced his ear. As River Ripple ducked away, the black tom barreled into his flank. River Ripple grunted, the wind knocked out of him, unprepared as the ginger tom hurled himself onto River Ripple's back and dragged him onto the ground. River Ripple gasped as the tom flipped him onto his spine and churned his belly with his hind claws.

The tom's hot breath bathed River Ripple's muzzle. "Hawk doesn't want you here," he snarled.

Pain seared River Ripple's belly. Fur clouded the air. He'd fought once in his life, as a young tom, with a silver tabby from beyond the park wall. But Arc had come to his rescue, and Dart and Shine had raced to help. They'd chased the tabby away, and River Ripple had escaped with only a scratch behind the ear. Arc had taught him a few fighting moves after that, but River Ripple had forgotten them.

Thrumming with pain, River Ripple writhed from beneath the tabby and scrambled to his paws, but the

other toms were waiting. The ginger tom clawed River Ripple's ears while the black one clamped his jaws around River Ripple's tail.

River Ripple swallowed back a shriek. *Don't panic.* He had to get away from these cats. He saw Hawk watching from beside the water, looking triumphant, and anger welled in him so fiercely that it drowned out every other thought. This wasn't fair! None of this was fair! He lashed out, landing a powerful blow on the ginger tom's cheek. Then he shoved the black tom backward so viciously that his hind paws splashed into the shallows. River Ripple tasted blood in his mouth, but he didn't care. As the tabby came at him, River Ripple spun and kicked out with his hind legs, knocking his attacker off his paws.

The ginger tom rushed toward him again. This time he clawed River Ripple's muzzle so savagely that his blood sprayed the ground. River Ripple screeched and hit back, but the tom blocked his blow with a paw.

The tabby leaped up as the ginger tom lashed out with another vicious swipe.

The black tom was shaking water from his hind legs. "Let me have him," he hissed to the others.

The ginger tom stepped back, and the tabby watched as the black tom padded slowly toward River Ripple. His eyes glittered with menace.

River Ripple swallowed. *He wants to kill me.* His injured hind paw throbbed. His fresh wounds burned like fire. He forced his legs not to tremble, and as the black tom neared, he closed his eyes and struck out, batting at the rogue desperately with both paws. He swiped nothing but empty air until he felt claws slash his nose. The pain felt like fire on top of fire. Then blows began to rain down on him from every direction as the three toms closed in on him. Helpless and terrified, River Ripple dropped to his belly and covered his ears with his paws.

“I think that’s enough.” Hawk’s sneer sounded far away, and at last the clawing stopped.

Twitching with pain, River Ripple slowly lifted his head. The toms were watching him, their eyes sparkling with satisfaction.

Hawk swished his thin tail. “Are you going to stay away this time?” he asked River Ripple.

River Ripple gave a grunt.

“It’s up to you,” Hawk sneered. “But now you

know what will happen if you don't." Signaling with a flick of his tail for the others to follow, the scrawny tom padded away.

As the four cats disappeared into the bushes, River Ripple struggled to his paws. Shock numbed his pain just enough for him to limp back along the path to his clearing, where he collapsed into his nest. He closed his eyes, knowing he should clean his wounds, but he couldn't find the will.

Thoughts swirled in his mind. The memories of everything that had happened to him since the monsters invaded the park seemed to collapse like falling rocks on top of him, and he lay helpless beneath the weight of his misery. Why had he endured so much? He'd done nothing to deserve it. One paw slip, that was all. And now he was here, alone and wounded in a place where cats were prepared to hurt each other rather than share. What if he never found his way home? Would this be his life now? His heart yearned for Flutter to come and touch her warm nose to his ear, take care of his wounds, and purr quietly that he would be okay.

He drifted into unconsciousness, dreaming about

her, and when he woke to find himself still alone, his misery deepened. But he knew he must take care of his wounds. He forced himself to sit up and wash. His body ached, and the scratches around his muzzle and ears and along his flanks stung with every movement. At last he finished and, exhausted by the effort, closed his eyes again and sought relief in sleep.

When he woke, he was hungry. Rain still pattered on his den and it was daylight. He didn't know how long he'd been asleep. Quite a while, he guessed, by the gnaw in his belly. It reassured him. Arc used to say, *A hungry cat is a healthy cat*. He must have fought off any infection in his wounds. But they hurt fiercely and he didn't want to move. Still, he needed to hunt.

He couldn't return to the shallows. He never wanted to face so many cats ever again. The river was lapping further into his clearing. He should try to find higher ground for a nest. But the thought made him weary. Why was everything so hard? Wincing with every step, he followed the path through the reeds to where it opened out and headed away from the river. The only place to hunt now was among the

hedgerows inland.

The endless rain seemed to have washed the grass and bushes clean of prey-scents. Following a line of spindly brambles, River Ripple scanned the shadows beneath for some sign of life. The pain of his injuries stung as though bees were swarming in his fur. His paws tangled in the long wet grass, and he tripped more than once, growling to himself at his awkwardness.

He spied a vole and lunged for it, but his movements were so stiff, it escaped before he could reach it. A bird fluttered in the hedge above him, but there was no way he could stretch that high when every hair on his pelt seemed to burn with pain. Anxiety wormed in his belly. If he couldn't hunt, he couldn't eat, and if he couldn't eat, he wouldn't recover from his wounds. Was he going to die here, far from his friends? Flutter would never know what had happened to him. He would end his life alone.

He stopped at the end of the hedgerow. Rain dripped from his ears and whiskers. His pelt clung to him, sodden and matted with blood, and he shivered as cold reached through his fur.

Then he saw, beyond the meadow, a row of Twoleg dens, dark against the horizon.

There'll be food there.

And yet he hesitated. The last time he'd seen Twolegs, they were carrying Flutter, Dart, and Shine away wrapped in webs. He didn't want to meet the same fate.

But Twolegs had fed him for seasons in the park. If they'd fed him then, they might feed him now. He was scared and cold and too weak to hunt. Did he really have any other choice?



Chapter 4



River Ripple stopped at the edge of a small, neat garden edged by a wooden fence. The rain had stopped at last, and afternoon sunshine was streaming from behind the clouds. As he heaved himself up the fence and settled on top, he narrowed his eyes. The garden seemed to belong to a single Twoleg den. It had a narrow stretch of lawn in the middle, edged by flower beds, and a shiny frame like a miniature version of the ones River Ripple had seen in the park, where Twoleg kits used to climb and dangle as though pretending to be squirrels.

River Ripple tasted the air. He didn't want to stray onto a kittypet's territory when he was so injured. But he couldn't smell any cat-scent, and there was no sign of movement, so he dropped down from the fence and crept through the shrubs, peeking out across the grass toward the Twoleg den. There was a Twoleg inside. He could see it through one of the clear openings in the wall and make out the smaller heads of Twoleg kits bobbing excitedly around it. Then an opening clattered

and swung wide, and the Twoleg kits exploded out onto the lawn.

There were two of them, and River Ripple could see that they were carrying something in their hands. The scent of it touched his nose at once. It smelled like park food, and he watched hungrily as the Twoleg kits gnawed at it, hurrying across the grass. As they reached the shiny frame, they dropped their meal onto the ground and swung up the bars, chattering like birds to each other.

River Ripple looked at the dropped food and licked his lips. The smell was mouthwatering. It took every scrap of his self-control not to dart out and grab it while it lay next to the frame. He couldn't risk being caught like Flutter, Dart, and Shine. But he wanted to steal it before the Twoleg kits picked it up again.

His muscles grew stiff waiting for the Twoleg kits to go back inside. His scratches were stinging. Perhaps he should move on to another nest. There might be more food elsewhere he could reach. But the smell of *this* food kept him fixed to the spot. He couldn't take his eyes off it. It lay on the damp ground, white and spongy, something brown and meaty-

smelling spilling from the middle. The sun disappeared as fresh clouds swallowed it, and rain began to fall again. It was a light shower, but the Twoleg kits shrieked, slithered from the frame, and raced for the shelter of their den.

River Ripple's heart soared. They'd left their food behind. This felt like the first piece of luck he'd had since the river had washed him ashore. As the Twoleg opening slammed shut, he crept out from the bushes. He glanced toward the den, checking that no Twoleg faces showed in the clear openings. Lights had flicked on inside and spilled across the lawn, slicing through the shadows that were beginning to swathe the garden. River Ripple hadn't realized it had gotten so late. Night was falling. The growing darkness would help hide his movement. He crept across the grass, keeping low, excitement pressing in his chest as he neared the abandoned food. He opened his mouth eagerly, and the smell bathed his tongue as he reached it. His belly felt hollow with hunger, and he gobbled down the first piece, hardly chewing the soggy white sponge, relishing the thin strips of meat stuck to it. He ate the second piece almost as quickly and then lapped at the crumbs

on the ground. When there was nothing left, he sat up and swiped his tongue around his jaws.

His belly was still grumbling, his hunger not yet satiated. There were tall cans beside the den entrance. He knew from the park that there might be Twoleg scraps inside. But the cans were covered. He'd have to pry them open to see inside. It would be dangerous to scavenge so near the den when light still shone from the clear openings. He'd wait until the Twolegs slept. If they were like the Twolegs around the park, he knew the lights would disappear before moonhigh when the Twolegs went to their nests.

He padded softly to the flower bed closest to the cans and nosed his way between the bushes. Crouching in the darkness, he waited. He felt anxious in this strange new place. *But I've been in so many strange new places these past moons*, he reminded himself. He lifted his chin. He'd learned to ride the river, he'd learned to fish, and he'd survived an attack by rogues. Perhaps it was the food in his belly that was giving him courage, but he felt suddenly bold. This was just a setback. He was going to find more food. He was going to eat whatever he could scavenge until he

was strong enough to make his way back to the park. Then he would find Flutter and tell her about his adventures.

After a while, River Ripple became skilled at climbing onto one can and heaving the lid off the other before reaching inside to pull out whatever food he could find. Night after night he returned to the Twoleg den, checking around the shiny frame for scraps left by the Twoleg kits before rummaging through the cans. During the day he rested in his nest. Even when the river dropped, he didn't return to the shallows. He stayed away from the stepping stones. Why get his fur wet or risk another fight when he could get food here? He wasn't proud of scavenging. But it was easy, and the Twolegs didn't seem to care. Besides, it was just temporary. Just until his injuries healed and he could return home.

Then came the night when he found nuggets left in a bowl beside the entrance of the Twoleg den. Like the park Twolegs, these Twolegs had decided to feed visitors. River Ripple felt a burst of gratitude as he ducked down beside the bowl and began to eat. The dry food wasn't as tasty as the fish Night had taught

him to hunt, but he didn't have to crouch in a cold river to catch it. River Ripple shuddered now as he pictured sitting in the shallows, the water washing around him. The long, warm days had shortened and grown chilly. The river must be freezing by now. He wondered if Night and Mist still hunted there, or whether they kept their pelts dry in the cold seasons and hunted land prey instead.

He hadn't seen the two loners since he'd been attacked, and he wondered if Hawk and his friends had chased Night and Mist off too. He hoped they were okay. *Perhaps I should visit them.* He hesitated. *No.* His run-in with Hawk had made him wary of the whole riverbank. He'd even wondered about making a den closer to the Twolegplace. It would save him the long trek to the garden each night. But he'd grown attached to his nest in his small clearing. It had become his safe place in what felt like an unsafe world.

He looked up from the bowl at the towering den, the roof cutting into the star-specked sky. Perhaps these Twolegs would provide an even safer home. His scratches were healing, but his wrenched leg was still

a little weak. This could be the sanctuary he needed to recover before he returned home to the park.

He didn't want to become a kittypet. And yet he returned to eat the Twoleg nuggets, night after night, until he hardly thought about the river at all. Indeed, it was a surprise when the reeds at the edge of his clearing shivered one day and Night nosed her way through, dripping from the river.

She looked at him. "We haven't seen you around for a while."

He blinked back at her. "Did you *look* for me?" Although he felt relieved to see her, he felt bitter that she hadn't visited him sooner, when his injuries from the beating Hawk's friends had given him were still fresh. His scratches and bites had scabbed over now and were itchy rather than painful, and his fur had begun to grow back where it had been torn out.

Night's eyes still rounded with alarm as she noticed his wounds. "What happened?"

"Hawk decided the shallows were his territory," River Ripple told her. "He got some friends to beat me up."

Night's pelt spiked. "Why, that nasty little tick," she

hissed. "I told Mist we should have chased him off the moment he turned up. I could tell he was trouble."

"Did he try to attack you for fishing, too?"

"He wouldn't dare." Night's eyes blazed angrily.

River Ripple wondered why the rogues hadn't given Night and Mist the same treatment they'd given him. Perhaps because there were two of them. Once more, he felt a pang at being alone. "So you haven't run into his friends, then?"

"We picked up some unfamiliar scents," she mewed. "But that was a quarter moon ago. They must have moved on."

"And Hawk?" River Ripple pricked his ears.

"He must have moved on too," Night told him. She frowned. "If he claimed your fishing rights, where have you been hunting?"

"Here and there." He looked away. He didn't want to admit he'd been taking food from Twolegs.

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Then her nose twitched. "You smell like Twoleg food."

He lifted his gaze guiltily. Then he puffed out his chest. Night was his friend, but she hadn't been there when it mattered. He'd been alone when Hawk and

his toughs had attacked. And if she'd visited sooner, he wouldn't have been driven to look for Twoleg food in the first place. "If they want to give it away, I might as well take it. It's not like the river is my real home. I don't *have* to eat fish."

Night leaned closer. "But it's dangerous to depend on Twolegs," she warned. "You should start fishing again. Hawk and his friends have left." She looked around his clearing. "If you're worried, you could make your nest closer to ours."

"I'm fine," River Ripple mewed curtly. "Besides, I'll be gone soon."

Night must have heard the sullenness in his mew. "I'm sorry I didn't check on you earlier," she mewed. "We went for a wander when the river was running high. I never guessed you might be in trouble."

"I'm not anymore."

Night blinked at him anxiously. "You could be if you keep taking from Twolegs." She twitched her tail. "Come fishing with me. I can start teaching you how to swim, if you like, so you're not so dependent on the shallows."

"There's no need." River Ripple didn't like the idea

of swimming even when the water was warm. Now that it was cold, he had no wish to get soaked up to his ears. And a cat couldn't drown from eating Twoleg food. "I'm not planning on staying," he reminded Night. "I'll only scavenge until I'm strong enough to get home."

Night sat back on her haunches, her eyes dark. "It's up to you," she mewed softly. "Just be careful."

The night seemed darker than usual. Clouds hid the stars and covered the moon, and the Twoleg den was wrapped in silence as River Ripple scaled the fence and jumped down into the flower bed.

He nosed his way beneath a shrub and padded onto the grass. He hesitated. The entrance to the Twoleg den was open. He scanned the lawn and borders. Nothing moved. The Twolegs weren't outside. And the den was dark. Had they gone away? He crossed the stretch of stone outside the entrance, looking for his bowl of nuggets. *It isn't there!*

His heart sank. He'd have to find food somewhere else. He turned away, then paused. His nose twitched as he caught the scent of nuggets. His eyes widened. That was strange; he couldn't *see* his bowl. He turned

back, tasting the air. The scent was wafting from the dark entrance of the Twoleg den. His heart quickened. The nuggets were *inside*.

Dare he creep inside and eat? There was no sign of Twolegs. And the den was dark. He crept to the opening and peered inside. A shiny floor stretched into shadow. Was that his bowl at the far end?

He hesitated. He'd never set paw inside a Twoleg den before. But he was hungry. He gazed into the shadows and licked his lips. *If I hear anything, I'll run.* After all, the entrance was wide open. He could easily escape.

He crept warily inside, listening closely and keeping his mouth open to taste the air. Staying low, he crossed the floor. It felt slippery beneath his paws. His ears twitched; it was strange how the smooth walls of the den muffled the air outside while reflecting back the sound of his breath, as though he were in an underwater cave.

The meaty scent of the nuggets bathed his tongue, and his mouth watered in anticipation. He stopped beside the bowl and looked around, checking one more time for any threat. Nothing moved. He began to eat.

The crunch of the nuggets as he bit into them echoed in the strange space. His heart quickened. Surely the Twolegs would hear him? But the food tasted so good, and he couldn't see any signs of them. He went on eating, losing himself in the taste, happy to fill his belly. He noticed another bowl a tail-length away, this one filled with water. These Twolegs were thoughtful. His mouth was dry from the nuggets, and he padded over to it and lapped up a mouthful. The taste sent a jolt of alarm through him. He spat out the water and backed away. It didn't taste of rain or mud. There was no flavor of grass or stone in it, only the sharp tang of something he didn't recognize. He wrinkled his nose. Did Twolegs drink this? Was it safe for cats? He decided to go back to the nuggets and wait until he was back at the river to quench his thirst.

He turned, his pelt prickling uneasily. Something had changed. He froze. The strange cave had grown darker. River Ripple could only see shadow where the entrance had been. His heart lurched. It had disappeared. He backed away, feeling for the safety of a corner of the den, pressing himself against the cold, hard walls as he arched his back. He let out a low

yowl, then hissed. If anything came near him, he would shred it.

Suddenly, the wall began to open beside him. Light spilled in. Panic shrilled through River Ripple's fur as he saw a Twoleg kit. It sidled into the room and blinked at him, eyes shining. It stared for a moment, then darted away squealing, back where it had come from.

River Ripple's heart was pounding. Blood roared in his ears. It had been a trap. And he'd walked right into it. He'd been captured like Flutter, Dart, and Shine. His mind reeled. Why did the Twolegs want to keep him?

He could hear Twoleg chatter beyond the new opening. River Ripple backed away, keeping as far from it as possible, dread pressing like a stone in his belly. He watched the strip of light flooding through the gap the kit had left, alert for shadows or paw steps. But no one came. Time crept slowly until, at last, the light went out and the Twolegs fell silent.

Through the long night, River Ripple crouched and watched. By dawn, he was exhausted by fear. As sunlight began to filter through the clear wall above him, he felt his eyes grow heavy as he finally gave in to sleep.

In the following days, River Ripple grew used to the sights and sounds of the Twoleg den. He learned to recognize the scents of the different Twolegs who came through the inner opening to leave fresh nuggets. He even became accustomed to the water, so that its sharp tang no longer tasted strange. And when the wind grew strong enough outside to lash rain against the walls of the Twoleg den, he grew used to feeling warm and dry in the stillness inside.

Eventually, he stopped hissing at the Twolegs and relaxed enough to wonder what was beyond the inner opening. When the Twolegs went to their nests high inside the den, he'd creep through it and explore the strangeness beyond. The floors were swathed in a soft, springy layer that felt like short, tough grass beneath his paws. There were large objects where Twolegs sat or leaned or lounged as though they were uncomfortable on the floor.

He came to know every muzzle-length of the den and to trust that the Twolegs meant him no harm. On the day one of the kits touched him, he stiffened, but then relaxed when its smooth paw ran along his spine. He could feel kindness in its touch and lifted his tail to

show his pleasure, surprised to find himself enjoying the sensation.

The days grew shorter, and River Ripple found himself feeling less lonely than he had since leaving the park. The Twolegs seemed to take turns stroking him or scratching behind his ears. The kits dangled colorful things for him to snatch at and chase after. It seemed to make them happy, but as the days passed, he found himself more and more quickly out of breath, until he preferred to rest in the warmest spots in the den than to play. He especially liked the nest they brought him, which was softer than any moss-lined hollow. It was always warm, and the only time he got his fur wet was when he washed.

It was a pleasant life, and yet his dreams always took him back to the river. In his sleep he grabbed fish as they washed between the stepping stones, and he crouched in the shallows, his pelt warmed by the sun, while Night and Mist waited on the riverbank. He woke missing the sound of the river and the scent of fresh air and trees. The longing tugged in his belly deep into the day, until food or the Twolegs distracted him. He was surprised his dreams never took him to the

park, and he realized one morning that he hadn't thought about Flutter for a long time. The realization sparked a pang in his heart. He hoped that Flutter had been taken to a home as warm and kind as this one. For the first time since he'd seen her taken away by Twolegs, he felt he didn't need to worry about her anymore.

Despite his dreams, River Ripple began to think that this life, cozy and protected by the Twoleg den, was all he needed. Until one day the Twolegs brought a new creature into the den.

River Ripple was sleeping in his soft nest. He thought he'd dreamed the yapping that woke him at first. But a stench bathed his muzzle that he'd hoped he'd never smell so close, and he scrambled to his paws, his pelt spiking. Fear pulsed along his spine. One of the Twoleg adults was carrying a small dog in its paws.

The Twoleg crouched and held the dog in front of River Ripple. The dog barked excitedly. *Does it want it to bite me?* River Ripple hissed and backed away. The dog was clearly young. Fully grown, it would be huge. He lashed out, only missing the dog's snout

because the Twoleg snatched it out of reach. The Twoleg blinked at him in surprise. River Ripple stared back, confused. *Did it think I'd be pleased?*

The Twoleg carried the dog away and shut it behind another inner opening. River Ripple stared after it, his thoughts spinning. Were the Twolegs really going to keep a dog in the same den? He tried to breathe through his panic, but the dog was yapping and scratching at the opening, trying to get through.

River Ripple jumped onto the ledge beside a clear stretch of wall, trying not to tremble. One of the Twoleg kits approached him, purring gently, but River Ripple backed away. How could he trust any of them now? As the day passed, he stayed where he was. A Twoleg brought him food and tried to coax him down, but he could hear the dog whining in the other part of the den. *They must think I'm a mouse-brain.*

Perhaps the dog wouldn't stay. Perhaps the Twolegs would take it away when they saw how unhappy River Ripple was. He slept on the ledge, hoping that, when he woke the next morning, the dog would be gone. His heart nearly stopped when he opened his eyes and saw it moving just below him. He

leaped up and arched his back and spat at it. But the dog seemed more interested in exploring the Twoleg den than in him. Still, River Ripple didn't take his eyes off it. *I'm safe up here*, he told himself.

But the Twoleg den *wasn't* safe anymore. His heart felt suddenly heavy. He would have to leave. Would he ever find anywhere safe? He pushed the thought away. *Just focus on getting back to the river*. Night had said Hawk and his friends had moved on. If he could make it back to his tiny clearing, he could decide what to do next.

But how could he escape the Twoleg den? River Ripple gazed through the clear wall into the garden. The Twolegs kept every opening shut. *But they open them to leave*. River Ripple shifted his paws thoughtfully. Even though he was unfit, he knew he was still faster than a Twoleg. If he waited in the right place and timed it right, he could dart past a Twoleg as it walked through an opening. He felt a twinge of guilt as he admitted to himself that he could have escaped before if he'd wanted to. But it had been so comfortable here, and so cold outside, that he hadn't wanted to try.

The dog began yapping again, excited, as a Twoleg padded into the room. Fizzing with energy, it jumped and barked, and River Ripple pressed tighter against the clear wall. How could any creature have so little self-control? The Twoleg chattered to it and stroked it so trustingly. *Does it really think it won't bite?* He'd begun to think Twolegs were smart after living with them these past moons, but it seemed they were quite foolish after all.

River Ripple's belly rumbled hungrily. He could smell the scent of his nuggets in the other part of the den and wished one of the Twolegs would bring him some. But they didn't, and he suspected that they were trying to trick him into leaving the safety of the ledge to go to his bowl. *Never!* There was only one reason he would leave this ledge now. To escape.

Throughout the morning, he watched the Twolegs move around the den as though nothing had changed. In the afternoon, the dog slept in a nest they'd brought it. River Ripple still refused to move. His belly was hollow with hunger, but he stayed on the ledge, ready to run as soon as he got the chance. At last he saw the Twoleg kits putting on their colorful pelts. His heart

quickened. He knew what that meant. They were going into the garden to play. He saw them slip on their bright red paw covers and put soft yellow cocoons over their heads.

Quickly, River Ripple got to his paws and stalked along the ledge. He waited, pricking his ears as the Twoleg kits padded toward the opening at the back of the den. He bunched his muscles as one of them reached to pull it open. As daylight sliced into the den, he leaped, blood pulsing beneath his pelt.

He hit the floor and ran for the opening. A howl sounded behind him. His heart skipped a beat. The dog was scrabbling from its nest. *It's awake!* Panic surged in his chest, almost choking him. But he kept running. The dog was at his tail. He could feel its breath on his heels. It yapped, charging after him as he raced across the spongy flooring. As he hit the shiny floor, his paws skidded. Alarm sparked along his spine as he fought to keep his balance. He uncurled his claws, trying to get a grip. The dog skidded too, sliding behind him and thumping into the wall before finding its paws and charging after him once more.

River Ripple pushed harder, fear driving him on.

The Twoleg kits shrieked as he darted past them. One of them reached for him, but River Ripple kept running. He could see the lawn outside. Dodging clear of the Twoleg's paws, he burst from the den and raced for the fence.

Breathless, he hared across the lawn. His legs felt weak from lack of use, but he kept going. The fence looked huge. How had he ever scaled it so easily? He hadn't jumped onto anything higher than a den ledge in moons. He glanced behind him. The dog was outside, still chasing, the Twolegs kits at its heels.

He had to escape. If he didn't get away this time, they'd make sure he didn't get another chance. But the fence was too high. He'd never make it. The shiny frame, the smaller version of the thing Twoleg kits had climbed in the park, caught his eye. It was close to the fence. If he could climb the frame, he could jump from the top.

As River Ripple veered toward it, he felt a tug at his tail. The dog had caught the tip of it between his teeth. River Ripple pushed harder against the ground, tearing free with a hiss, and as he neared the shiny frame, he leaped for the lowest bar. He made it,

wobbling as he fought to find his balance, then reached up and hauled himself onto the next. He climbed higher, fighting back fear as his paws slithered and slipped on the shiny bark. *I can't fall.* He jumped higher, amazed he was managing to keep his grip, until at last he reached the top.

The dog bounced up and down, yapping with frustration. The Twoleg kits waved their forepaws and howled while one of the big Twolegs began running from the den.

River Ripple focused on the fence. It was several tail-lengths away. If he was going to make the jump, he'd have to focus. *Find stillness before you move. It will give you strength.* Arc's words rang in his mind. River Ripple paused. He blocked out the yelping below him. He fixed his gaze on the fence. Drawing in one long breath, he gathered his strength in his hind legs. Then he leaped.

His heart seemed to stop as he soared through the air. For a moment, he imagined he was a hawk. Then he hit the fence with a clatter, grasped the top with his forepaws, dug in his claws, and, wobbling, found his balance.

The dog was jumping up at him, barking, but it couldn't reach. River Ripple looked back at the Twolegs. The adult had wrapped its paws around the kits, and River Ripple thought he saw sadness in their eyes.

I'm sorry, he told them silently. Thanks for being kind for so long and seeing me through the worst of the weather. For the first time, River Ripple wondered if he'd have survived the cold alone, and a surge of gratitude rose in his chest. He blinked at the Twolegs, then turned away and dropped down onto the far side of the fence.

He'd go back to the river. He longed now for its soothing chatter. And to see Night and Mist once more. And to taste fish and smell the reassuring mustiness of his reed den. Once he was there, he could decide what to do next.



Chapter 5



River Ripple breathed in deep drafts of air as he crossed the meadow and began to follow the hedgerow back to the river. The scent of grass and trees and earth and stone filled him with energy. He was frustrated by the heaviness of his body and the tiredness in his muscles. He wanted to run back to his den, but he was out of breath even walking. He would have to get fit again if he was going to make it back to the park.

He stopped on a rise that sloped down to the riverbank. The reed beds stretched away into forest. Trees arched over the river, trailing the tips of their bright green branches over its glittering surface. Pink cherry blossoms bloomed against the blue sky, and a soft wind ruffled his pelt. In the distance he could hear the familiar chatter of water over stone. His heart seemed to fill his chest.

A shadow moved on the slope below. *Night!* The black-and-white she-cat was pushing through the long grass. “Night!”

But she'd already seen him and was springing up the slope toward him. "You're back!"

River Ripple raced to meet her, purring loudly as he wound around her, his tail high.

She nudged his cheek with her muzzle. "We thought you'd gone back to the park." She stepped back and looked him over. "Where have you been?" Her gaze paused at his robust flanks. "It looks like you've been eating well."

River Ripple shifted his paws self-consciously. It was only a matter of time until she caught on. There was no way he could have hunted this well for himself.

Night's eyes widened. "Not the Twolegs!"

"They trapped me," he mewed defensively.

Beckoning him with a flick of her tail, she began to head downslope. "I warned you to be careful."

He fell in beside her. "They were actually quite kind."

"Then why did you leave?"

River Ripple didn't want to admit a dog had driven him out. "I missed the river," he replied honestly.

"It took you long enough," she mewed dryly. "You've been gone for moons. You missed the river

icing over—” She stopped and looked at him. “Is that why you stayed there? You didn’t like the cold?”

“I told you,” he mewed. “I was trapped.”

“How did you escape?”

“They opened one of their entrances today.”

“Didn’t they open them before today?” Night looked puzzled.

River Ripple started walking again, his pelt twitching guiltily.

Night padded beside him. “Surely, Twolegs need to leave their dens occasionally?”

River Ripple didn’t like hiding the truth from her. “They brought a dog into the house,” he told her quietly.

“A dog?” Night shuddered. “No wonder you escaped. Did it hurt you?” She looked him over again.

“It was just a kit,” he confessed. “But it kept leaping around. Like a fish that had been dropped on the riverbank. It barked and nipped at me, like it was trying to hunt me.”

“I think dogs must have bees in their brain,” Night mewed.

“This one certainly did.”

They walked in silence for a while. Then River Ripple went on. "You're right," he mewed.

She glanced at him. "About what?"

"I stayed because it was warm, and there was food," he admitted. "I'd never lived by myself before. I'd always been with my parkmates. And, after Hawk and his friends attacked me, I felt so . . ." He hesitated. Would a loner understand? "Alone."

Night's eyes rounded with sympathy. "I'm glad you came back," she mewed.

"So am I." River Ripple was surprised how pleased he was to be beside the river again.

As they reached the marsh grass, Night slid into the lead and nosed her way through. River Ripple followed, his eyes brightening happily as she stopped on the shore and brushed some grass away to reveal two carp lying on the pebbles.

"I caught them earlier," she told him. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes!" River Ripple's mouth watered. He was famished—he hadn't eaten since the Twolegs had brought the dog to their den—but still he hesitated. "Is one of these for Mist?" Why was she giving away

food she should be saving for her brother? Anxiety prickled in his paws. “Mist’s okay, isn’t he?”

“Mist’s fine.” Night pawed one of the carp toward him. “He can catch his own fish today.” She tore a lump of flesh from the other carp.

River Ripple leaned down and took a bite. The flavor sang on his tongue. The silkiness of the flesh in his mouth after so many rough nuggets made him purr with happiness. He tried to eat slowly, but it was delicious and he was so hungry. He ate it all, crunching the bones and saving the tail until last. As he chewed the final mouthful, he gazed at the river. It was sparkling in the sunshine, shifting pebbles lazily along the shore.

Night was still eating, her eyes closed in pleasure. She’d been so thrilled to see him. River Ripple felt a twinge of unhappiness. *Arc* would have been pleased to see him if he’d made it back to the park. Flutter, too. All his parkmates: straightforward Owl, soft-spoken Moth. He missed them all terribly, and guilt jabbed his belly. He’d promised to rescue Flutter from the Twolegs. They should have been welcoming kits into their lives by now—a litter who looked like the two of

them, a litter they could love and protect together. Instead he was here, far from Flutter and the park, and he was beginning to wonder if he would ever see her again.

“You look sad.”

Night’s mew cut into his thoughts. She was looking at him.

“I was thinking about Flutter,” he told her.

She looked away, pain darkening her eyes as though his sadness had sparked sadness in her.

River Ripple blinked at her. “You get lonely too, don’t you?” he mewed.

“I have Mist,” she answered, gazing at the river.

“But he’s just a littermate,” River Ripple mewed. “Don’t you ever long for a mate?”

Her gaze flashed sharply toward him. “I had one, remember?” she mewed curtly. “And kits.”

River Ripple flicked his tail awkwardly, wishing he could take back his question. Clearly, he had trespassed on thorny ground.

“I lost them. I lost them all. I’m never risking that hurt again. I’m fine with Mist and occasional friends.” She blinked at him. “Like you. But not a mate. Not

again.” She got to her paws. She was brisk now, changing the subject. “Are you planning on going back to the park?”

“I *want* to,” River Ripple told her. “But I’m scared.”

“Of the journey?”

“Not so much the journey . . .” River Ripple faltered, trying to work out what exactly was making him reluctant to head home.

“Are you worried about what you’ll find when you get there?” Night gazed at him. “You said monsters were destroying the park when you left and Flutter had been taken by Twolegs,” she mewed. “Do you think it all might have disappeared for good?”

He swallowed. Hearing it said out loud felt worse than thinking it. But she was right. “What if I *did* find them again—Flutter and Arc and Moth and all of them? And I find out they’re fine without me? So much time has passed.” He swallowed hard, a new and terrible thought occurring to him. “What if Flutter has a new mate?”

“Then stay here,” Night mewed.

He stared at her. She made it sound so simple.

Could he give up a whole life so easily? On the other paw, was it wise to risk a dangerous journey only to find disappointment?

In the days that followed, the thought nagged him. Why not stay? He liked the river—after all, he'd named himself after it! He had friends here. He knew Night and Mist would always keep their distance, but they were kind, and there was prey, and he'd made a den. And now that Hawk had left, it felt safe once more. And yet an ache remained in his chest that kept nudging him to go home.

The ache was still with him as he crossed the stepping stones. *Should I stay or should I leave?* He stopped on the middle one and gazed downstream. The river was sluggish, and the sun, for the first time that season, felt hot on his pelt. He sat down and closed his eyes and lifted his face toward it, bathing in the warmth as he let his thoughts drift. He'd meditated earlier that morning, but it might help ease the ache if he meditated again.

River Ripple let his shoulders loosen and listened to the call of the birds on the riverbank until his thoughts quieted, leaving only sensations —the rippling of his fur

in the breeze, the sound of water trickling between the stepping stones, the scent of the blossoms. In that still place of calm, he saw Flutter. She looked at him with her bright blue eyes, and he saw love in them. His heart soared like a bird. He wanted to reach out and touch her, but he remained still, frightened of shattering the image in his mind.

She blinked at him, a long, slow, wistful blink.

His breath caught in his throat. There was sadness in the look, and he suddenly understood. She was saying goodbye. She was telling him to embrace his new life. She dipped her head, and the knowledge rose in him that if they were meant to see each other again, they would. His thoughts sharpened into certainty. He would let his life lead him forward. He wouldn't risk it trying to get back to the park. He would make his home here, without her.

He blinked open his eyes. His heart was beating fast. He knew what to do. He would stay here, beside the river. He felt like he could breathe deeply again for the first time in days. But the ache was still there. *Why?* What was it nudging him toward if not Flutter and the park?

A scent touched his nose. *Pigeon*. He hadn't tasted pigeon since he was in the park, but the rich, musky smell was unmistakable. He jerked his muzzle toward it, stiffening as he saw five cats standing around the dead bird. Were these cats like Hawk and his friends? He hardly dared move. He didn't want them to notice him. But he couldn't resist pricking his ears. He wanted to hear what they were saying.

"I thought we were supposed to be showing Turtle Tail how to catch fat, lazy pigeons," mewed a sleek brown tabby she-cat.

"Well, I've certainly learned *something*." A tortoiseshell leaned down to sniff the pigeon. She whisked her tail happily. "I'm glad I came back. Hunting never looked like so much fun!"

These cats weren't like Hawk. There was something friendly about the way they crouched around the pigeon and took turns to eat. There was warmth in the way they spoke to each other.

The gray tom was looking grave. "Remember that there are tensions now," he warned the tortoiseshell. His tone sparked River Ripple's curiosity.

"What tensions?" River Ripple surprised himself

by voicing the question out loud.

The strange cats turned to look at him.

“Who’s that?” The sleek brown tabby she-cat got to her paws and stared at him openly. “And what cat likes sitting near *water*?”

River Ripple realized he must seem odd, sitting in the middle of the river. Could they even see that he was sitting on a stone? He remembered the first time he’d seen Night cross the stones. He’d thought she was walking on top of the water.

He bounded lightly to the shore where the strange cats were still watching him. “Hi,” he mewed, approaching them. “My name is River Ripple.”

The other cats glanced at each other but the gray tom met River Ripple’s nod of greeting with a steady gaze. “Are you a rogue?”

Me? River Ripple was surprised. His pelt was freshly groomed and he was still carrying some of the weight he’d gained with the Twolegs. *I must look more like a kittypet.* “I don’t like giving myself labels,” he mewed. “I live by the river.”

As he flicked his tail toward the opposite bank, he saw a dark pelt slip between the reeds. Night was

watching from the shadows on the other side. She shot him a warning look. *She doesn't trust these cats.* The gray tom was looking at him expectantly. "That's all any cat needs to know," he added. He wanted to reassure Night that he was being cautious.

"I'm Gray Wing," the gray tom mewed simply, then nodded to the others. "This is Turtle Tail and Rainswept Flower. And these two are Gorse and Wind."

River Ripple blinked at them, trying to remember all the names. There was something about these cats that he liked; he wanted to make a good impression. But the pigeon-scent was tugging at his attention. It wasn't fish, but its flesh would be juicy. "That looks tasty." He swiped his tongue hopefully around his mouth.

Gray Wing's eyes sparked with amusement. He pushed the pigeon toward River Ripple.

This tom was kind. River Ripple thanked him and fluffed out his fur happily. He crouched to take a bite, then another. It was delicious, but he held back, eating as neatly as he could, aware the cats were watching him.

He was pleased when Turtle Tail commented, "I've never seen a cat eat so delicately."

She thinks I'm delicate. River Ripple was amused and blinked back at her. "I'm a cat full of surprises." He dipped his head in gratitude and flicked his tail before turning away and heading for the river. He was going to leave these cats while they still seemed impressed.

He crossed the stepping stones and nosed his way through the bushes on the far shore.

Night was waiting for him, pacing behind a thick clump of meadowsweet. "I thought you'd be more careful after what Hawk did to you," she mewed as she saw him.

"You should have come to meet them," River Ripple told her.

Her eyes widened. "I'm a loner, remember?"

"But they were friendly. They even shared their catch with me."

"I don't care." Night's tail was twitching anxiously. "When cats start hanging out in groups, they always end up fighting. Cats should live alone."

You might like being alone, but I don't. "The

park cats didn't fight," he told her, remembering Moth's warm nuzzles when he felt sick, or Stoat's generous sharing of any Twoleg scraps he'd foraged that day. Owl was always there to give advice when he felt unsure, and Dart was always up for an adventure. Even before he'd fallen in love with Flutter, he'd never felt lonely among the park cats. "We helped each other."

"Maybe," Night conceded. "But they're the first cats I've heard of who did."

"These cats seemed happy to be together," River Ripple insisted.

"I hope they're not thinking of staying," Night grunted.

"It might be good to have them around," River Ripple argued. "They'd discourage cats like Hawk."

"Or turn out to be just like him," Night warned. "Don't get attached to them."

"Why not?"

"You don't know who these cats are or what they want," Night mewed darkly. "Be careful, River Ripple. They might hurt you."

He blinked at her sympathetically. It must be sad,

and probably exhausting, to be so distrustful.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” she pressed.

“I’ll be careful,” he promised. But he wanted to know more about these cats, and he hoped they’d stay near the river. He suddenly realized that the ache that had been nudging him to go back to the park hadn’t been about missing Flutter, or Arc, or *any* cat in particular. He’d loved Flutter, of course, and Arc had been his best friend for as long as he could remember. But he missed the feeling of belonging as much as he missed the cats themselves. Belonging was what he’d lost when he’d been washed away from the park, and meeting Gray Wing and his companions had reminded him what a great loss that had been.



Chapter 6



River Ripple was hungry. The river had been running low, and there were only minnows left in the shallows. He'd seen carp and trout moving in deeper water, and if he'd been able to swim, he'd have caught one. But Night had been away for nearly half a moon, so there'd been no one to teach him. Now, just after finishing his meditation, he leaped the riverbank and crossed into the meadow. Maybe he'd find prey at the edge of the forest.

He'd only glimpsed Mist twice since Night had left; he seemed to be ranging farther and farther upstream.

"Is she coming back?" River Ripple had called to him across the stepping stones when he'd seen him a few days earlier.

"Eventually," Mist had called back.

"Why didn't you go with her?"

"Sometimes she likes to be alone."

"How long will—"

But Mist hadn't wanted to talk. Instead he'd

turned away and disappeared into the long grass bordering the forest.

Now River Ripple crossed the meadow, shaking the memory away as he headed for the shade of the trees. He'd been lonely these past few days, and it wasn't just hope of prey that had led him this way; he was following the route Mist had taken. Perhaps he'd bump into the loner again.

He'd secretly hoped Mist and Night would stick around more now that he was living by the river; after all, it was Night who'd suggested he stay here. Instead he was beginning to feel as though the two loners might move on for good any day, and that each time he saw them might be his last. His hope that Gray Wing and the others might become friends had quickly faded. They had made a home on the moor, rarely visiting the river. And when he'd gone looking for them, he was disappointed to find them arguing, just as Night had said they would. He'd listened to them through the heather wall that surrounded their sleeping hollow and heard them bickering over who should be their leader and who should go on patrol and how they should defend their territory. He'd left without letting

them know he'd been there, a little shaken by how aggressive they'd sounded. Perhaps they were more like Hawk than he'd first thought.

It suddenly seemed to him that the cats here were either rootless loners, drifting from place to place, or fiercely territorial. River Ripple found both attitudes strange. *I don't seem to fit in anywhere.*

As he neared the trees, the grass shivered. River Ripple tasted the air, his heart quickening as he smelled rabbit. Was he fast enough to catch it by himself? He'd lost the weight he'd gained with the Twolegs. But doubt prickled through his pelt. It had been a while since he'd hunted land prey. He'd caught a hare moons ago while hunting with Mist, but Mist was the one who'd made the kill. *Still, I chased it into his paws*, he told himself. *And I'm even fitter now.* Besides, a rabbit would be slower than a fish, and there was no water to pull at his fur.

River Ripple dropped into a hunting crouch and watched the trembling grass. His paws pricked eagerly as he glimpsed two ears twitching between the stems. He stalked toward it, his tail trailing through the grass as he put one paw softly in front of the other. The

rabbit didn't move. It must be grazing. His belly growled. He'd eaten nothing since the two tiny minnows he'd wolfed down last night. The meager meal had left him hungry, and this morning he was famished.

Stopping a tail-length away, River Ripple pressed his hindquarters to the earth and flexed his claws. They itched for the kill. He slowed his breathing and slitted his eyes. Then he leaped, soared through the air, and burst from the grass. The rabbit eyed him wildly and shot away as River Ripple landed with a thump just behind it. He charged after it, but the rabbit dodged one way, then the other, and River Ripple's paws skidded on the grass as he tried to close in on it. *It's making for the forest.* He had to cut it off before it reached the undergrowth. He changed course, his paws thrumming against the earth. Exhilaration pulsed beneath his pelt. Wind streamed through his fur. He was gaining on the rabbit. He was going to reach it before it could escape! He leaped, cold air washing his pelt as he dived into the shadow of the forest.

Fur flashed in front of River Ripple as a light gray tom exploded from the brambles, knocked him aside,

and landed squarely on the rabbit, pinning it to the ground and killing it with a growl of triumph.

River Ripple stumbled to a halt, fury surging in his chest. “That was mine!”

The tom swung his muzzle around, focusing his blue eyes on River Ripple. “This is my territory!” he snarled. “All the prey here belongs to me!”

“But I was chasing it,” River Ripple snapped. “I was about to catch it.”

“You were about to *lose* it.” The tom slit his eyes. “There are more rabbit holes in there than there are trees.” He nodded toward the forest. “There’s no way you’d have caught it before it reached one.”

“That’s not true! I nearly had it!”

“Running at that speed?” The tom faced him full on. His shoulders were broad, his paws large, and tufts of fur bristled at the tips of his ears. Contempt glittered in his blue eyes. “Are you a kittypet?”

“No!” River Ripple lifted his muzzle.

The tom’s gaze flitted over him. “Are you *Ripple*?”

“I’m *River* Ripple.”

“Gray Wing warned me about you,” the tom

mewed sourly.

“*Warned?*” River Ripple frowned, puzzled. Gray Wing had seemed pleased to meet him.

“He told me there was a loner hunting on our land.”

So this cat was part of Gray Wing’s group. River Ripple fluffed out his fur indignantly. “How can it be your land?” he snapped. “You’ve only just arrived.”

“It doesn’t matter when we got here,” the tom growled. “We’re here now.”

“But Gray Wing lives on the moor!”

“That’s his choice,” the tom grunted.

“You’re part of his group, aren’t you?” River Ripple was confused.

“I’m Clear Sky, his brother,” the tom told him sharply. “I have my *own* group, and we live here.”

River Ripple’s tail twitched with annoyance. Were these strange cats going to claim every tree and hill as their own? What about the river? Would they claim that too? “Why can’t you just share?”

Clear Sky looked amazed. “Why would I do that?”

“Why not?”

The tom stared at him. “Because I don’t want to

go hungry.”

“There’s enough prey here for every cat,” River Ripple objected.

“Maybe, on a warm day like today, when there’s peace and the weather’s been good,” Clear Sky mewed. “But what about when the snows come, or rogues move in and start overhunting?” He glared accusingly at River Ripple.

“Are you calling me a rogue?”

“What should I call you?” Clear Sky padded closer. “Where do you come from?”

River Ripple held his ground. “Where do *you* come from?”

“The mountains.”

Mountains? Ripple glanced toward the moor, wondering how far these cats had traveled to reach the river. Had they come farther than he had? “Why did you come here?”

“We didn’t want to starve.” Clear Sky’s gaze was icy. “And I’m going to make sure we don’t.”

“By stealing other cats’ prey?”

Clear Sky took another step closer. “I don’t have to explain myself to you,” he snarled. “The only thing

you need to know is that I don't allow other cats to hunt on my land."

But River Ripple wasn't going to be bullied. "I bet you let Gray Wing hunt on your land."

"Why would I? Gray Wing has his own territory."

River Ripple frowned, puzzled. "So you don't even share with your kin?"

"I don't need to," Clear Sky snapped.

"But wouldn't it be better if you helped each other instead of competing?"

Clear Sky curled his lip. "Strong cats don't need help."

"What about weak cats?" River Ripple asked.

"They're not my problem."

River Ripple frowned. "What about sick cats or old cats?"

"There aren't any sick cats or old cats in my group." Clear Sky flexed his claws. His patience was clearly wearing thin.

But River Ripple pressed on. "Where I come from," he mewed, "we shared everything."

"We shared everything where I came from too," Clear Sky hissed. "And we still starved. That's why

we came here. We wanted to make a new life for ourselves, and now that we have, we intend to protect it.”

“Even if it means stealing from other cats?” River Ripple looked pointedly at the rabbit.

“I didn’t steal,” Clear Sky snapped. “I took what was mine.”

“Nothing *belongs* to you.” River Ripple felt his hackles rising. This cat was as bad as Hawk. “No matter how loudly you yowl.”

Clear Sky showed his teeth. “I can do more than yowl,” he snarled.

River Ripple didn’t want to fight. He wasn’t outnumbered as he had been with Hawk. But if he started fighting over territory, he’d be no better than this fox-heart. He forced back frustration. Perhaps he could show this cat another way. “Do you know how to fish?”

Clear Sky stared at him. “*Fish?*”

“If you share that rabbit with me, I’ll teach you how to fish.”

Clear Sky snorted. “Why would I want to fish? If you like them, go catch some and stay away from my

land. This rabbit is mine.”

River Ripple’s heart sank. As he turned away, Clear Sky called after him. “If I, or any of my group, see you around here again, we’ll shred you.”

River Ripple ignored him.

“Unless you want to join us,” Clear Sky mewed. “But you’ll have to learn how to hunt properly first.”

River Ripple glared back at him. “I don’t want to join your group,” he snapped.

Clear Sky’s eyes glittered. “One day you may have to,” he growled. “We’re going to own all this land eventually, and then you’ll have to join us or leave.”

River Ripple didn’t respond. The thought of becoming like the mountain cats—stealing land, competing for prey, bullying other cats—made him shudder.

But Clear Sky hadn’t finished. “And you can tell that to your loner friends,” he yowled. “Those two black-and-white fleabags that keep hanging around.”

Pulsing with rage, River Ripple headed back across the meadow. Why did Clear Sky and his friends have to come here? *Perhaps once they’ve established their territories, they’ll let us be.* But

worry tugged in his belly. What if Night and Mist decided to leave? River Ripple didn't want to be alone here and outnumbered by such territorial cats. Maybe he should have tried to find his way back to the park after all.

He decided to concentrate on hunting and tracked the river upstream, sniffing his way through the long grass along the shore. There was no sign of prey, and the shallows were still deserted. Hunger gnawed in his belly. There wasn't even a minnow in sight. He sat down with a sigh and closed his eyes. Had he decided to settle in the wrong place? Or would trouble find him wherever he went?

As his shoulders drooped, he heard a splash. He opened his eyes. A fat carp was nibbling among the weeds nearby. Had the river somehow sensed his despair and brought him food?

River Ripple crept to the edge and waited until the carp had worked its way close to the bank. Then he shot his paw into the water as fast as a frog's tongue and grabbed the carp with his claws. He jerked it up deftly and tossed it onto the riverbank. Before it could flip-flop back into the water, he killed it with a sharp

bite and carried it to a shady dip beneath a willow herb. *Thank you!* He blinked and, grateful to the river, settled down to eat.

As he ate, he wondered whether Clear Sky was right: Would he have to join the mountain cats eventually? Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as he feared. At least he'd *belong* somewhere. Wasn't that what he wanted? He gazed across the river as the sun slid toward the moortop. *No*. He would never feel he belonged with those cats. They loved the idea of territory too much. But what if belonging to a group was the only way to ensure lasting peace? If that was true, he would do it his way. He would always believe that prey should be shared and that the strong should protect the weak. He knew Mist and Night felt the same way, but would they agree to formalize their loose friendship into a group? He wouldn't find out until they returned. His pelt prickled uneasily. *If* they returned.

He was woken the next morning by reeds rustling at the edge of his clearing. He lifted his muzzle sharply. Someone was there. Pelt twitching, he rose from his nest and peered outside. "Who is it?"

“Hi, River Ripple.” Night lifted her tail cheerily.

River Ripple broke into a purr. She was back. He slid from his den and blinked at her. “Where have you been?”

“Just traveling.” She sat down and curled her tail over her paws. “I get restless when the new leaves start to bud.”

“You were gone so long.” River Ripple mewed. “I was beginning to worry you weren’t coming back.”

“I needed some time alone.” She looked away, her gaze sharpening with grief. “I lost my kits around this season.”

River Ripple shifted his paws. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“It’s something I need to work through myself.” She fluffed out her pelt. “But I’m back now, so you don’t need to worry.”

“I’m glad.” River Ripple whisked his tail. She clearly wanted to change the subject. “Have you seen Mist?”

“Not yet,” she mewed. “He’s probably gone upstream to look for better fishing. The river’s too low here.”

“Yeah,” River Ripple grunted. “I’ve had to eat *minnows*.” He wrinkled his nose.

She looked apologetic. “I should have taught you how to swim.”

“Maybe you could teach me now that you’re back.”

“Okay, but . . .” She glanced toward the river, her ears twitching uneasily. “I smelled strange scents in the meadow.”

“The mountain cats,” River Ripple told her.

“*Mountain* cats?” Night narrowed her eyes.

“Gray Wing and his friends,” River Ripple explained. “I met another of them at the edge of the forest. He’s called Clear Sky. He stole my prey and warned me off.”

Night’s eyes rounded anxiously. “Did he hurt you?”

“No,” River Ripple told her. “Actually, he kind of suggested that I join their group.”

“Join it?”

“*If* I learned to be a better hunter.”

“He sounds rude.”

“He was.” River Ripple flicked his tail, irritated by the memory. “I’d hate to be part of his group; all he

cares about is territory.”

“I warned you not to trust them,” Night mewed.

“You were right,” River Ripple admitted. “Their group has split into two. One on the moor and one in the forest.”

Night looked worried. “So we’re caught in between.”

“Maybe we should form our own group.” River Ripple searched her gaze. Would she agree?

Night’s pelt ruffled uneasily. “I told you, I’m a loner.”

“I know,” River Ripple mewed quickly. “I don’t mean a group like theirs. I don’t want to set borders or chase other cats off.”

Night narrowed her eyes. “Then what do you mean?”

“I thought we could look out for each other more,” River Ripple ventured.

Night tipped her head to one side. “Don’t we do that already?”

“I guess,” he conceded. “But maybe, from now on, you could tell me when you’re leaving and when you’ll be back.” He looked at her hopefully.

“I guess I could do that.”

“And if there’s good fishing in the shallows, I could let you know,” he went on.

“Sure.”

River Ripple held back a purr. He was surprised that Night was agreeing to all of this so easily; he hoped he wasn’t pushing his luck. “And perhaps we could hunt together more regularly,” River Ripple pressed gently. “It would give us a chance to exchange news and report on what the mountain cats are up to.”

Night looked at him for a moment, then dipped her head. “Okay,” she mewed. “Let’s try it. But I’m not making any promises.”



Chapter 7



“It’s safe here.” Night stood in the river, letting the water wash around her, and beckoned River Ripple with a nod.

He hesitated. His morning meditation had left him in a relaxed state, but now his anxiety spiked. He could see that the gently sloping shore deepened quickly in the water. He would be out of his depth in a few paw steps.

“The current’s very calm.” Night blinked at him encouragingly. “And I’ll be with you the whole time.”

The river was smooth, flowing toward a gentle bend before disappearing around an alder copse. River Ripple had often sat on the shore here and watched chub and large trout lazing in the deep water. He’d longed to be able to catch them, but now he decided it wasn’t worth the risk. “I’m fine just fishing the shallows,” he called to Night. “I don’t think I’m ready to swim yet.”

“You’ll never feel ready,” she mewed. “Just do it. It’s a perfect day. The river’s slow and the stepping

stones are just around the corner. They'll stop you from being washed away."

"What if I drown before I reach them?" River Ripple's pelt fizzed nervously.

"I told you," Night mewed, "I'll be with you the whole time." She looked at him expectantly.

"Is the water cold?" he asked, delaying.

"You'll get used to it," she told him.

He still hesitated.

"It's dangerous living beside the river when you can't swim," Night pressed. "And think of all the fish you'll be able to catch, even when the river's low or the shallows are flooded."

River Ripple knew she was right. If he really wanted to settle beside the river, he'd have to learn to swim. Narrowing his eyes and flattening his ears firmly against his head, he padded to the water's edge and waded in.

Night purred with amusement. "You look like you're walking into a fight, not a river."

"I'd rather be walking into a fight." River Ripple sucked in a deep breath as cold water rose up his legs and over his flanks.

“A little bit farther out.” Night backed into deeper water.

River Ripple followed, shivering as the river lapped over his spine. His fur floated around him like a cloud, and his heart began to pound when the water tried to lift him off the riverbed. He curled his claws into the mud. “I don’t think I’m ready,” he gasped.

“You’re ready.” Night swam around him, making ripples that lapped his chin.

He sneezed as water splashed his nose tip.

“Put your muzzle under,” Night instructed. “And breathe out.”

River Ripple did as he was told, not giving himself a chance to think. Bubbles streamed from his mouth, and the water swirled under his chin and over his nose. It only took a few moments to grow used to the sensation, and it suddenly felt less strange to be so deep in the water. He blinked at Night over the surface.

She was treading water in front of him. “The river will hold you,” she told him as he lifted his muzzle to take a breath. “But you need to help it.” She swam a lap around him. “Use your paws to push yourself up

and forward. If you stay calm, your body will *want* to float. You just need to steer it.”

She made it sound simple. He felt a rush of hope. Perhaps it *was* simple.

“Raise your forepaws and feel the river lift you,” Night instructed.

River Ripple took a breath and pulled up his forepaws. At once, his head sank beneath the water, and the river spun him around and tried to drag his hind paws from under him. Panic flared beneath his pelt. Then Night’s teeth pinched his scruff as she hauled him above the surface and held him steady while he planted his paws firmly on the riverbed once more.

“I thought you said my body would want to float!” he spluttered.

“It will,” Night told him. “You just need to get a feel for it.”

He closed his eyes and focused his thoughts. *The river is my friend. The river is my friend.* He forced his muscles to loosen and fixed his attention on the sensation of the water streaming through his fur. Then he lifted his forepaws again.

“Use them to paddle!” Night mewed.

River Ripple churned the water, making it froth in front of him. He kept his hind paws planted heavily on the riverbed.

“That’s it!” Night mewed. “Keep paddling.”

River Ripple felt a surge of delight. He was keeping his head above the water and beginning to sense the power in his paws to fight the river’s drag.

Night swam around him, her eyes bright. “As soon as you feel confident, lift your hind—”

River Ripple didn’t give her a chance to finish. Swimming *was* easy! He lifted his hind paws and kicked out, amazed as his head stayed above the surface. Night narrowed her eyes against his spray as he splashed excitedly.

“I’m swimming!” Pride swelled in his chest, but just as quickly, River Ripple felt a flash of alarm. He realized that the current was turning him, pulling his hindquarters around until he was drifting downstream. He splashed harder, striking out with his forepaws, kicking with his hind legs, but the current was in control. He spun slowly around, panic flashing in his fur as it dragged him into deeper water. “Help!” He looked for Night, but she’d disappeared.

His anxiety sharpened. He tried to reach for the riverbed with his paws, but it was too far down. He thrashed at the water, struggling now to stay above the surface. Perhaps park cats couldn't swim! The river was going to swallow him!

Then he felt something thump against his belly. A warm body was lifting him up. *Night!* She was underwater. He felt her supporting him, carrying him along on her back. Relief swamped him and he relaxed. He let her guide him downstream. She was keeping to the middle of the river, in the deep water, but she felt firm and steady beneath him. He began to pull at the water with his forepaws and push out gently with his hind legs, finding a rhythm, feeling more confident and in control as Night steered him toward shallow water. She ducked out from underneath him as the riverbed rose to meet his paws and bobbed to the surface.

"You're a natural," she puffed, catching her breath.

"So long as I've got you to hold me up," he purred, planting his paws in the mud once more.

He practiced for the rest of the morning, Night

never leaving his side, until at last he found he could hold himself above the surface without splashing and steer himself rather than let the current steer him.

He felt a wave of joy as they waded onto the shore at sunhigh and collapsed beside each other on the bank. "I can swim," he breathed, water streaming from his pelt.

"Don't try swimming without me yet," Night warned. "You need more practice, and then I need to teach you about currents." She nodded upstream. "One day you'll be able to swim in rapids and hunt in the faster channels. But not yet."

River Ripple closed his eyes and relished the warmth of the sun. The trees would be in full leaf soon, and the days were losing their chill at last. Once more he was thankful to the river for bringing him here.

He could hear Night washing beside him, the steady lapping of her tongue on her pelt. He opened his eyes and looked at her. She began purring quietly to herself. This was the happiest she'd seemed in days. He knew she was still mourning her kits and her mate, and he understood her sense of loss. He was still

mourning the life he'd planned to spend with Flutter, and, like Night, he wouldn't be able to think of taking a new mate for a long time. For now he was glad to have Night as a friend, and he suspected she felt the same way. Their friendship was easy and undemanding and suited them both.

He got to his paws, an idea sparking in his mind. "It's my turn to teach you something," he mewed.

She looked up from washing. "What?" Her eyes flashed with curiosity.

"In the park, we used to meditate," he told her.

She sat up. "What do you mean?"

"It's a way of drifting into your thoughts without getting trapped by them," he told her. "Like swimming in the river without being pulled by the current."

Night looked intrigued. "How do you do it?"

River Ripple sat beside her and wrapped his tail over his paws. Lifting his muzzle, he gazed at the far bank.

Night copied him, following his gaze. "Like this?" she asked.

"Yes." He breathed out slowly. "Focus on your breath, and when you feel ready, close your eyes." He

gave her a moment to relax, then went on. "Let your muscles loosen. If you find yourself getting tangled up in your thoughts, imagine the river washing them away."

He could hear Night breathing softly beside him and let his thoughts fade until he was aware only of the river swishing past. His mind cleared, and he found himself imagining a flower meadow. Lush grass and brightly colored flowers stretched around him. A bright sun shone from a clear blue sky, and in the distance, trees rustled gently in the breeze. An orange butterfly fluttered around him, swooping low and landing on his paw. He gazed at it, its red speckled wings twitching as it rested for a moment. Then it flitted up, past his muzzle and into the sky. He thought of Flutter. Was it a sign? His heart seemed to soften and felt suddenly peaceful, certain of its connection to Flutter and the park.

He let go of the thought and, once more, became aware of the river and the breeze in his fur. As he opened his eyes, the air seemed brighter and the river clearer. An orange petal tumbled through the air, fluttering on the breeze like the butterfly he'd seen in

his vision. It drifted down onto the surface of the water and the river whisked it away downstream.

Another sign? He watched as it disappeared from view, realizing that Night was watching it too. As it sailed out of sight, he met her gaze. “How was your meditation?”

Her eyes sparkled. “I enjoyed it,” she mewed.

“Did you see anything?”

“A butterfly.”

He blinked at her. “Me too!”

“It looked a bit like that petal.” Night nodded where the petal had disappeared around the bend in the river.

It was definitely a sign of *something*. Perhaps the river was telling them to let it guide them. He wondered whether to tell Night. Then he decided that she had to find her own meaning in her visions.

She got to her paws. “Did you often meditate when you lived in the park?”

“Every morning,” he mewed. “I still do.”

“Maybe I’ll start doing the same.”

River Ripple was pleased that he’d taught her something. “Will you teach Mist?” He began to head

toward the meadow that edged the riverbank.

“I might.” She fell in beside him.

He heard her belly growl. “Are you hungry?”

“Very,” she mewed. “I’ve never swum so long without catching a fish.”

“We could catch one now—” He stopped as he saw her gaze flash toward the long grass ahead of them. He tasted the air. *Rabbit.*

Night had already dropped into a crouch. He’d never seen the black-and-white she-cat hunt land prey. He hadn’t hunted any either since Clear Sky had stolen his last catch. *You’ll have to learn how to hunt properly first.* The gray tom’s comment still rankled. River Ripple wanted to prove he was as good a hunter as any mountain cat, in the river *and* on land.

He dropped down beside Night. “You head straight for it,” he breathed. “I’ll go around and head it off.”

She nodded, not taking her eyes from the grass ahead. A brown shape showed between the stems, and River Ripple’s paws tingled with excitement. He crept away, arcing around the rabbit, giving it a wide berth, and stopping a short distance beyond. He’d lost sight of Night through the long grass, but she seemed to

know he was in position. He heard her paws thrumming the ground, and the rabbit burst out a tail-length ahead of him. Its eyes widened with horror as it saw him, and it jerked around and tried to flee. But River Ripple leaped without missing a beat, judging his landing so precisely that the rabbit seemed to run right into his paws. He grabbed hold and gave it a killing bite, sitting back contentedly as Night reached him. She sniffed its warm, musky body and licked her lips.

“I thought you only ate fish,” River Ripple mewed.

“Sometimes a little warm blood is nice,” she mewed.

“That’s mine!”

River Ripple jerked around as a sharp mew sounded beside them. *Clear Sky?*

But it wasn’t the gray mountain tom. A far scrawnier tom was glaring at them. His yellow pelt was ragged, and fresh scratch marks showed in his fur. His green eyes were slitted and sparked with hostility. “Give it to me and you won’t get hurt,” the tom hissed.

River Ripple exchanged glances with Night. She looked as surprised as he felt. Did this battered loner

really think he could steal prey from them? He was clearly alone and wounded, and it was obvious he didn't have the strength to win a fight.

And yet River Ripple couldn't help feeling a glimmer of admiration for the tom's bravado. "Instead of threatening us, why not join us," he mewed.

Night stiffened beside him. "Do you have to try to make friends with every cat?" she mewed irritably.

"He looks like he needs help," he told her. He nudged the rabbit forward, keeping one claw hooked into its pelt in case the tom tried to snatch it and run.

The yellow tom glanced at the rabbit hungrily, then eyed Night.

Night rolled her eyes. "Go on," she mewed wearily. "Take a bite."

"Really?" The tom sounded like he couldn't believe his luck.

"Just don't eat more than your share," Night growled.

They didn't find out the tom's name until he'd finished eating. He'd been far too concerned with filling his belly to talk, and River Ripple wondered how long he'd been without food. He was called Whistle,

and he was the first of many loners who passed through over the following moon. Each time River Ripple met a cat beside the river or picking their way through the reed beds, he'd invite them to hunt and then bring them to the small thicket where Night and Mist—and now Whistle—made their dens, to share their catch. Mist would eye them warily; Night was polite but kept her distance, observing their manners as they ate. River Ripple knew she was still distrustful of strangers, but each time he brought a new cat back, he felt sure she was a little more welcoming.

A few of the cats returned, and, one at a time, they began to make dens around the river. A gray she-cat named Silver built a den outside the thicket. Hollow, a black tom, chose a clearing near River Ripple, while Sage, an old tabby she-cat, hollowed out a den in a clump of rushes on the shore.

One by one, River Ripple taught them to meditate, and before long he, Night, Mist, and the new arrivals would meet in the morning to meditate together and again in the evening to share prey. Sometimes they hunted together, and sometimes they simply lay in the sun, enjoying the companionship.

Croak, a tortoiseshell she-cat, and Woodlouse, a brown-and-white tom, stayed the night from time to time, and River Ripple guessed it wouldn't be long before their visits grew longer and more frequent.

One evening, as the sun slid toward the moor, he lay sleepily in the clearing in the middle of the thicket while Night, Mist, and Silver shared a squirrel they'd caught at the edge of the forest.

Whistle was quietly gnawing on a carp. The yellow tom had gained weight, and his scratches had healed. His fur was well groomed now, and River Ripple had been surprised to discover that he was a handsome cat. Night had taught him how to fish the shallows, and he'd quickly grown skillful at hooking fish from the river. She'd teach him to swim soon so he could hunt the deeper water with River Ripple and Mist.

As the cats ate and drowsed, paw steps sounded beyond the trees.

River Ripple sat up. "Who's there?"

Croak padded in, two loaches dangling from her jaws. She laid them at the edge of the clearing. "I've been checking out the hollow just beyond the thicket," she mewed. "It looks like a good place to build a den."

The tortoiseshell blinked hopefully at every cat.

“I guess it does,” Night mewed.

“I hope you don’t snore,” Mist grunted. “Sounds carry here, and it’s hard enough to sleep with Silver growling to herself.”

Silver swished her tail toward the black-and-white tom. “*You* yowl in your sleep!”

Croak dipped her head. “I’ll go and fetch some bedding then. If you don’t mind me staying.”

“Eat your loach first,” Night told her. “We can help you gather bedding afterward.”

River Ripple rested his head on his paws and closed his eyes. His belly was full, and a warm wind was rustling the leaves above him. He dozed as the others ate.

“You seem happy.” Night paused beside him as the others went to find bracken for Croak’s nest.

River Ripple lifted his head and blinked at her. “I am.”

“You wanted a group,” Night mewed. “And you’ve built one.”

“Yes,” he mewed. “Without being mean or greedy like the mountain cats.” He searched her gaze. “Are

you okay having so many cats around?”

“It’s not bad,” she mewed. “As long as they don’t crowd me.”

Always a loner at heart, River Ripple thought. But Night seemed more content and less aloof than she used to be. “I’m glad you’re happy too.” He pushed himself to his paws. “For the first time since I left the park, I feel like I belong somewhere.”



Chapter 8



River Ripple dropped the minnow he'd been carrying. He looked along the top of the ditch. "Is everyone in position?"

"Yes." Whistle was peering over the edge. Hollow and Croak nodded from their hiding places in the long grass on either side. The long ditch stretching between them made for good hunting. Hollow had told them about how rats used it to skirt the field, and *River Ripple* and his group hunted here regularly now. Today they were hoping to lure a weasel from its burrow farther along.

River Ripple left the minnow, leaped the side of the ditch, and crouched down beside Whistle.

They waited. The shadows slowly shifted as the sun moved across the sky, but no one twitched or fidgeted. They sat as still as stone. *River Ripple* was impressed by his new rivermates. They had many other skills: Whistle was fast; Woodlouse knew the best places to hunt; Hollow could hear prey from a great distance and recognize the call of every bird in

the area. Croak had a sharp sense of smell and picked up scents long before any of the others. Sage, though she was old and needed more rest than the others, was a skillful hunter, and Silver was great at building dens. The gray tabby she-cat knew how to thread sticks and rushes to build strong walls, and she'd helped Woodlouse weave a reed nest at the other end of River Ripple's clearing. She'd even shown them all how to decorate their dens with feathers and shells washed up by the river.

River Ripple loved to lie in his nest listening to the soft clink and rustle of these gifts from the river. And he loved the way moonlight glowed on the smooth pebbles he'd laid around his den entrance. He felt deeply peaceful curled inside.

Now, as he waited beside Whistle, his nose wrinkled. The day-old minnow was already sour, and the warm sunshine was drawing out its scent. At last, farther down the ditch, a small snout poked out. The weasel was creeping out of its burrow. River Ripple held his breath and strained to see between the grass stems as, slowly, cautiously, the weasel crept toward the minnow. Its beady eyes were glittering hungrily.

River Ripple nudged Whistle. But the yellow tom was already flattened against the ground. He caught River Ripple's eye, pleased, then turned his attention back to the weasel.

River Ripple forced his tail not to twitch as excitement sparked through his fur. They would have to be quick. The weasel would snatch the minnow and dart straight back to its burrow. He bunched his muscles. The weasel crept closer. River Ripple held back until it was a whisker away from the bait. Then he lunged through the grass and down into the ditch and landed with a snarl in front of his quarry.

The weasel's eyes bulged with horror. It jerked around and raced back along the ditch. Whistle dropped from above, blocking its escape. The weasel darted to one side, but Croak leaped down, driving it toward the other side, where Hollow slithered down the steep bank and forced it back along the gully, straight into Whistle's paws.

Whistle gave it a killing bite so fast the weasel had no time to struggle. Swishing his tail happily, he carried it back to his rivermates.

River Ripple purred. "That was a good strategy."

He dipped his head to Hollow, who'd come up with the idea.

Hollow looked pleased. "Hunting is easy with a team."

River Ripple agreed. There were already two voles and a starling heaped at the top of the ditch. They could add the weasel to the haul and take it back to the thicket. The prey pile would be full by dusk.

Night was grooming herself as River Ripple led the others into the thicket clearing. She looked up, her eyes sparkling when she saw the prey they were carrying.

"Is that a stoat?" she asked as Whistle dropped his catch at the foot of the hazel tree.

"Weasel," he told her.

"I've never seen one before." Night padded across the clearing and sniffed it. "We'll have full bellies tonight."

While Whistle, Croak, and Hollow went to rest into the shade, River Ripple sat down beside Night.

"Where are the others?" Woodlouse, Mist, Sage, and Silver weren't here.

"They've gone to the river to fish." She poked the vole Hollow had dropped. "Although I'm not sure we

need fish too.”

“It’s good to have land prey and river prey.” River Ripple wondered if she’d acknowledge that bringing more cats into the group had improved their diet.

“I’ll always prefer fish,” she mewed.

“Me too,” River Ripple agreed. “But more cats bring more skills, and more skills mean more choice.” He glanced at her. “Imagine if we had even more cats.”

Night’s gaze sharpened warily. “The group is big enough,” she mewed curtly. “Things are going well. Why spoil it?”

River Ripple swallowed back a frustrated growl. He wished Night were more trusting. But he shouldn’t complain. He’d known from the start that she and Mist were loners. He should be grateful they’d tolerated the change he’d already brought to their lives. Was it fair to ask them to tolerate more?

He’d wanted to suggest to Night that they find somewhere they could all make dens—a camp where they could live close to each other, instead of stretched out on either side of the river. But the thought of living tail-to-tail with so many other cats might make her

resist even more fiercely the idea of bringing more cats into the group. He'd keep his idea to himself for now. *Still, it wouldn't do any harm to scout the area for a space big enough for us all to build dens.*

He ducked out of the thicket and crossed the meadow, stiffening as he saw a cat stalking along the edge of the forest at the far end. It must be one of Clear Sky's group. River Ripple had advised his rivermates to stay clear of the mountain cats. No territory was worth fighting for, especially when prey around the river was so plentiful.

River Ripple turned toward the shore. Would the alder copse at the river's edge make a good place for a camp? He leaped down the riverbank and nosed his way through the long grass. The river murmured gently over the shore. Upstream he could see the bulrushes lining the reed beds, swaying in the breeze as dragonflies flitted over the water.

As he reached the alders, he heard mewling. He pricked his ears. It sounded like a kit. He looked into the shadow of the trees as the mewling was joined by a second cry. Then he saw a white pelt splotted with ginger ducking behind a patch of ferns. He padded

closer, opening his mouth to taste for scents. He smelled she-cat scent, and milk. A queen? The mewling grew louder, and River Ripple heard the queen speak.

“I’m back,” she called softly. “I told you I wouldn’t be long.”

“Hey.” River Ripple padded closer.

The ferns shivered and the queen peeked out. Her yellow eyes flashed with worry as she saw him. “Who are you?”

“My name’s River Ripple.” He dipped his head politely. “I live around here with some friends.”

The queen stiffened. “I’m s-sorry,” she stammered in alarm. “I d-didn’t mean to trespass. We’re just passing through.”

“You’re welcome here,” he reassured her.

“Really?” Her eyes rounded.

“Yes.” River Ripple blinked at her warmly. Why was she so frightened? “Has some cat tried to chase you off?”

She glanced up the riverbank toward the meadow. “I tried to find shelter in the forest, but an angry gray tom told me I was on his land.”

River Ripple flexed his claws. *Clear Sky*. What was wrong with that mountain tom? Couldn't he even share with a queen? "It sounds like you have kits."

The mewling had quieted, but a squeak from inside the bush made the queen jerk her muzzle around. "It's okay," she mewed. "I'll feed you in a moment."

"Feed them now," River Ripple mewed. "I won't disturb you."

"Thank you." The queen nodded and disappeared between the bright green fronds. River Ripple padded to the water's edge and waited. A queen on her own with two kits might need help.

He watched three ducks bobbing around the reeds on the other side, wondering whether to swim across and catch one. Clouds rolled in front of the sun. Without its warmth, the air felt chilly, and River Ripple fluffed out his pelt.

"You're still here?"

He turned as he heard the queen's mew. She was padding toward him. The shore was muddy, and she stepped over it gingerly with her fluffy white paws, her nose wrinkling as though picking her way through mouse dung. A ginger she-kit and a white tom-kit

scampered after her, stopping as they neared him.

“Who are you?” the she-kit mewed.

“I’m River Ripple.” He whisked his tail. “Who are you?”

“I’m Scout.” The tom-kit lifted his chin.

The she-kit pushed past him. “I’m Hunter.”

River Ripple purred and looked at their mother. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Cleo,” the queen mewed.

“What are you doing by the river?” River Ripple asked. She didn’t look like a loner. She looked soft and well fed.

“I left my Twolegs,” she told him. “They were going to give my kits away.”

River Ripple’s pelt twitched. Twolegs fed cats as though they liked them, but they brought dogs into their dens and broke up families as if they didn’t care at all. “Why?”

Cleo flicked her tail. “I guess they wanted two cats, not four.”

Two cats? “You have a mate?” He scanned the shore. Why wasn’t he with her?

“Casper stayed behind,” Cleo explained. “He

didn't believe the Twolegs would actually do it. But I wasn't going to take the risk." She swept Hunter and Scout close with her tail. "I'd rather live out here than lose them."

River Ripple felt a rush of admiration for the white-and-ginger kittypet. She didn't look as though she'd ever been outside a Twoleg den. There was no sign of muscle beneath her pelt, and her fur was so white that he wondered if she'd ever gotten her paws muddy before today. "Can you hunt?" he asked.

She dropped her gaze, looking embarrassed. "No."

"You must be hungry," he mewed. "Especially if you're feeding kits."

"I am." She looked at him ruefully. "I didn't think about how I'd find food once we left. I just wanted to make sure my kits were safe."

"I would have done the same," River Ripple told her. If he'd stayed with Flutter, their kits would have been about the same age. Regret jabbed his heart. He glanced back at the thicket. "Would you like to come to our clearing?"

The queen looked curious. "Is that where your friends live?"

“Yes,” he told her. “My den’s in the reed beds.” He nodded across the river. “But most of my rivermates live on this side.”

Cleo looked hesitant.

“They’re really nice,” River Ripple promised. “And we have plenty of prey.”

Cleo dipped her head. “Thanks,” she mewed. “That would be great.”

He led Cleo to the thicket. Cleo carried Scout while Hunter rode on River Ripple’s shoulders, purring all the way. When they arrived, Mist was home with Woodlouse, Sage, and Silver. He was sharing a trout with Hollow, while Whistle and Croak dozed in the shade.

Night lay beside them, nibbling dirt from between her claws. She narrowed her eyes when she saw River Ripple with a kit clinging to his back and frowned when Cleo followed him in and placed Scout gently on the ground.

Woodlouse got to his paws, and Sage and Silver hurried to greet the kittypet, but Night stayed where she was. Mist rounded his eyes inquisitively but didn’t move, while Hollow crossed the shady clearing and

sniffed the kits.

“Where did River Ripple find you?” Hollow asked them kindly.

“At the river,” Hunter told him.

“The river?” Hollow pretended to be shocked. “You’re very strange-looking fish.”

“We’re not fish.” Scout puffed out his chest. “We’re cats.”

Cleo looked nervously at the cats as they surrounded her. “River Ripple said we could stay here for a while,” she mewed. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it is.” Silver nodded toward the prey pile. “Are you hungry?”

As Cleo looked at it eagerly, Night padded to River Ripple’s side.

“You’re bringing *kittypets* back now?” she whispered.

River Ripple whispered back, “She was hungry and needed somewhere safe to stay.” Then he raised his voice and called across the clearing. “Silver, give her one of the voles. She’s probably never eaten fresh prey before, and it’ll be easy to swallow.”

Night was scowling at him. “What good’s a

kittypet?" she murmured. "I bet she can't even hunt."

"She'll learn," River Ripple promised.

Night didn't say any more. She was staring at Hunter and Scout, her eyes dark. Did they remind her of the kits she'd lost? River Ripple felt a prick of guilt. Perhaps it had been thoughtless to bring them here. But he couldn't have left them on the riverbank. Cleo had needed help. Surely Night would understand.

Cleo did learn to hunt, becoming very good at it. After a few days, she was bringing back mice and voles to camp; in a few days more, she was catching rabbits. Night grudgingly accepted her and then began to warm to her, complimenting her on her skill and even showing an interest in her kits. While she didn't give Hunter and Scout rides around the thicket on her shoulders like the other cats did, she let them chase her tail and throw moss balls for them to catch.

After Cleo had mastered land prey, Night decided to take her to the river to teach her how to fish.

"It's best if you don't learn to swim yet," Night told the white-and-ginger kittypet as she led her and River Ripple to the water's edge. "Hunter and Scout might follow you into the water, and they're not strong

enough yet to fight the current.” Night waded into the river. “But you can learn to fish the shallows.”

River Ripple watched from the shore as Cleo followed Night into the water, surprised that the kittypet didn’t shudder as she got her fur wet for the first time. He felt a glow of pleasure as Night crouched down into the water and stretched out her paw, remembering his first fishing lesson. He’d achieved so much since his faltering attempts to hunt in the river.

“Wouldn’t it be better to start somewhere easier?” he called from the shore. “Like the stepping stones.”

Night winked at him. “She’s more skillful than you were.”

She was right. Cleo hooked the first fish that passed her, and Night splashed through the water to the kittypet’s side as Cleo gave it a killing bite.

“Well done,” Night purred. She took the fish from Cleo and tossed it onto the shore, then began to nudge the kittypet a little farther out.

Cleo resisted, her eyes widening. “Is it safe?”

“It’s shallow,” Night promised her. “And I’ll be here to grab you if the current unbalances you. But

you'll be able to reach into deeper water from here. The fish are bigger there." She nosed Cleo's shoulder, pushing her further from the shore. "I won't let anything happen—"

As she spoke, ginger fur exploded from the bushes. A large tom shoved River Ripple aside and leaped into the water. River Ripple staggered, trying to regain his balance as the tom grabbed Night by the neck fur and dragged her away from Cleo.

"Get off her." He viciously swiped at Night's muzzle. She screeched with surprise, lost her footing, and disappeared beneath the surface.

Cleo stared in horror as the tom reached into the water and hauled Night out with his claws, shaking her like prey. Caught off guard, Night struggled to fight back, but the tom shoved her away and lashed out with a hiss. His claws raked her flank. River Ripple's breath caught as he saw that the tom had opened up a gash. Yowling, he plunged into the water and waded toward the tom.

Before he reached him, Cleo pushed herself in front of the attacker. "Get away from her, Casper!"

The tom stared at Cleo, confused. "She was trying

to drown you!”

“She was teaching me how to fish!”

River Ripple pulled up beside them, the river swirling around his flanks. Night was pushing her way to the shore, her ears flat, her tail dragging behind her.

River Ripple turned and waded after her. “Are you okay?” He knew she wasn’t. The water around her was turning red with the blood oozing from the wound on her flank. She padded heavily onto the shore and sat down, her eyes dull with shock.

Cleo was still facing the tom. “You have to *think* before you act!” she snapped, jerking away and heading for the bank. “I’m so sorry,” she mewed desperately as she reached Night. She saw the gash and her wet pelt twitched with horror. “He’s hurt you,” she mewed. “Let’s get you back to your den.” She nosed Night gently to her paws and began to guide her along the shore.

“I—I made a mistake.” Casper waded from the river and began to follow.

River Ripple nudged him away. Anger surged beneath his pelt. “How could you think Night would hurt any cat?”

“I don’t know her,” Casper mewed defensively. “All I saw was a strange cat pushing Cleo toward the deep water,” Casper mewed. “How was I meant to know they were *fishing*? Where I come from, cats don’t fish.” River Ripple could see from the panic sparking in the ginger tom’s eyes that he was deeply shaken. “Will she be all right?”

“I hope so,” River Ripple told him darkly. He hurried ahead and pressed against Night’s shoulder.

Cleo glanced at him. “I’m sorry about Casper.” She’d talked about the kit’s father when the group had shared meals, but she hadn’t mentioned he was a mouse-brain who used claws first and asked questions later. River Ripple shot her a reproachful look, and Cleo dipped her head apologetically.

River Ripple took Night’s weight as Cleo fell back and walked beside Casper.

“Why did you come here?” she asked sharply.

“The Twolegs moved away,” Casper told her.

“And left you behind?” Cleo asked.

“Yes,” Casper mewed. “But new Twolegs came to live in the den and started feeding me. They’re kinder than the old ones. They give me nicer food, and I’m

allowed to sleep anywhere I like. I think they'll let us keep the kits. That's what I came to tell you. It's safe to go home."

There's more to life than food and sleep. River Ripple growled to himself and guided Night up the riverbank. She was trembling, staring at her paws as though it was taking all her strength to keep going. As they reached the thicket, Silver and Croak hurried out.

Croak's nose twitched. "I knew I smelled blood," she mewed as she saw them. She padded quickly to Night's side. Together she and River Ripple helped Night to her den, past the others who'd left the meal they'd been sharing to crowd around their injured rivermate.

River Ripple stayed outside as Night collapsed into her nest and Croak crouched beside her.

"Fetch some moss to pad the wound," the tortoiseshell called to Whistle, who was peering inside, eyes round with worry.

He nodded and hurried from the thicket.

"I'll help." Hollow raced after him.

Croak was sniffing Night's wound. "It's long, but not too deep," she mewed. "The bleeding will stop

soon.”

Relief washed River Ripple’s pelt. He glanced at the clearing. Cleo and Casper had stopped in the middle. Hunter and Scout were the only cats who’d noticed them. The others were too concerned about Night to wonder why there was a ginger kittypet in their camp. But the two kits were fluffed excitedly and purred loudly at their father.

“I knew you’d come and find us,” Scout mewed.

“Have you come to live with us?” Hunter asked

Casper looked down at the kits with warmth in his eyes. “I’ve come to take you home.”

The kits stopped purring.

Mist padded into the clearing, his pelt ruffling as he saw Casper. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“He’s my mate,” Cleo told the black-and-white tom quickly. “He came to tell me it’s safe to go home.”

Mist’s gaze flitted toward Night’s den, where his rivermates clustered. His nose wrinkled. “Why can I smell blood?” He hurried to the den, slid past River Ripple, and squeezed inside.

“She’s got a gash on her flank,” Croak told him as he crouched beside his littermate’s nest. “Whistle and

Hollow have gone to fetch moss.”

Mist blinked anxiously at Night. “You’re going to be okay,” he promised, though he didn’t sound sure.

Croak sat back on her haunches. “It looks worse than it is,” she mewed.

Night shifted stiffly in her nest. “It took me by surprise,” she murmured. “I’ll be okay in a moment.”

“You need to rest,” Croak told her.

“It looks painful,” Mist mewed.

“It is.” Night reached her muzzle around and sniffed the wound. She lapped at it tentatively with her tongue and drew back quickly, wincing.

Her eyes were brighter, and, feeling reassured, River Ripple turned away. He crossed the clearing and stopped in front of Casper. The ginger tom looked out of place beside Cleo. It was hard to believe the two cats were mates. Casper’s soft fur and round eyes were not those of a hunter. Cleo was sleeker and fitter and seemed to belong beside the river now. But Hunter and Scout were winding excitedly around their father’s paws, clearly delighted to see him again.

River Ripple’s heart pricked with pity. He hadn’t thought about how much the kits must have missed

their father. He blinked at Cleo. "Are you going back with him?"

Cleo looked Casper before answering. "I was hoping he'd stay with us."

River Ripple didn't respond. How could he? This tom had hurt Night. It was true he'd thought he'd been protecting his mate, but wasn't using claws first and asking questions later more like something Clear Sky would do?

"You'd like it here," Cleo told Casper. "We're like a family. We hunt together and share prey together. The kits are never hungry."

"They were never hungry with the Twolegs," Casper reminded her.

"But here we're free to do what we like," Cleo pressed.

"Having to hunt every day and share my food doesn't sound like freedom to me," Casper mewed. "The Twolegs give us everything we need, and we don't have to work for it." He touched Hunter's ear with his nose and shifted his paws to let Scout peek from under his belly. "And it's always warm and dry in the Twoleg den." He looked around. "Can you imagine

life here when it's cold?"

But you're never truly free. River Ripple remembered his own time with Twolegs. He'd been warm and dry, yes—but also trapped. And when the Twolegs decided to change everything, he'd had no say.

Casper blinked at River Ripple. "I'm really sorry I hurt your friend," he mewed. "I just reacted when I thought Cleo was in danger." He gazed at her. "Because I love her so much."

Then why did it take so long for you to look for her? River Ripple kept the thought to himself and dipped his head to the ginger tom. "We've all grown fond of Cleo, and she's been a great help to the group." He hoped she would stay even if Casper didn't.

But Cleo was gazing wistfully at Casper. "Please stay," she mewed.

"I wouldn't be happy here," Casper told her. "And I think the kits would be safer in the Twoleg den." He blinked at her. "What would you do if they got sick out here?"

Cleo dropped her gaze. "I don't know." Sighing,

she looked at Hunter and Scout.

"I'm going back to the Twolegs," Casper told her. *"And I want you to come with me. It's your choice, but it's not the same without you, and it would be best for the kits."*

Cleo hesitated. She scanned the clearing, and River Ripple could see from the sadness in her eyes that she was saying goodbye to her home beside the river. His heart felt heavy. Cleo and the kits had brought a strong sense of family to the group. But he understood why she wanted to leave. Would he feel safe raising kits here?

Cleo blinked at him apologetically. *"I have to go with Casper,"* she mewed. *"Thanks for letting me be part of the group."*

Hunter stared at her mother in alarm. *"Are we really leaving?"*

"I want to learn how to swim," Scout mewed.

Casper nuzzled the tom-kit. *"We'll bring you back to visit."*

Cleo ran her tail along Hunter's spine. *"We'll be safer with the Twolegs,"* she told him.

River Ripple's heart ached with disappointment,

but Scout and Hunter didn't need to know that. He purred at the kits. "How about one last meal with us before you go?" he mewed. "It will give you a chance to say goodbye to every cat."

The thicket felt strangely quiet when River Ripple padded into the clearing the next morning. He'd grown accustomed to arriving from his home in the reed beds to find Hunter and Scout chasing each other in and out of the tree roots or batting a moss ball.

Woodlouse, Sage, and Hollow were finishing the last of yesterday's catch. Whistle and Silver were still sleeping in their dens.

Mist sat outside Night's den. He got to his paws when he saw River Ripple. "She's worse today," he mewed anxiously.

Croak slid out of Night's den. "The wound's infected," she mewed.

River Ripple hurried past and poked his head inside. Night was asleep, but he could feel heat pulsing from her, and the air was sour with the stench of infection. "Night?"

She groaned but didn't open her eyes.

River Ripple ducked out. "Do you know how to

cure her?" he asked Croak.

Croak shook her head.

River Ripple looked toward Whistle and Silver. "Do you know how to treat an infected wound?"

Silver shook her head.

Whistle's eyes glistened nervously. "All we can do is wait to see if she gets better."

Panic sparked through River Ripple's fur. What if she *didn't* get better? What if she got worse? If she couldn't fight the infection, it would kill her. He blinked at Mist. "We have to get help."

"Where from?" Mist frowned.

There was only one place they could ask. "The mountain cats might know how to treat her," he mewed.

Mist's ears pricked. "Do you think they'd help?"

"We have to try," River Ripple mewed. "It's better than doing nothing." He headed out of the thicket and padded toward the meadow. Pausing, he gazed toward the forest. It stood dark against a bright blue sky. *Clear Sky won't help.*

But Gray Wing might. River Ripple headed the other way and swam the river. He waded out of the

water, climbed the riverbank, and took the path toward the moor.

His pelt twitched anxiously as he reached the edge and ducked between the bushes of heather, following a rutted track between them. He tracked it uphill, hoping it would lead straight to the hollow where he'd listened to Gray Wing's group bickering. He'd lost his bearings when he'd left last time, and it had taken him nearly the whole afternoon to find his way back to the river. The high walls of heather blotted out the horizon, and the trail twisted and turned like an eel.

He had to hurry. Night needed help.

What if they turn me away? River Ripple pushed the thought aside. Surely the mountain cats wouldn't let her die. *Perhaps they don't know how to cure infections.* River Ripple's heart lurched. *Stop thinking!* He focused his attention on the path and followed it until it hit a dead end where a swath of prickly gorse blocked his way. He turned back and took a path he'd missed, but it led to another dead end. He retraced his steps, taking one path, then another, probing deeper and deeper into the maze of heather, panic welling in his chest. It felt like he was getting

farther away from help instead of nearer, and he wondered whether to head back downhill and start again on another trail completely.

As he slowed and looked back along the path, he heard a mew.

“Dappled Pelt!”

He pricked his ears. Cats were close by!

“Are these dock leaves big enough?”

“Nearly!”

The voices sounded beyond the heather wall. How could he reach them? The path might lead him farther away instead of closer, and the cats could be gone before he found where they were. He narrowed his eyes and flattened his ears and plunged between the branches. They were prickly and scraped his pelt and scratched his nose, but he wriggled on, pushing deeper and deeper into the heather.

Another mew sounded. “Is this feverfew?”

River Ripple felt like he was swimming through the heather. He sneezed as dust and pollen tickled his nose, and screwed his eyes tighter against the prickles, until suddenly his head popped out into daylight.

Three cats were standing in a grassy clearing.

They turned and stared at him as he slithered from the bushes and dropped onto the grass.

“I need help!” He crossed the meadow toward a black she-cat with dark green eyes.

The she-cat’s eyes widened. A slender tortoiseshell hurried to her side, while a gray-and-white tom raised his hackles, growling, a few tail-lengths away.

“I’m not here to cause trouble,” River Ripple mewed. “I need a cat who knows how to treat an infected wound.”

The black she-cat pricked her ears. “Dappled Pelt.” She looked at the tortoiseshell. “Can you help him?”

“Who’s hurt?” The tortoiseshell padded toward River Ripple.

“My friend,” River Ripple told her. “She’s at the thicket near the river. She’s got a fever and her wound smells bad.”

The tortoiseshell glanced at the black she-cat. “Can I go with him?”

The she-cat nodded. She flicked her tail at the gray-and-white tom, who relaxed, his pelt smoothing.

River Ripple felt relief wash his pelt.

The tortoiseshell blinked at him. "Show me where she is."

"This way," He nodded at the heather wall he'd burst through.

The tortoiseshell glanced at it doubtfully, then headed for a gap nearby. "Let's take this path," she mewed.

River Ripple followed as she ducked between the bushes.

"Your name's Dappled Pelt, right?" River Ripple called as he followed her along the trail.

"Yes," she mewed without looking back. "What's yours?"

"River Ripple."

"And your wounded friend?"

"Night."

"I think Gray Wing's mentioned you," Dappled Pelt mewed. "Are you the cats who fish in the river?"

"Yes."

"We see you from the moor," Dappled Pelt told him. "Can you really swim?"

"Yes," River Ripple answered breathlessly.

Dappled Pelt was fit and clearly used to these trails. She kept up a fast pace right to the edge of the heather and quickened it as she crossed the grass to the shore.

River Ripple picked up his pace and fell in beside her. "Do you really know how to heal wounds?"

"I know herbs that will help," Dappled Pelt mewed. "But I can't promise to cure her. Is she strong?"

"Yes," River Ripple told her.

"Well fed?"

"Yes."

"Good." Dappled Pelt stopped at the riverbank and stared across the water. "Is she over there?"

"Yes." River Ripple was beginning to wonder if this was all he would say to the mountain cat. Still, he was very happy for her to take the lead if it meant saving his friend.

Her pelt prickled along her spine. "I can't swim."

Finally, something I can help with! "We can cross on the stepping stones." River Ripple led her downstream.

She hurried after him. "I thought I was going to have to ride on your back," she mewed. Her eyes

sparkled with amusement. "I'm glad there's another way."

River Ripple purred, warming to this mountain cat. She wasn't anything like Clear Sky. She didn't seem to care about boundaries. She only seemed to care about helping Night even if it meant getting her fur wet.

"Does borage grow near your camp?" she asked as she followed him across the stepping stones.

"I haven't seen any," River Ripple told her. "To be honest, I don't know what borage looks like."

"Don't worry." Dappled Pelt reached the last stone and leaped to shore, looking relieved. "I do." She glanced back across the stones, shaking the water from her paws. "Which way now?"

"Follow me." River Ripple led her toward the thicket.

"It's pretty here," Dappled Pelt commented as they passed a willow tree trailing its branches in the water.

"I guess it must seem different from the moor," River Ripple mewed. He wondered what it felt like to be so closed in. Perhaps the heather protected the mountain cats from the worst of the weather. It must,

since there were no trees to blunt the wind. Or perhaps they were used to the cold.

As he led her into the thicket clearing, Mist and Croak hurried to meet them. Silver and Woodlouse got to their paws. Hollow sat up, his ears pricking.

Mist blinked hopefully at Dappled Pelt. "Can you help?"

"She knows about healing herbs," River Ripple told him.

"I'll do my best." Dappled Pelt dipped her head, then crossed to Night's den as though she'd been there before.

River Ripple's tail twitched with surprise. "How do you know where Night is?" he asked.

"I can smell the infection." Dappled Pelt stopped outside. She looked at Mist, who'd followed her, his pelt ruffling nervously. "Is it okay if I go in?"

"Of course."

The tortoiseshell mountain cat disappeared inside.

She squeezed out a few moments later. "I need borage for her fever and oak leaves to fight the infection. Marigold, too, if you can find any." She looked hopefully around the clearing.

Hollow swished his tail. "I can get borage."

"I'll fetch oak leaves." Woodlouse hurried away.

"I know where there's some marigold," Silver mewed.

They headed out of the thicket.

Dappled Pelt looked at River Ripple. "I need cobweb too," she told him. "To bind the wound once I've treated it."

"Okay."

As he turned to leave, she called after him. "As much as you can gather!"

By the next evening, Night's fever had dropped, and the angry swelling around the gash in her flank had subsided.

As the sun sank behind the moortop, River Ripple stood at the edge of the thicket with Dappled Pelt. "Thank you." His heart swelled with gratitude. "She might have died if you hadn't come."

"I'm glad I could help," Dappled Pelt told him. "And I hope you manage to collect all the other herbs I suggested." She met his gaze anxiously. "Will Croak and Sage remember what they're all for?"

He dipped his head. "I'm sure they will." She'd

taught them all so much in the two days she'd been with them, but Croak and Sage were the ones who'd really paid attention. "Are you sure you won't stay a little longer?" he mewed.

He wished she'd stay with them permanently. She'd be a great asset, not only because of her healing knowledge, but because she was kind and gentle in a way he hadn't expected from a mountain cat.

She shook her head. "My group needs me."

River Ripple felt a pang of disappointment. But he admired her loyalty.

"I've enjoyed my time here," Dappled Pelt went on. "Your friends are nice, and so was the meditation. I might even try it once I'm home."

"You are welcome to visit anytime," he told her.

"Thanks." She dipped her head.

"Will you be okay on the stepping stones?" River Ripple called as she turned away.

"I'll be fine," she promised, flicking her tail.

As she padded from the thicket, River Ripple headed to Night's den. Mist was dozing outside, and he tiptoed past him. The tom must be exhausted. He'd hardly slept since Night was injured. River Ripple was

tired too, but he wanted to check on Night before he crossed the river to his nest among the reeds. He nosed his way into her den. “Night?” he mewed softly.

Her head was resting on her paws and her eyes were closed. She opened them and sat up a little. “Hi.”

“I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“It’s okay,” she told him. “I’ve slept all day.”

“How’s your wound?” River Ripple asked. “Does it hurt?”

“Hardly at all,” she mewed. “Whatever that mountain cat did, I feel much better.”

“She was kind, wasn’t she?” River Rippled mewed. “It was useful having someone who knows about herbs.”

Night eyed him warily. “I heard you speaking with her,” she mewed. “Asking if she’d stay. You want her to join us, don’t you?”

He blinked at her. “She’d be a good fit.”

Night scowled. “I thought I’d made myself clear about taking in more cats,” she mewed.

“But Dappled Pelt would make the group better,” he pressed. “She has skills no one else has. And she’s gentle and—”

Night cut him off. “Her friends aren’t gentle,” she mewed. “Sure, Dappled Pelt is friendly and kind. *Cleo* was friendly and kind, but Casper wasn’t. He nearly killed me.”

“He didn’t mean to,” River Ripple argued.

“Perhaps not,” Night conceded. “But all the same, he brought trouble. More cats mean more trouble. I wish you could see that.”

“But—”

“This isn’t the park, River Ripple. We can’t simply trust every cat we meet. Out here, cats can be as dangerous as Twolegs.”

“Twolegs aren’t always dangerous,” River Ripple protested. “And neither are cats.”

“Believing that will get you into trouble,” Night warned. “The group ought to stay as it is. We should keep ourselves to ourselves. It’s the only way we can be sure no one else gets hurt.”

River Ripple didn’t want to argue. Night was still weak. But he wasn’t going to agree with her, either. This wasn’t the park—she was right about that. But that didn’t mean he had to stop trusting every cat. It would go against his deepest instinct. Whatever Night

said, he was determined to believe that other cats, and even some Twolegs, were good and kind. At least until they proved otherwise.



Chapter 9



“I can see trout.” Mist waded into the water and paused, looking back at River Ripple. “Are you coming?”

“Soon.” River Ripple blinked at him through the darkness. Moonlight was shimmering on the surface of the river. They’d come night fishing, but River Ripple wanted to meditate first. He hadn’t had a chance that morning. When he’d reached the thicket at dusk, Sage and Woodlouse had been more interested in the prey pile than in meditating, and Mist was eager to go hunting. Croak and Hollow had been gone for three days, roaming somewhere beyond the forest with Whistle. Silver hadn’t returned to her nest since yesterday, which wasn’t unusual. And so River Ripple had agreed to join Mist on his hunt. But he always felt a day hadn’t ended properly unless he had meditated, so now he sat on the riverbank and watched Mist dive beneath the surface, then closed his eyes.

It was strangely quiet. No crickets hummed; no owls called. The air felt heavy and smelled sharp,

almost like Twolegplace air. Perhaps the wind was carrying scent from a Twoleg nest. River Ripple didn't usually come this far upstream, past the stepping stones, where the forest reached the water. Clear Sky had claimed the woods for his own, and it wasn't worth risking a fight. Besides, there were more than enough fish downstream.

River Ripple let his shoulders loosen and focused on the chattering of the water. Being near the river brought him fresh energy and swept old thoughts away. Meditation felt to him like a conversation with the river. It seemed to be listening. Sometimes he even found himself asking the river for advice.

He asked for it now. Night's determination to keep their group cut off from other cats troubled him. Was she being wise? He thought about the mountain cats. *They* kept themselves to themselves—Clear Sky had ringed his territory with scent markers to keep other cats away, and Gray Wing's cats rarely strayed from the moor. Perhaps all cats were loners at heart. *Should I accept Night's decision to keep the group as it is?*

The river swished gently past without answering,

and River Ripple's thoughts tumbled after it.

The mountain cats were territorial, that was clear. But they were willing to open up to outsiders when it suited them. Hadn't Clear Sky said that River Ripple might join them one day? And the moor cats had sent Dappled Pelt home with him when he'd asked for help. Dappled Pelt couldn't have been more different from Clear Sky—she wasn't aggressive or strict about borders—but hadn't seemed interested in joining his group. He admired her loyalty and wondered if his rivermates would ever be so dependable. They came and went as they pleased, and it was starting to bother him. Would Croak, Whistle, and Hollow come back this time? Would Silver return to her den? He couldn't help wondering if his group would still exist by the time the cold weather returned. *Can I make them stay?*

The river flowed softly past. *Water carves its own path, not by force but by perseverance.* River Ripple stiffened. Was this the river's answer? *I can't make any cat do anything, but I might be able to guide them.* Hope sparked beneath his pelt. *I can inspire loyalty.* He could encourage his rivermates to stay. He could bring change simply by setting an example, by

staying true to his own beliefs. He might even help the mountain cats—he might soften them a little and persuade them that kindness and tolerance would make a better life for them all.

“River Ripple!” Mist’s sharp mew broke into River Ripple’s thoughts. “Look!”

As River Ripple opened his eyes, smoke stung them. Gray clouds billowed along the shore. He leaped to his paws, his ears flattening at a sound that sent terror sparking through his fur. The forest was *roaring*. His pelt spiked as he saw trees wrapped in flame. The woods were on fire! He backed away as flames lit the darkness and blasted scorching air across the shore.

Mist waded from the water. “We must warn the others.” The thicket was a long way downstream, but the grass and bushes in between were as dry as bone. A stray spark could set them alight. “Hurry!” Mist nudged River Ripple sharply and bounded away.

River Ripple began to follow, screwing up his eyes as smoke fogged the shore.

“Tall Shadow!”

A cry from the forest made him pull up. He

stumbled to a halt. "Someone's in the forest!" he yowled to Mist.

Mist glanced back, slowing.

"Warn the others!" River Ripple waved him on with a flick of his tail. "I'll see who it is."

Mist's eyes rounded with worry.

"I'll be careful," River Ripple promised, nodding Mist on.

Mist hesitated for a moment longer, then raced away, splashing through the shallows around the bend in the river before disappearing into the darkness.

River Ripple headed back toward the forest. As he felt the heat of the fire, the cry sounded again.

"We'll never get out!"

River Ripple narrowed his eyes as smoke gusted from between the trees. Cinders stung his nose, but he forced himself closer. A crack sounded in the treetops, and his heart seemed to burst as a burning branch snapped and began to fall. It trailed fire through the air and crashed onto the ground less than a tree-length away, exploding into cinders and shooting sparks high into the canopy. River Ripple shrank beneath his pelt as heat washed over him, but he held his ground, and

as the cinders settled, he saw Gray Wing.

He froze. The gray tom was trapped in a small clearing with a group of other cats. They stared at the fire as it leaped around them, licking hungrily at the trees and devouring the ferns. Dappled Pelt and Jackdaw's Cry were with them, and so was the black she-cat River Ripple had met on the moor. A younger ginger tom was pacing to and fro, his gaze flashing around the ring of flames.

What were moor cats doing here? This was *Clear Sky's* territory. River Ripple strained to see past the wall of flames that blocked the cats from the river. Was Clear Sky's group with them? He couldn't see the aggressive tom. But the whole forest seemed to be ablaze. Had they already escaped?

Another branch crashed to the ground. It landed, flaming, behind the group of cats. The black she-cat dropped into a crouch, her pelt slicked with fear. The ginger tom looked toward shore. *Does he know the river's close?* River Ripple tried to catch his eye, but the tom was staring blindly ahead. *Can he see me through the smoke?*

"This way!" River Ripple yowled through the

flames. Hope flickered in his chest as the ginger tom's ears pricked. He yowled louder. "You have to jump the flames!"

The ginger tom lifted his tail.

Hurry! River Ripple willed him to jump. It would take courage to leap through fire into darkness. *You can do it!* River Ripple silently urged the tom on, his breath catching as the tom began to run toward the flames.

"Thunder! No!" the black she-cat called after him, but the ginger tom ignored his campmate.

"Come on!" he called to the others. "There's water here."

Thunder had seen the river! River Ripple stepped back as Thunder leaped and soared through the air, smoke clouding around him like mud in water as he lifted over the flames and plunged down, stones cracking when he landed with a thump on the shore. He rolled over deftly and jumped to his paws, turning back toward the forest.

His eyes widened as he saw River Ripple, and he hesitated, but only for a heartbeat. Then he called to his friends, including Jackdaw's Cry, a black tom River

Ripple had met at the border only a few days before. “Jump!” He began pacing frantically beside the wall of fire. “Come on! You can do it!”

He’s brave! River Ripple hurried toward him.

Thunder stared at him. “Who are you?”

“My name is River Ripple. You did well, young one.” He wanted to continue praising Thunder for his courage, but the tom turned back to his campmates.

“Tall Shadow! Gray Wing! Hurry! It’s safe here!”

They pricked their ears eagerly; then, one at a time, they began to race toward him and leap the flames. Jackdaw’s Cry crashed down first. He staggered to keep his balance, then turned to help his campmates as they hit the shore and skidded over the pebbles. River Ripple stepped back as they found their paws and shook ash from their pelts, their eyes streaming from the smoke.

Dappled Pelt stumbled as she hit the ground but managed to stay on her paws. She blinked at River Ripple in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Fishing.”

“At night?” Her eyes widened. “How can you—” She didn’t get a chance to finish.

“Take a long run up!”

River Ripple jerked his muzzle around as Thunder yowled to the three cats left behind. One of them was hanging weakly between Gray Wing and the black she-cat, propped up by their shoulders.

Thunder yowled again. “Take a long run up, and then leap into the air as if you were catching a bird.”

The flames were closing around the three cats. Smoke rolled from deep in the forest.

As they disappeared into the cloud, the black she-cat yowled in panic. “Moon Shadow can’t make it.”

“Gray Wing, you jump,” Jackdaw’s Cry pressed in beside Thunder. “Then we’ll work out how to help Moon Shadow.”

“Come on, Gray Wing!” Thunder urged. “You *have* to do it!”

Gray Wing’s eyes were slitted against the smoke. He turned quickly to the black she-cat and spoke to her. Then, lowering his head like a badger about to charge, he raced for the flames and leaped. The flames crackled. The smoke thickened. Gray Wing disappeared as it billowed around him. Had he jumped high enough? River Ripple started forward.

“Gray Wing!” Thunder wailed. “Where are you?”

A rolling ball of fur landed heavily on the shore. As the smoke cleared, River Ripple saw Gray Wing, curled in the dirt, his eyes streaming, convulsing as he coughed. River Ripple’s heart lurched as he saw flames sparking along Gray Wing’s tail.

But Thunder had already darted toward his campmate and was pounding out the fire with his paws.

“I’m fine.” Gray Wing struggled to speak. “We can’t leave them there! They’ll burn to death.”

The black she-cat and Moon Shadow were still trapped by flames. They crouched together, hidden one moment by the smoke, lit another by the fire.

“You *have* to jump!” River Ripple yowled over the roar of the fire. But they didn’t seem to hear him.

“I’ve got an idea!” Jackdaw’s Cry suddenly blinked at Thunder excitedly. “But I need some help! Are you up for it?”

“What do you want me to do?” There was no hesitation in Thunder’s gaze as he answered, only determination.

“Follow me!” Jackdaw’s Cry waded into the river

and plunged beneath the surface.

River Ripple blinked. They weren't used to water, and the river was freezing. Weren't these cats scared of anything?

The tom stood up, water streaming from his pelt. "Get yourself wet like this," he told Thunder. "Then we're going through the fire to fetch Moon Shadow."

Thunder splashed into the shallows and ducked down beside Jackdaw's Cry, dunking his body in the cold water with barely a gasp. Then, pelts dripping, the two toms raced toward the flaming barrier.

"Get your tail over here," Jackdaw's Cry called across the flames to the she-cat. "We're coming for Moon Shadow!"

"I'm not leaving him!" The she-cat glared defiantly.

"You have to!" Jackdaw's Cry stared fiercely back.

"Thunder and I are coming through, and there isn't room for four cats over there."

"You promise? You won't let Moon Shadow die?"

Thunder met the black she-cat's anxious gaze. "We promise."

At last she backed up and, with a leap that made River Ripple hold his breath, skimmed the burning wall, wincing as the flames licked her soft belly.

As she landed, Thunder pelted forward into the flames, Jackdaw's Cry beside him.

River Ripple's heart seemed to miss a beat, and he watched breathlessly as they disappeared. The other cats stared at the blazing wall, terrified into silence. The fire roared and crackled between the trees, and Gray Wing coughed helplessly on the shore. Then, as suddenly as they'd disappeared, Thunder and Jackdaw's Cry burst from the flames, half carrying, half pushing Moon Shadow between them.

River Ripple could smell their fur burning as they let Moon Shadow fall to the ground and saw cinders smoldering in their pelts. "Quick!" He jerked his muzzle toward the river. "Soak yourselves again—there are sparks in your fur!"

As Thunder turned to look, the cinders burst into flames. He raced for the water, splashing into it behind Jackdaw's Cry.

"We did it!" Thunder mewed joyfully as he doused himself in the shallows. Then he saw Gray Wing,

crouched and coughing on the shore. His gaze darkened and he hurried toward him. "Are you okay?" His eyes narrowed with worry. "There's a burnt patch on your rear paw—"

"I'm fine!" Gray Wing cut Thunder off. "I'm not badly hurt, and my fur will soon grow back." Even though his mew was barely more than a hoarse whisper, there was irritation in it. "You don't need to fuss."

River Ripple pricked his ears in surprise. Hadn't he seen how brave Thunder had been? No wonder Thunder seemed to shrink beneath his pelt. But only for a moment.

The young tom turned away and looked at River Ripple. "Thank you for helping us." He shook out his fur. "Now, how do we get out of here?"

River Ripple nodded upstream. "I'll show you the way," he told Thunder. The night air shimmered in the heat of the fire. They had to get clear of the forest. "But you'll need to cross the river."

Thunder's gaze flashed around his campmates, their fur singed, their eyes glittering with shock. "I don't know if they have the strength."

“They’ll find it.” River Ripple looked at them too. They appeared to be exhausted, but he’d seen enough to know how tough they were. He wouldn’t want these cats as enemies. And Thunder had been the bravest of them. “Not every cat would find it in them to jump over fire,” he told the ginger tom. “Most of them would panic until it was too late.”

As he spoke, Gray Wing struggled to his paws. He was looking at Thunder through narrowed eyes. Was he going to snap at his campmate?

River Ripple stepped between them. “It’s good to see you again, Gray Wing.”

The black she-cat padded forward. “My name is Tall Shadow,” she mewed. “I’m the leader of these cats.” So *this* was Tall Shadow. Dappled Pelt had spoken warmly of her. River Ripple was surprised she seemed so stiff. “Thank you for your help,” she went on. “Can you really get us out of here?”

“Certainly.” River Ripple dipped his head. “I can show you the way out of the fire and back to your hollow, but you have to trust me.” Would the mountain cats follow him across the river?

He led them to the stepping stones, glancing back

to see them trailing behind him like a string of bedraggled ducklings. Would these cats—who dismissed every stranger as inferior—let him lead them to safety even if the path seemed dangerous?

River Ripple waited for the others to catch up, then nodded to the far shore. The river was flowing deep and quick. The stepping stones lay just beneath the surface, barely causing a ripple.

Tall Shadow's eyes widened. "Are you birdbrained?" she mewed sharply. "We're not all going to be able to swim the stream. Cats don't like water. Jackdaw's Cry and Thunder only went in because they had no choice."

There was no time for explanation. This was the safest route across the river, and showing would be quicker than explaining. He hopped onto the first stone, water swirling around his paws.

Tall Shadow gasped.

Thunder stared at him. "You're walking on water."

"No, I'm not." River Ripple couldn't help feeling a glimmer of satisfaction. *There are some things even mountain cats don't know.* "I'm walking on stones just below the surface. They'll hold any cat's weight."

Gray Wing was hanging back. "I'm sorry." He struggled to clear his throat. "But I can't go yet. I'm sorry I led the rest of you into danger, but the whole reason I came here was to look for Clear Sky."

River Ripple wondered what the gray tom meant. Had he wanted to warn Clear Sky of the fire? He remembered Clear Sky's words. *Strong cats don't need help.* He glanced back toward the burning forest. Did Clear Sky still believe that?

Gray Wing went on. "I'm sorry," he croaked, "but I can't go yet. I'm sorry I led the rest of you into danger, but the whole reason I came here was to look for Clear Sky, my brother."

River Ripple flicked his tail. So Gray Wing must have come here to warn Clear Sky, meaning that these cats had risked their lives for him. Would Clear Sky have done the same for them? "You think that Clear Sky can't look after himself and his cats?"

"Well . . . he can." Gray Wing avoided River Ripple's gaze. "Clear Sky's excellent at surviving."

"Oh, yes," River Ripple mewed sourly. "He's very good at that." Suddenly he felt a twinge of pity for Gray Wing. He clearly knew his brother's failings, and

yet he was still worried about him.

But they couldn't stay here. The wind was driving the fire along the riverbank. Sparks hissed as they rained into the river. If the grass caught fire on the far side of the river, there would be no escape left. They had to keep moving, but Gray Wing was still staring back toward the burning forest. *There's no time to worry about Clear Sky!* River Ripple swallowed back the words. He looked at Tall Shadow. Would she take the lead? But the black she-cat didn't move. She seemed to be waiting for Gray Wing. The others stared blindly ahead, exhausted and frightened. Even Dappled Pelt looked overwhelmed.

They'll die if they stay here. River Ripple hopped back onto the shore. Gray Wing was still hesitating. "Your leader is struggling," he hissed to the gray tom.

Gray Wing dragged his gaze from the forest.

"Your spirit is strong," River Ripple pressed. "And now you need to be strong for every cat."

Relief flooded beneath River Ripple's pelt as Gray Wing seemed to focus. He'd gotten the tom's attention; now he had to get the others moving. "First we need to get you all to safety," he told them. "Then

we can think about helping Clear Sky and his group—if they need helping.”

A wall of heat swept the cats as the wind picked up, fanning the flames.

“Right.” Gray Wing swished his tail. “Let’s do that.”

As River Ripple headed back toward the water, Gray Wing began to cough, but there was no time to wait for him to find his breath; they had to get to the other side. River Ripple waded in and stood beside the first stepping stone, up to his belly in the water as Tall Shadow hopped warily onto it. Her pelt twitched as the river lapped over her paws, but the stone didn’t shift under her weight, and she seemed to gain confidence and jumped onto the next.

River Ripple waded past and leaped onto the stone ahead of her. He led the way, looking back after every jump to make sure the mountain cats were following. They trailed behind, distrustful at first, but growing more certain with each jump. River Ripple reached the shore and watched them.

Gray Wing was at the rear, his flanks heaving as though he was struggling for air. He was barely

managing to cross the gaps. *He's really hurt.* River Ripple urged him on silently, away from the heat and the smoke, until at last the gray tom struggled onto dry land with his campmates. The mountain cats looked at one another as though barely able to believe they'd made it. As cool air washed River Ripple's fur, he felt a wave of compassion for the exhausted group, surprised when they clustered around him, their eyes brimming with gratitude.

"Thanks for saving our lives." Tall Shadow dipped her head.

"Yes. Who knows how many of us the fire would have eaten before it was full?" Cloud Spots added.

But Gray Wing was staring back across the river. The fire on the far shore had swallowed the bushes, and smoke billowed now over the stepping stones. "Clear Sky!" He yowled hoarsely across the water, struggling to make himself heard above the roar of the fire.

River Ripple shuddered but added his voice to the call. How could Clear Sky still be alive?

"Clear Sky!" Thunder joined his campmate. "Clear Sky!"

Borders can't protect you from everything, River Ripple thought darkly.

“Clear Sky!” Gray Wing broke down into coughing again as smoke drifted across the water. And then, as the wind whisked it away, a yowl sounded farther downstream.

Gray Wing pricked his ears. “That’s him!” he spluttered. “He’s alive!”

The yowl sounded again, stronger this time.

River Ripple hurried along the bank, and as the wind shifted and drove the flames back toward the forest, he saw a gray pelt sheltering in the shadow of the rocks jutting from the riverbank.

Clear Sky! River Ripple could hardly believe his eyes. Perhaps borders *could* protect him from anything. Or perhaps he was just lucky.

“Clear Sky!” Gray Wing was already calling to his brother. “Can you hear me? You’ll have to swim! It’s safe if you keep to the far side of that rock.”

The territorial gray tom River Ripple had tangled with before padded from the shadow of the rocks. More cats limped out behind him. Eyes glittering with fear, they crept to the water’s edge. How could they

cross? There was no way to reach the stepping stones. The fire had swallowed the shore. River Ripple watched in amazement as Clear Sky waded into the river. As the gray tom pushed into deeper water, his campmates followed. Fear flashed in their eyes as the riverbed fell away beneath their paws. They began to splash, some disappearing beneath the surface for a moment, then bobbing up again. Paws flailing, they began to struggle for the far shore. *They're swimming!* River Ripple stared in amazement. They weren't graceful, and he was glad the river was narrower here. But, thrashing and floundering, they kept their heads above water.

Clear Sky reached the shallows first and staggered onto the shore. River Ripple dove past him and grabbed the tabby she-cat struggling through the water behind. He dragged her toward the riverbank until her paws found the riverbed, then he let her go. As he turned back for another, Thunder and Dappled Pelt waded in and began to help.

Thunder caught a young she-cat by the scruff and hauled her toward the bank. Dappled Pelt nudged a frightened tabby onto the shore. They worked together,

guiding the cats to safety, until there was only a gray-and-white tom left in the water. As River Ripple dragged him toward the shallows, Dappled Pelt ducked down and pressed her shoulder to the tom's flank.

They reached the shore together, and the tom shrugged them off and limped toward his campmates. "Thanks," he grunted without looking back.

Dappled Pelt watched him go, the river swirling around her paws, then blinked at River Ripple. "We would have died today without you." Her golden eyes glistened gratefully.

"I'm glad I was here." Water streamed from River Ripple's pelt. He took a moment to catch his breath, relieved to see all the mountain cats on dry land. "I got a chance to return your kindness to Night."

Dappled Pelt pricked her ears. "How is she?"

"Much better," River Ripple told her.

"I'm glad." She looked relieved, and he suddenly wondered how much Dappled Pelt had told her campmates about his group. Would they see him as a threat? How much did the mountain cats know about the cats living in the thicket at the edge of their border? His pelt prickled uneasily. Gray Wing's cats seemed

tolerant of others, but Clear Sky saw every cat as a challenge. River Ripple watched uneasily as Clear Sky talked with Gray Wing and Thunder. The forest had been burned, Clear Sky's home along with it. Would its loss make Clear Sky more aggressive than ever?

Dappled Pelt was looking at him curiously. "How are Croak and Hollow?"

River Ripple stared at her blankly. His thoughts had wandered.

"Is Silver sleeping better?"

River Ripple tensed. "She's left," he mewed quickly. "They all have." It would be better for everyone if the mountain cats didn't think there were rivals at the edge of their territory. At least until they'd recovered from the fire.

"But you seemed so happy together." Dappled Pelt looked disappointed.

"We were," River Ripple mewed. "But we're loners at heart, and we like our freedom, so we come and go as we please." He glanced toward the mountain cats, clustered on the shore. "We still meet in passing from time to time," he added. "But none of us are really comfortable in groups." He realized with a

pang of regret how much truth was in his words. His group *were* all loners, and they *did* come and go. There was no real sense of loyalty, and he suspected that, even after all this time, he was the only one who wanted to belong to a permanent group.

“Would you like to come with us?” Tall Shadow’s question took him by surprise.

Come with us. He looked at the black she-cat, puzzled. Was she inviting him to join her group? He hesitated. *Do I want to?* He’d belong to something permanent. *No.* He would never belong with these cats. They were too different.

Tall Shadow was still staring at him expectantly.

Clear Sky was staring at him too, but his eyes were narrowed suspiciously. Even though he had no territory to protect now, he seemed to be issuing a warning.

River Ripple swallowed back a growl of irritation.

Tall Shadow’s question hung in the air. *Would you like to come with us?*

River Ripple lifted his chin. “I’m a rogue,” he told her. “I sleep with no other cats, but I wish you all the best.”

He turned and headed along the shore. His heart felt suddenly heavy. He was heading for the thicket to tell his friends he was safe, but was there any point? Silver, Hollow, Whistle, and Croak weren't there. And the others might have fled the moment they'd smelled the fire. For all he knew, the thicket was already deserted and he would never see any of them again.

I'll find more cats. River Ripple lifted his chin. He'd seen the courage and loyalty the mountain cats had shown in the face of danger. He knew now what he wanted. He wanted rivermates he could rely on. Dawn was beginning to show beyond the smoldering forest. He climbed the riverbank and crossed into the meadow. One day he'd find cats with the same beliefs. Together they would build a group—not territorial and aggressive like the mountain cats, but strong enough to face any threat.



Chapter 10



Charred wood crunched beneath River Ripple's paws. Overhead, blackened branches crisscrossed a bright blue sky. The scorched trees stood like stones, but, in the devastated forest, the eerie silence had lifted. Birds were calling to each other, and a woodpecker hammered in the distance. On the forest floor, green shoots poked here and there through the ash. The woods were coming back to life.

River Ripple tasted the air. Through the sharp tang of burnt wood, he could smell that voles and mice had begun to creep from the safety of their burrows. He looked up as a fat pigeon flapped its heavy wings above him.

Night saw it too. She blinked at it from the other side of the clearing. "Too risky," she warned River Ripple.

"I could reach it." River Ripple nodded toward a tree. Stripped by fire of its leaves, it would make easy climbing.

Night shook her head. "The branches are burnt,"

she warned. “They might not hold your weight. Let’s keep going.”

Hollow padded from between the trees. The loner had returned the day after the fire with Whistle and Croak. “I saw squirrels over there.” He nodded toward a rise deeper in the forest, where the trees had escaped the fire. There were singed ferns and bushes shriveled by the heat, but the brambles were green with new leaves, and a bushy canopy still shaded the forest floor.

River Ripple had enjoyed hunting in the forest in the days since the fire. The ash had soured the river, and fish were scarce. So, with Clear Sky and his followers staying in Gray Wing’s camp, River Ripple’s group hadn’t wasted an opportunity to fill their bellies with rich land prey. They’d ranged farther and farther, hunting regularly now beyond the reach of the fire, on land that surely must be outside Clear Sky’s boundaries. Even Clear Sky couldn’t be greedy enough to claim the whole forest—could he?

River Ripple swished his tail. He could see the squirrels too. They were sending twigs showering onto the forest floor as they scampered along the branches.

Just one would make a nice addition to the group's haul. They'd been hunting since dawn and had hidden the pile of prey they'd collected beneath the roots of an oak nearby. "Let's grab one and head back to the thicket."

Hollow led the way to the rise, nodding toward the squirrel tracks zigzagging between the trees. "We won't even have to climb."

The three cats scanned the slope, and River Ripple's heart quickened as he spotted a gray pelt bobbing along the top. He dropped into a hunting crouch, signaling with a flick of his tail for Hollow and Night to spread out. They followed his order and flanked him as he stalked quietly up the hill. Keeping low, he stopped close to the top, grateful his muted gray pelt would seem no more than a shadow moving against the forest floor.

The squirrel was scampering toward a beech. It stopped and began to rummage through the leaf litter heaped between its roots.

River Ripple glanced at Night. She was only a few tail-lengths away from the squirrel. He waited as she closed in and Hollow crept around the other side.

Night pressed her belly to the earth and fixed her gaze on the squirrel. Her hindquarters swayed, slowly at first and then faster, until, with a shiver of excitement, she leaped. She landed squarely, pinning the squirrel with her claws, and gave it a killing bite.

Hollow straightened and padded toward her, his tail whisking. "Great catch."

Licking his lips at the warm scent of blood, River Ripple joined him. "Let's head home," he mewed. "We can pick up the rest of our catch on the way."

As he turned, he caught a new scent and stiffened. Two cats were standing on the slope below, hackles high and anger glittering in their eyes. They were staring at the squirrel dangling from Night's jaws. Night stared back at them, her fur twitching nervously.

The smaller of the pair, a gray-and-white she-cat, flattened her ears. The gray tom beside her began to lash his tail.

River Ripple narrowed his eyes. He recognized them from the night of the fire. They'd been soaked from their swim across the river, their pelts clinging to their bodies, but the tom's thick neck and the she-cat's narrow face were still familiar. They were Clear Sky's

cats. His heart sank. The mountain cats had returned to the forest, and would not take well to River Ripple's cats moving across their territory.

He dipped his head politely. "Good morning," he mewed.

The gray tom padded forward, a growl rolling in his throat. "What are you doing here?"

The she-cat cut in. "They've come to steal our prey," she snapped.

River Ripple forced his fur not to ruffle. "It's good to see you've recovered," he mewed.

"Recovered from what?" The she-cat stared at him.

"You nearly drowned in the river," he reminded her. "When you were escaping the fire." Had these cats forgotten he'd helped save them only a few days earlier?

"Drowned?" The she-cat snorted. "We just got our fur wet, that's all."

The tom nodded toward the squirrel. "That's our prey."

"We caught it," River Ripple shot back.

"On *our* land," the tom snarled.

Hollow padded forward, his gaze flashing with anger. "This isn't your land."

"The forest belongs to Clear Sky." The tom's tail lashed harder.

Night dropped the squirrel. "Not this part!"

"All of it!" the tom hissed.

River Ripple's belly tightened. It was worse than he'd feared: Clear Sky had become even more territorial since the fire. Surely, having seen that strong cats still needed help from time to time, Clear Sky should have become more tolerant and willing to share. But it seemed that nearly losing his group had had the opposite effect. Anger sparked beneath River Ripple's pelt. But he still kept his fur flat. He wasn't going to fight today. He nodded to Night. "Come on," he mewed. "Let's go home."

She looked at him uncertainly.

"Bring the squirrel," he told her.

Her eyes glittered with doubt, but he held her gaze until she picked it up.

The gray tom took a step closer, showing his teeth.

River Ripple looked at him. "I don't know your name." He tipped his head to one side questioningly. "I

assume you have one.”

“You don’t need to know my name,” the tom growled.

“I would like to tell Clear Sky how well you guarded his precious prey.” River Ripple wanted these cats to know how petty they seemed to him.

The gray-and-white she-cat scowled. “I’m Quick Water and this is Nettle,” she snapped. “Not that it matters. If Clear Sky catches up with you, he’ll be too busy shredding your pelt to listen to anything you have to say.”

“You seem very sure of him,” River Ripple mewed.

“We are,” Quick Water shot back. “Now drop that squirrel and leave.”

“We’ll leave,” Ripple mewed. “But we’re taking the squirrel. We caught it. It belongs to us.”

He padded around the two mountain cats, forcing his ears not to twitch. He was ready for them to take a swipe at him, but they only watched as he passed. They knew they were outnumbered, and Hollow was broad-shouldered enough to intimidate any cat. River Ripple was aware of his own muscles beneath his pelt.

Head high, tail swishing, he led Night and Hollow back toward the meadow.

Quick Water and Nettle were tracking them.

“Don’t look back,” he told Night as they neared the edge of the forest, but he couldn’t resist peeking over his shoulder.

The two cats were glaring after them menacingly.

River Ripple, Night, and Hollow padded out from the shadow of the trees. Night’s eyes shimmered uneasily.

But Hollow’s tail was whipping from side to side. He looked at River Ripple. “What about the rest of our haul?” he growled. “We can’t just leave it there. It took us all morning to catch.”

“We’ll have to,” River Ripple told him.

The fur lifted along Hollow’s spine. “And let those mangy fox-hearts find it?”

Night stopped and dropped the squirrel. “We shouldn’t provoke them,” she mewed.

“Are you saying we should let them bully us?” Hollow growled.

“I don’t think we should start a fight we can’t win,” Night argued.

“Who *says* we can’t win?” Hollow’s eyes sparked with anger.

River Ripple gazed at the river flowing past the bottom of the meadow. He could see the thicket from here, green against the reed beds. It suddenly seemed vulnerable. The soft bushes and spindly trees where the group made its nests would be no defense if the mountain cats decided to attack. He felt a pang of guilt. He shouldn’t have taken his rivermates hunting in the forest. He’d been asking for trouble. Quick Water and Nettle were bound to report back to Clear Sky. If they told him they’d seen three river cats hunting together, Clear Sky would stop believing River Ripple’s story that he lived alone. He might tolerate a few lone cats hunting at the edge of his territory, but he would see a group as a threat—one he’d want to eliminate.

“Night’s got a point,” he told Hollow. “We need to stay away from the forest from now on.” He nodded toward the river. “There will be plenty of fish again soon, and we can hunt the water meadows until then.”

Hollow shot him a look seething with frustration; then he stalked away, heading for the thicket.

“You had me worried.” Night eyed River Ripple. “I

thought you were going to start a fight with those cats. I don't want a war."

"Nor do I," River Ripple mewed. "Our group's not strong enough to fight them yet."

"Yet?" Night's eyes widened. "I don't ever want to fight them," she mewed. "I only live here because there's good hunting and it's peaceful." She paused. "If it becomes dangerous, I'll move on. There's always prey farther down the river."

River Ripple blinked at her. Would she really leave rather than fight? While he was generally sour on the mountain cats at the moment, even he had to admire their loyalty to one another. He wished that his rivermates were more like them. Was he was expecting too much? Perhaps, if they had more time to grow attached to one another and the thicket, they'd become loyal.

Until they became a cohesive group, he would have to negotiate with the mountain cats as though there were no group. It would be hard talking to Clear Sky; he was too hostile. But River Ripple might be able to persuade Tall Shadow that he and his rivermates wanted nothing but peace—that they were simply a

loose collection of loners who occasionally hunted together. If he could convince Tall Shadow, she might convince Clear Sky, and the mountain cats would leave his rivermates alone.

“I’m going to visit the moor cats,” he announced.

Night blinked at him. “Is that safe?”

“I’ll take the squirrel.” He nodded to it, still lying on the grass. “I’ll make her believe we’re not a group. That we’re no threat. I’ll make sure they leave us in peace.”

She looked anxious. “Won’t they be angry if you cross onto their land? We shouldn’t provoke Tall Shadow’s cats as well as Clear Sky’s.”

“I’ll tell her I want to check on Moon Shadow and Gray Wing. They were in bad shape after the fire.”

Night narrowed her eyes. “Be careful,” she mewed. “These cats are greedy. It’s one thing to hunt on our land, but I’m concerned they might want to steal *us*.”

He blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

“They might want us to become part of their group. We’d have to follow their rules.” She shuddered. “I don’t want to spend my life fighting for

borders and prey.”

“That won’t happen,” River Ripple promised. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“I hope you do.” Flicking her tail nervously, she headed for the thicket.

River Ripple watched her go. He was beginning to feel that keeping his group together was harder than hunting minnows. One false move and they would scatter, and he’d be left alone beside the river with only quarrelsome mountain cats for company.

He shook out his pelt and grabbed the squirrel, then headed for the river. He swam across, dragging the squirrel through the water, and waded out, heading for the path Dappled Pelt had shown him through the heather. It brought him to the clearing where he’d found her, and he could see the prickly walls of the mountain cats’ camp higher up the hill. He ducked into a tunnel between the bushes and followed the winding trail, relieved when it came out beside an opening in the camp wall. Fluffing out his damp fur, he padded inside.

Cats ringed the clearing, sharing prey and washing. They lifted their heads as he stopped at the edge of the

clearing and stared at him. He looked as respectful as he could, dipping his head and dropping his tail. No one spoke, but Dappled Pelt at least looked pleased to see him; she blinked warmly and got to her paws.

River Ripple glanced over at Jackdaw's Cry, sitting beside a ginger she-cat while two kits chased around him. He hadn't thought about the mountain cats taking mates and having kits like ordinary cats.

Where was Gray Wing? Had he recovered from the fire? He scanned the shadows at the edge of the clearing but there was no sign him, or Tall Shadow.

River Ripple laid the squirrel on the grass. "Is Tall Shadow here?"

Dappled Pelt stopped beside him. "She's resting in her den," she mewed. "Is it important?"

"I was hoping to speak with her."

Dappled Pelt's tail twitched anxiously. "I don't know if she'll meet with you."

River Ripple frowned. Had the fire made the moor cats more territorial, like Clear Sky? "Why?"

"Moon Shadow died," she told him. "She's mourning."

River Ripple felt a stab of pity. The mountain cats

had fought so hard to rescue the black tom. "I'm sorry to hear that," he mewed.

"He was her brother." Dappled Pelt began head across the camp. "She's taken it very badly."

River Ripple began to follow then glanced at the squirrel. "I brought this for her."

"Tall Shadow's not eating at the moment," Dappled Pelt told him. "But I'm sure one of the others will enjoy it."

He left the squirrel and followed. "I saw how much Tall Shadow cared for her littermate," he mewed, remembering how she'd refused to leave the tom's side even as the forest burned around her.

"They've lived in separate camps for a while," Dappled Pelt told him. "I think that's one of the reasons she's so upset. She felt guilty she let him go. If she could have persuaded him to stay on the moor, he might still be alive."

"She risked her life to save him," River Ripple pointed out. "Wasn't that enough?"

"Of course it was," Dappled Pelt agreed. "But her pain runs deeper than his loss. It was a hard life in the mountains and a hard journey to get here. We lost so

many friends, but we thought life would be easier after we'd arrived." She shook her head slowly. "We didn't expect life to *still* be so hard."

River Ripple thought of his own journey here. He too had made the mistake of believing that once he'd found a new home, everything would fall into place. "Life never seems to get easier," he murmured.

She must have heard the weariness in his mew. She glanced at him. "Is something wrong?"

"I just had a run-in with Clear Sky's cats," he confessed. "I didn't know they were back in the forest."

"They left yesterday," Dappled Pelt told him. "Thunder went with them."

River Ripple wasn't surprised Thunder had left. Gray Wing had been hard on the young tom during the fire. But he couldn't help thinking Clear Sky might be worse.

Dappled Pelt stopped in front of a den woven into the camp wall. She called into the shadows. "Tall Shadow?" A grunt sounded inside. "River Ripple's here. He wants to talk to you."

River Ripple heard movement inside. A nest

rustled. As he waited for her to come out, he glanced across the clearing. Jackdaw's Cry was sniffing the squirrel. The black tom lifted his head, meeting River Ripple's gaze as though asking if it was a gift. River Ripple dipped his head and Jackdaw's Cry picked it up with a nod of thanks and carried it back to the ginger she-cat and her kits.

The den shivered as Tall Shadow slid out. She looked defeated. Her pelt was dull, and her tail dragged behind her.

River Ripple felt a rush of sympathy for the black she-cat. "I'm sorry to hear about Moon Shadow," he mewed.

Tall Shadow looked at him, then looked away without speaking.

Dappled Pelt blinked at River Ripple. "She's been like this for days," she mewed anxiously.

"Loss is hard to deal with." River Ripple remembered his own. His heart still ached when he thought of Flutter and the life he'd hoped for with her. He would never have that life. Perhaps that was the reason he longed to create a new family of cats by the river. "I'll talk to her. I might be able to help."

Dappled Pelt dipped her head. "I hope so," she mewed softly, then padded away.

River Ripple felt a flash of guilt as he realized that comforting Tall Shadow would be a way to get closer to her and become allies with the mountain cats. *I really do want to make her feel better*, he told himself. "You look like you've given up," he mewed.

Tall Shadow stared at the ground despondently.

River Ripple pressed on gently. "It seems a waste to come so far only to lose hope."

Tall Shadow lifted her gaze. Her eyes were hollow with grief. "I thought we'd find a better life here." Her mew was rasping, as though this was the first time she'd spoken in days. "But it's just the same. Nowhere is safe. We just find new ways to die."

"It won't always be that way." River Ripple felt a flood of pity for this cat. "Don't give up." He knew how daunting life could be and thought about what had comforted him during his first dark days here. "Life is like the river. It flows on, never stopping."

"So?" She looked at him sharply.

"Let the current carry you."

"What does *that* mean?"

“Accept what you can’t change,” he mewed. “The river is far stronger than you. Don’t resist the current. Don’t swim against it. Use its power to lift you and guide you.”

“My brother *died!*” Her eyes flashed angrily. “Should I just accept his death and let it *lift* me and *guide* me? Where to?”

River Ripple returned her gaze steadily. “Your grief will make you stronger,” he mewed. “With every loss, we see how valuable life is.”

“With every loss, I see how little is worth fighting for,” she growled.

“Then don’t fight,” River Ripple mewed. “Accept.”

Her dark green gaze swam with sadness. “I can’t.” Her mew cracked.

“Would Moon Shadow want you to lie down and stop living?” River Ripple mewed. “Would he want you to give up like this?”

But she wasn’t listening. “It’s not fair!” she snapped. “He’s gone and I’ll never see him again!”

River Ripple’s heart ached for her. He would never see Flutter again, and the thought still

overwhelmed him from time to time. But, when he meditated, he felt a connection with her that comforted him. “There might be a way for you to reach him,” he ventured. “It’s the way I connect to the cats I left behind.”

She looked up. “What is it?”

“Where I come from, cats meditate,” he mewed. “We let our thoughts drift, and it allows us to access feelings we normally can’t.”

“Like dreaming?”

“Kind of,” River Ripple mewed. “But you’re awake. You follow your breath and open your mind and let your thoughts slow. It’s like . . .” He hesitated, trying to explain how it felt to him. “It’s like becoming water,” he mewed. “Shapeless and flowing. Worries seem unimportant, and you can connect to what’s most precious to you.”

“Like Moon Shadow?”

“Maybe.” River Ripple didn’t want to promise too much. Meditation had given him a powerful sense of Flutter’s presence even though she was far away, but he didn’t know if it would work for every cat. “I can’t be certain. But there’s a chance he might be able to

touch your mind if you allow him.”

Tall Shadow tilted her head thoughtfully. Hope seemed to flicker in her eyes for the first time. “I might try it,” she mewed. She sat up straighter and looked across the camp, as though seeing it properly for the first time in days. Then she turned to River Ripple once more. “Why did you come?” she asked. “Do you need something?”

“I wanted to see how Gray Wing was doing,” he told her. “He seemed badly injured by the fire.”

“He’s recovering,” Tall Shadow told him. “What about you? Did the fire reach the thicket? Did any of your group get hurt?”

River Ripple’s tail tip twitched nervously. She clearly hadn’t believed him when he’d told her he was a loner. Dappled Pelt must have talked about her time beside the river with Night, Mist, Croak, and the others. “The fire didn’t reach the thicket.” He tried to sound casual. “Not that it matters. No cat sleeps there now.”

“Really?” Tall Shadow looked surprised. “Have you moved your camp?”

“It was never really a camp,” he mewed. “Cats

come and go. Their dens are only ever makeshift.”

“But you still hunt together.” Tall Shadow narrowed her eyes. “We see you in the river with other cats.”

“I guess we do.” River Ripple shifted his paws. “Sometimes. But mostly we go our separate ways.”

Tall Shadow narrowed her eyes. “Clear Sky seems to think you’re a permanent group.”

“He does?” River Ripple’s belly tightened. “I guess it could look that way across a border. But we’re just loners. Nothing more.” He looked at her innocently. “Perhaps you could tell him that next time you see him.”

“Are you worried he sees you as a threat?”

“Why should he?” Her shrewdness took him by surprise. “We’re just cats who fish in the river,” he mewed.

“I’ll tell him.” She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. “If I see him.”

“Thank you.” River Ripple dipped his head. “No cat should feel threatened by us.” It was true, but would the mountain cats believe him? Would they even understand the concept?

River Ripple slept in the thicket that night, curled between the roots of a hazel, rather than return to his den in the reed bed. The confrontation with Quick Water and Nettle had left him uneasy. If the mountain cats were planning revenge, he wanted to be able to protect his rivermates.

He slept fitfully, only slipping into deep sleep shortly before dawn. Hollow's paw steps still woke him, and he blinked his eyes with a jolt of alarm. The sun had just begun to lift over the forest, and the black tom was already restlessly pacing the small thicket clearing.

"Is something wrong?" River Ripple lifted his head.

Hollow's hackles twitched. "We shouldn't have left our prey in the forest."

"Forget it," River Ripple advised.

"But it's *ours*," Hollow growled. "We caught it."

"It's not worth fighting over." River Ripple understood the tom's frustration, but they'd provoked Clear Sky's cats enough.

"It's not just the prey," Hollow growled. "We have to show them we can't be bullied."

But we're not strong enough to fight them. River Ripple got to his paws. "Let's hunt along the riverbanks and catch something else. The prey we left will be stale by now."

"I'm going back for it." With a growl, Hollow headed out of the thicket.

"Wait!" River Ripple called after him. "It's too risky!"

Night squeezed from her den. "What's wrong?"

"Hollow's going to fetch the prey we left in the forest yesterday." River Ripple's ears twitched nervously.

Night looked alarmed. "What if the mountain cats catch him?"

"I hope they won't." River Ripple couldn't let Hollow face danger alone. "I'd better go with him." He hurried after the black tom, surprised when Night followed. "Stay and rest," he told her. Her wound was freshly healed; he didn't want her to get hurt again. And he didn't want Clear Sky's cats to see them together. Especially after he'd tried so hard to persuade Tall Shadow yesterday that they weren't a group.

Night fell in beside him. "He might need help."

"I'll be there to help," River Ripple told her.

"It will be safer with three of us."

She sounded determined, and he realized it was pointless arguing. He padded out into the meadow. Dew shimmered on the long grass, and beyond it the blackened forest stood dark against the pale morning sky. Hollow was already halfway to the forest, bounding across the field, not even trying to keep out of sight. River Ripple broke into a run and raced after him, Night at his heels. They caught up to him at the edge of the trees.

Hollow blinked at them. "You didn't need to come."

"You'll need help carrying the prey," River Ripple told him.

"I want to make sure you don't start a fight," Night added.

Hollow sniffed and padded into the forest.

"Let's hope Clear Sky's cats aren't awake yet," River Ripple mewed as he followed.

"I don't care if they are," Hollow grunted. "It's *our* prey. *We* caught it."

Night glanced nervously at River Ripple.

“Let’s be as quick as we can,” he mewed.

Birds called alarms to each other as the three cats trekked through the woods. River Ripple’s pelt ruffled along his spine. Alert for any movement or the sound of paw steps, he followed Hollow, wishing the black tom would keep his head down and tread more softly. Was he *looking* for a fight?

“We just grab the prey and get out of here,” River Ripple hissed softly.

Hollow’s tail flicked angrily. “We should never have left it behind.”

“Keep your voice down,” Night whispered. “These cats are not the sort to refuse a fight twice.”

They were nearing the rise where they’d hidden the prey between the roots of an oak. Hollow quickened his pace, reaching the tree first, and ducked down to pull out the haul.

His pelt bristled. “They’ve stolen it, the thieving fox-hearts!”

River Ripple stopped beside him and looked into the empty hole between the tree roots. His heart sank. Clear Sky would be angry at seeing how much prey

they'd caught on his land. *His land.* River Ripple's claws itched with frustration. How could one cat claim so much?

"I'm not going home empty-pawed," snapped Hollow. He headed away between the trees.

"Come back!" Night hissed after him.

But Hollow ignored her, barging through a clump of ferns and disappearing.

River Ripple glanced at Night. "Let's just find something quickly and go home," he mewed. A fast catch might appease Hollow, and he couldn't help feeling a small glimmer of satisfaction at the idea of taking prey from the mountain cats. *After all, they stole ours.*

Night frowned and padded after Hollow.

River Ripple sniffed the empty prey hole once more. He could smell the stale scent of a mountain cat. They must have taken it last night. A blackbird shrilled overhead. River Ripple lifted his head sharply. Someone else was here. His heart quickened as the scent of a tom touched his nose. Thunder was staring at him from behind a beech tree.

River Ripple stiffened. Was the ginger tom alone?

“We came to—” He began to explain, but Thunder ducked away. River Ripple saw his tail snake off through the bracken. Had the young tom gone to fetch help?

He had to stop this before it escalated. He padded quickly after Thunder, his heart pounding as he pictured Clear Sky’s cats lurking in the undergrowth.

He heard a hiss. His belly tightened. It sounded like Hollow. Had the mountain cats cornered his rivermate? He broke into a run. Panic sparked in his chest as he heard paw steps thrumming the forest floor and leaves swishing ahead.

Night darted from the ferns, blocking his path. River Ripple slowed to a halt. Her eyes were bright with alarm. “Hollow’s chasing a tom.”

“*Here?*” Did Hollow have bees in his brain? “Which way did they go?”

Night nodded toward the bracken. The stiff stems were still quivering. River Ripple raced toward them and pushed through. He burst out and saw Thunder’s ginger pelt flash above the ground, among the leaves. The young tom had leaped onto the low branch of an ash. Hollow was hauling himself up the trunk, snarling

angrily.

River Ripple stared in dismay as the black tom scrambled onto Thunder's branch and advanced on the ginger tom. "Hollow! Stop!" he hissed.

But Hollow didn't seem to hear. His angry gaze was fixed on Thunder.

The mountain cat pressed his belly against the bark, his pelt bristling in alarm. As Hollow neared, Thunder swiped at him, but Hollow dodged the blow and flung himself at Thunder.

Thunder rocked on his paws, almost overbalancing. He reached frantically for Hollow, gripping onto him with his claws and sinking his teeth into the black tom's scruff. But Hollow lashed out and raked Thunder's flank. Eyes sparking with pain, Thunder screeched. His paws slipped and he fell, dragging Hollow down with him.

River Ripple darted forward, panic flashing along his spine. He felt claws clamp his tail as Night pulled him back.

"Wait!"

River Ripple tried to pull free, but she hung on.

"Let them fight it out themselves," she hissed. "If

we join in, it will look like an ambush.”

She was right. It was bad enough starting a fight on Clear Sky’s land, but ganging up on a lone tom might provoke the mountain cats more. He watched, blood pounding in his ears, as Thunder landed on his paws.

Hollow hit the ground with a thump. He landed on his flank, and before he could find his paws, Thunder turned on him and pinned the black tom’s shoulders to the ground with his forepaws.

“You stupid furball,” he spat, his muzzle a whisker from Hollow’s. “I wasn’t doing you any harm!” He looked up. His gaze flitted from River Ripple to Night. “I don’t want any—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish.

Clear Sky crashed from the ferns and slammed to a halt beside Thunder. His gaze raked the clearing and stopped as it reached River Ripple. “Get out of here now and don’t come back!” he snarled. “Thunder, you can let that mange-pelt up!”

Thunder let go of Hollow and backed away as the tom scrambled to his paws.

Back off. River Ripple tried desperately to catch

Hollow's eye, but Hollow was glaring angrily at Thunder.

Clear Sky charged at the black tom, butting him viciously with his shoulder. Caught off guard, Hollow staggered and fell, sprawling, to the ground.

Clear Sky glowered down at him. A menacing growl rolled in his throat. Hollow froze. His gaze flicked toward Clear Sky, glittering with alarm now. He'd finally realized these cats were dangerous. Slowly, he got to his paws, not taking his eyes off Clear Sky for a moment, then jerked around and bolted away through the ferns.

River Ripple felt a rush of relief. Now he had to get Night away before she was hurt. "Go," he whispered to her sharply.

She glanced at him, her gaze fearful. "I'm not leaving you."

"I'll be right behind you," he breathed.

Night hesitated.

"Go!" River Ripple hissed.

Clear Sky was glaring at them.

Night backed away, then ducked through the ferns.

River Ripple turned to follow. He took a few steps,

then stopped. This was wrong. Anger rose in his chest like a sudden storm. Why should he run away like a frightened kit? *I have claws too.* He faced Clear Sky.

The gray tom's eyes were no more than slits. "Cats who attack my son will be punished," he growled.

River Ripple bristled. Who was this cat to *punish* anyone? "You can't keep doing this," he mewed. "You can't tell other cats what to do."

"Come over here and say that again." Clear Sky showed his teeth. "I can do what I like."

River Ripple glanced at Thunder.

The young tom was watching his father as though he hardly recognized him. "I'm sure it doesn't—"

Clear Sky shot him a look so vicious that Thunder seemed to forget what he was going to say. He looked back at Clear Sky, his mouth half-open, his fur ruffling self-consciously.

River Ripple narrowed his eyes. Thunder had only ever shown himself to be courageous and loyal, but neither Gray Wing nor Clear Sky seemed willing to grant him the respect he deserved. Were mountain cats as wary of one another as they were of

strangers? He nodded to Thunder encouragingly. “No, please, carry on,” he mewed. “I’m interested to know what a young cat thinks about all this.”

Clear Sky hissed. “Thunder’s opinion is none of your business.” His eyes gleamed. “Thunder doesn’t *have* an opinion.”

River Ripple couldn’t believe his ears. How could this cat be so arrogant? And why would Thunder put up with it? He let the words hang in the air, wondering if Thunder would speak up for himself. During the fire, the young tom had acted without hesitation. But now he stood silent, utterly cowed by his father. River Ripple’s tail twitched irritably. Was this what it was to be a mountain cat? To be ruled by bullies and keep silent when you wanted to speak? If it was, he wanted no part of it. Angrily, he turned and pushed his way through the ferns.

His paws pulsed with rage—at Clear Sky for being so arrogant, at Thunder for putting up with it, at Hollow for starting the fight, at Night for letting these fox-hearts intimidate her, maybe into leaving the river altogether. He wondered whether he should follow her. The cats here were too aggressive, or too weak. His

dream of being part of a group that was loyal, generous, brave, and tolerant seemed suddenly impossible. He couldn't give up. He wanted to believe that his dream could become a reality, but his heart was feeling as heavy as stone. River Ripple headed for the shore, musing that he needed a break. He would spend the day like a loner, fishing by himself, listening to the river in the hopes that it would tell him what to do.



Chapter 11



River Ripple settled down to sleep. Outside his den, a large round moon bathed the clearing in silver light. A soft wind whispered through the reeds. The river lapped the shore. The gentle sounds usually soothed him, but tonight they offered no comfort. As he snuggled deeper into his nest, River Ripple's heart ached with loneliness. He'd hoped that by now, as the long moons of warm weather came to an end, his group would be stronger and more united. He'd even found a camp for them—an island among the reed beds—and moved his den there, hoping his rivermates would make it their home too. It was a good location, and easy to defend from intruders: surrounded entirely by water, except for a single, winding path that came out close to the stepping stones. Thick reed walls blocked the wind on cold days, and when it was hot, there was always shade at the side of the smooth, wide clearing.

He'd been pleased when Croak, Hollow, Whistle, and Woodlouse had woven dens here, but they'd begun

to roam as the days had grown shorter and gradually drifted away. Even Mist still came and went as he pleased. This time the black-and-white tom had been away for half a moon. River Ripple knew he'd return eventually, but he'd given up on the others. Their instinct to wander was too strong. They *might* return, but it was hard to believe they'd stay for long, and he suspected their loyalty would only ever be to themselves.

At least Night was still here. She was asleep now in her den on the other side of the island. She'd only recently made camp here, moving away from the thicket as the quarrels between the mountain cats grew more frequent and fiercer. She'd felt vulnerable, sleeping too near the forest. Clear Sky and his cats seemed to pick arguments on purpose, even threatening their own kin living on the moor. River Ripple didn't understand them: they'd come here together from the mountains in search of better territory to hunt in, but now that they'd found it, all they did was fight over it.

He tucked his nose under his paws and tried to sleep, weary after a long day trekking downstream and

back up again. He'd told himself he'd been searching for the juiciest prey, but he knew, deep down, he'd been hoping to find traces of his old rivermates. Perhaps they'd found poor hunting beyond the river, or they'd simply grown lonely and wanted to return to the group. He felt pitiful, longing for cats he knew would never stick around. To make it worse, he couldn't shake the feeling that it wouldn't be long before Night and Mist left for good too.

He closed his eyes again and forced himself to relax. He would find comfort in dreams.

It took a while to fall asleep, though, and when he did, he dreamed Night had left. On his way to look for her, he stumbled into Clear Sky's camp. He was deep in the forest. Brambles crowded the edge of the dark clearing where he stood. He could see creatures moving in the shadows around him. They were padding closer, and his chest tightened as he recognized the mountain cats, their eyes gleaming in the darkness. He backed away, growling, as fear reached icy claws around his heart.

Go away! He felt limp with relief for a moment as he shook off the terrifying dream. Then he tumbled

into another. He was still lost in the woods, trees towering on every side. Where was the river? Could he find his way back? Roots snaked over the earth, trying to grasp his paws. He hopped clear and, with a flash of hope, glimpsed water glittering between the trees. As he hurried toward it, something moved.

Alarm sparked in his belly. "Who's there?"

No one answered, but he saw pale figures drifting in the darkness. Had the mountain cats returned to the riverside to hassle him?

He tried to run, but a root snagged his paw. Another twined painfully around his tail, yanking at his fur. More coiled themselves around his legs. He struggled to tear free, but they gripped tighter, fixing him to the spot as the pale figures encircled him, moving closer every moment, winding like fog between the trees. Panic surged beneath his pelt. They looked like cats, but they moved like mist, and their pelts began to glimmer as though stars were trapped in their fur.

An owl screeched overhead. River Ripple's pelt spiked with fear. "Leave me alone!" Suddenly the roots released him. He backed away, but he was

surrounded.

“What do you want?” He jerked awake, gasping, as though surfacing from the deepest part of the river, and scrambled clumsily from his nest, hurrying from his den and gulping in cold air.

The moon had disappeared behind thick clouds. *Strange*. Clear skies earlier had promised days of shiny, cold sunshine. He wasn't usually wrong about the weather. He shook out his pelt. *Weather can be changeable*, he thought. *Just like cats*.

Night was snoring softly in her den. The sound reassured him, and as he grew calmer, the fresh air began to make him sleepy. Yawning, he turned back to his nest.

Then he froze. Mist was seeping through the reeds. It moved with purpose, twining in and out of them like a snake. Cold fear ran along his spine. He backed away as it swallowed the empty dens and rolled slowly toward him. *I'm still asleep!* He swallowed back panic as the mist began to swirl into shapes until pale figures encircled him. He shook his head, whisked his tail, trying to fight his way back to consciousness. *I must wake up!* But the shapes kept

sharpening until they were ghostly cats with glowing eyes and pelts that seemed to shift and glimmer in the darkness as though made from water. Had the river come to life?

“Who are you?” His mew was husky with dread.

The ghostly figures didn’t reply but watched him. He saw sadness in their eyes, so deep it seemed to draw grief from him, pulling it out of his heart as though dragging waterweed up from the riverbed. These ghosts were asking something of him.

“Stop it!” He turned away, overwhelmed by the intensity of their gaze.

An owl screeched overhead—the same screech he’d heard in his dream—and panic clawed at his heart. Trapped, he spun around and faced the figures. “What do you want?” he demanded.

They didn’t answer. Instead they began to drift away, filing through the entrance at the head of the clearing and gliding along the path that led to the stepping stones.

He watched them, feeling a tug in his paws. *They want me to follow.* He didn’t want to. Every hair on his pelt resisted, shivering as he began to pad after

them. He glanced into Night's den as he passed. He could see her muzzle through the shadows, resting on her paws. Should he wake her?

No. She wouldn't understand. These ghostly cats had come for a reason. Even if she could see them, she would swish them away with a flick of her tail and return to her nest. He couldn't risk that. He could feel the river's call. He must answer it.

As the cats disappeared along the path, he hurried to catch up. They didn't look back but floated, hardly more than air, past the reeds. Pelt twitching nervously, River Ripple followed as they drifted across the stepping stones and into the forest on the other side of the river. Ears pricked, he crept after them through the shadows. *What if Clear Sky's cats find me here?* Would he be able to see the ghostly cats? River Ripple's belly churned, but he kept following, frightened that the slightest breeze would disperse the ethereal figures as they led him deeper into the forest. He tracked them between brambles, up a rise, and along a ridge where pines stretched into the dark sky, until they reached the top of a slope. They paused there, and he padded past them and looked down into a

hollow. It was wide and deep, like a valley scooped from the earth by a giant paw. Ferns rustled around the slopes. On the far side, the forest opened to show the moor stretching away into the distance. At the bottom, four great oaks, leaves browning, spread their branches.

As an angry yowl rose from below, River Ripple stiffened. He leaned forward warily as snarls of rage sounded from the darkness deep in the hollow, then glanced at the ghostly cats. They showed no sign of fear. Instead they headed down the slope, seeping like water between the ferns. They made no sound, and River Ripple followed, treading softly, his pelt bristling as they moved closer to the angry cries.

They stopped as the ferns ended, and River Ripple peeked out. Through the darkness he could see a huge rock standing like a guard at one end of a clearing, its shadow turning the earth around it black. Between the four great oaks, the air trembled with screeching. The mountain cats were fighting. Bodies writhed; teeth glinted; claws slashed. River Ripple's chest tightened. This wasn't a border dispute. This was a battle fiercer and more brutal than anything he'd ever seen.

Over the past moons, watching the mountain cats snapping and snarling at one another across their borders, he'd come to recognize them and learn their names. Even the rogues they'd recruited were familiar to him now. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he began to see more clearly. Gray Wing fought among them, Thunder and Jackdaw's Cry too. He could see Clear Sky with his newly recruited rogues—hard, spiteful cats River Ripple would never have invited to his own group.

One of them, a gray she-cat called Dew, lashed out at Gray Wing, opening a long scarlet wound in his flank. Thunder raced to help, grabbing Dew and hauling her backward. He flung her with a snarl at Shattered Ice's paws, then turned back to help Gray Wing as another rogue dived at the gray mountain cat and clung like a burr to his back.

River Ripple stared in shock. The stone tang of blood filled the air. These cats were driven by something he couldn't understand. He could barely breathe as he watched them tear one another apart.

Then he saw something lying in the middle of the clearing. He strained to make it out and recognized

Hawk Swoop. Dread trickled along his spine like icy water. There was something in her stillness that reminded him of dead prey. But no cat stopped to look at her. They fought around her as though she were no more than a rock to be avoided.

Another of Clear Sky's rogues, a brown-and-white tom called Fircone, shouldered his way through the fighting. He reached Thunder and, as he lashed out, Tall Shadow crashed between them. She shoved Fircone away and leaped on him. Thunder froze as the black she-cat pushed Fircone down and slashed his belly, again and again.

River Ripple could barely believe Tall Shadow's viciousness. Her pelt was bristling, and she trembled with rage. Was this the quiet, serious mountain cat who'd mourned so deeply for her brother? Didn't she realize Fircone was a cat, not prey? As she leaped away, Fircone fell still, and River Ripple saw the earth gleam in the darkness with his blood.

River Ripple flinched. She'd *killed* him. He wanted to run back to the island and huddle deep in his nest. But he couldn't move. Grim fascination rooted his paws to the ground. Had these cats gone mad?

Tall Shadow turned away from the dead tom, barely glancing at him. Thunder was already racing toward another part of the battle. Did Fircone's life mean so little to them?

As River Ripple fought back horror, a bloodcurdling screech echoed across the clearing. His gaze flashed toward it. Snake, one of Clear Sky's most vicious recruits, had pinned a white tom to the trunk of an oak. He slashed at the tom's muzzle, but the tom ducked away, struggling free and grabbing Snake's hind leg. The tom tugged on it and dragged Snake onto his back, then lunged for Snake's throat. But Snake fought back and knocked the tom off his paws. Before the tom could find them again, Snake swiped at his throat, slicing it open as though slitting the belly of a fish. Blood darkened the tom's milky white pelt, and he dropped back and fell still.

Across the clearing, River Ripple could see that Thunder had frozen. The young tom's eyes were wild with panic. He looked as horrified as River Ripple felt.

Stop them! River Ripple willed Thunder to end this. But how could he? Frustration built in his chest as Falling Feather, one of Clear Sky's cats, barged past

Thunder and flung herself at Acorn Fur. Thunder shot after her and tore Falling Feather away from his campmate. He pressed the white she-cat to the earth and held her there as his gaze flashed toward Clear Sky.

River Ripple followed it. Clear Sky was fighting Rainswept Flower. He sent her reeling with a vicious blow.

“Is it worth it?” Clear Sky hissed to the brown tabby she-cat.

Rainswept Flower found her paws and faced him. “What do you mean?”

“Are you ready to die just to stop me from making borders?”

Rainswept Flower curled her lip. “You’ll keep stealing land as long as we let you.”

“*Stealing land?*” Clear Sky’s mew was shrill with outrage. “I’m just making sure my cats never starve.”

River Ripple stared in disbelief. This battle was over *territory*? These cats were killing each other just to protect their land! He felt sick. They were behaving more like foxes than cats.

He turned to look at the ghostly cats beside him.

Why didn't they do something? Wasn't that why they'd come here?

They didn't move, but watched the battle solemnly, their eyes dark with sorrow.

"Stop them!" River Ripple glared at them. "*Make them stop!*"

One of them turned to look at him. It was a tom, his pelt barely visible in the shadow of the hollow. "They can't see us," he mewed softly.

"They can see *me!*" River Ripple turned toward the clearing.

"No." A cold paw touched his shoulder. Icy claws snagged his fur, jerking him back with a strength that surprised him. "It's not your battle."

River Ripple turned on him. "I have to do something!"

The tom looked at him steadily. "Do you think they won't kill you?"

Beside him a she-cat, her pelt rippling against the ferns, blinked at River Ripple. "We need you to live. You're our only way to reach them."

River Ripple stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"A river divides us from them," the tom mewed.

“You will be the stepping stone that allows us to cross.”

River Ripple stared at them. What were these strange cats talking about? There was no river here. “How?”

“You’ll see.” The she-cat’s gaze drifted back toward the clearing. “But first they must end this battle themselves.”

Shrieks filled River Ripple’s ears. He flinched at the sound. He didn’t want to see more cats die. But what could he do? *Do you think they won’t kill you?* His chest tightened. The tom was right. Diving into the battle would be like running into the path of a monster. He must wait with the ghost cats. There was nothing else to do. He curled his claws into the earth and forced himself to watch.

Dread dropped like a stone in his chest as he saw Rainswept Flower. She was on the ground and she wasn’t moving. Had Clear Sky *killed* her? Then he saw Jackdaw’s Cry. The black tom lay dead. *Not you too.* He pictured the bright-eyed mountain cat dunking himself in the river, drenching his fur so that he could rescue Moon Shadow. He’d been so brave. So filled

with life. Now he was dead, his fur drenched with blood instead of water. And he was slumped over another corpse.

“Clear Sky!” Acorn Fur’s panicked yowl jerked River Ripple’s gaze across the clearing.

Clear Sky was standing over Gray Wing. “Just give in,” he hissed at his brother.

Gray Wing was fighting for breath, his flanks heaving as he stared back at his littermate. He’d clearly not recovered from the smoke he’d breathed during the fire. But still he flung a weak blow at Clear Sky’s muzzle. “Never.”

Clear Sky glared at him. He lifted a paw as though ready to strike the killing blow. “*Give in.*”

Stop! River Ripple recoiled. *You’re littermates!*

He watched, breathless, as Gray Wing pushed himself to his paws. “Kill me.” The gray tom could hardly speak, but he fixed Clear Sky with a gaze which shone, even in the shadowy clearing, like gold. “Kill me and live with the memory. Then tell the stars that you won.”

“Don’t make me do this, brother.” Clear Sky didn’t move, but his mew was trembling. “All I want is for

every cat to be safe.” River Ripple could hardly believe his ears. *Safe?* Couldn’t he see the carnage around him? Clear Sky went on. “To have borders to protect us and make sure we have prey.”

River Ripple closed his eyes. How could these cats be so foolish? Borders would always mean battles. There was prey enough for everyone if only they would share. When he opened his eyes again, Clear Sky had sheathed his claws. His gaze was flitting over the dead as, around him, the others fought on weakly, barely able to stay on their paws. River Ripple leaned closer. Could Clear Sky finally see where his greed for land and prey had led?

“Stop!”

At last. River Ripple’s heart seemed to rise in his throat as the mountain tom’s yowl rang in the still night air.

“This battle is over.”



Chapter 12



Relief flooded River Ripple as the cats fell back, sheathing their claws, their muscles loosening, their bodies softening. The fighting stopped.

Now they seemed to notice the bodies littering the ground.

Thunder's face fell as he saw Hawk Swoop. He crossed the clearing as though his paws were made of stone. "Hawk Swoop." He nudged her with his muzzle. "You can't be dead. How can you be dead?"

Tall Shadow poked Rainswept Flower's body as though she might move.

A chill swept River Ripple's pelt. He was intruding on their grief. And their shame. *I should go home.* He backed away, but the ghostly tom looked at him.

"It's time," he mewed.

River Ripple hesitated. "What for?"

"Go to them."

"This isn't my battle," he objected. "You said so."

"The *battle* wasn't yours," the tom mewed. "But the peace will be." His eyes shone like stars. "What

you do now and in the future will affect the lives of these cats for more moons than you will live.”

River Ripple stared at him. “That’s crazy.” How could this cat know what the future held? “I’m just a loner. I live by the river. I have nothing to do with these cats.”

“You are part of them,” the tom mewed.

The ghostly she-cat padded closer. “You’ve never really *wanted* to be a loner,” she mewed. “You want to *belong*.”

How did she know that?

“But not to them,” he mewed quickly. “They’re nothing like me.”

“Then why did you stay by the river?” the she-cat asked.

“I had nowhere else to go.” Was that true? He could have gone *anywhere*. He could have moved on or found a new Twoleg home. He could have kept trying to return home to his parkmates. But he’d stayed here, at the edge of the mountain cats’ lives, waiting for something. Calmness seemed to flood his paws, as though rising up from the earth. It spread through his body, warmth and stillness seeping into

every hair on his pelt until he felt solid and grounded for the first time in moons. Like a rock in the river. Like a stepping stone.

He shook the sensation away. *No!* He wasn't going to be part of any mountain-cat group. He looked toward the clearing. The air reeked of blood. The cats were still inspecting their dead. Some were limping away into the ferns. These cats had brought violence and death with them. They'd carried here the desperation that had driven them from their home in the mountains. Could such cats ever understand the peaceful way of the river, the gentle flow of life?

"Show them." The ghostly tom's mew cut into River Ripple's thoughts. He blinked at the tom in surprise. Could this strange cat read his mind? And yet the words sparked hope in his chest. He lifted his chin. Wasn't this what he wanted? A chance to show these cats that peace was easier than war and that kindness could fill an empty belly more easily than greed?

The ghostly cats were staring at him. Expectation had replaced the sadness in their eyes.

"Okay." River Ripple dipped his head. Turning, he pushed his way through the ferns, out into the clearing.

Gray Wing saw him first. The gray tom's chest heaved as he struggled to speak. "River Ripple."

Thunder turned his head.

Clear Sky's eyes widened as River Ripple halted. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

River Ripple glanced around the bodies. The air was thick with the stench of death. He forced back a shudder. "I watched the battle."

"And you didn't try to help?" Thunder stared at him, his fur lifting along his spine.

"Who would I have helped?" River Ripple padded to Fircone's body and leaned down to touch it with his nose. *Rest peacefully*. His heart ached, and he looked back at Clear Sky, anger hardening in his chest. "This battle was not mine." He understood now what the ghostly cats wanted. Violence and cruelty belonged to the mountain cats. He wanted no part of it. He was going to show them another way to live. "Why did you leave the mountains?" he asked. "Did you need something to fight over so badly? Before you came, we hunted and slept and lay in the sun. We fought over prey, but no cat ever killed another." He blinked. "You brought death here."

Clear Sky stared back at him defiantly, but River Ripple could see the mountain tom's pelt ruffling self-consciously. "This wasn't my fault," he mewed. "I just wanted to make sure there was enough prey for every cat."

Prey! River Ripple looked down at Fircone. "There'll be plenty now," he growled.

Gray Wing was trembling. "We let it go too far."

Tall Shadow snorted. "There never would have been a battle if Clear Sky hadn't started setting borders."

"It's done now," River Ripple mewed. They needed to move on.

On the other side of the clearing, Wind Runner lifted her chin. "What next?" There was a challenge in her mew. "I'll fight again if that's what it takes to make the moor safe for my kits."

River Ripple's pelt itched with frustration. Wind Runner wasn't even a mountain cat. She'd already been living on the moor when they arrived. She'd chosen to make her life with them along with her mate, Gorse Fur. Had they infected her with their viciousness?

Gorse Fur tried to placate her. "You fought well, but the moor isn't worth it. We can take the kits somewhere else."

"Never." Wind Runner glared at him. "The moor is my home."

"And the forest is mine!" Clear Sky eyed the other cats angrily.

They were bickering again! River Ripple couldn't believe it. After everything they'd seen, they still wanted to fight.

Suddenly the clouds cleared. He blinked in surprise. Moonlight drenched the clearing. Stars sparkled in the sky, and the pelts of the fallen cats began to shine in the crisp white light.

Clear Sky's gaze flashed toward the ferns, his eyes wide as the ghostly she-cat with the rippling pelt padded slowly into the clearing. She wasn't pale anymore. Her pelt was silver and sparkled in the moonlight as though stars were woven into her fur.

Clear Sky stared at her in disbelief. "Storm?" he mewed huskily. "Is that you?"

Around him, the dead bodies began to glitter, their pelts shimmering with starlight. Gray Wing jerked

back. Thunder leaped up with a wail. Even River Ripple felt shock sparking through his pelt as a silvery shape rose from Hawk Swoop's body.

She'd died only a few moments ago. Did she still feel the pain of her death? Was she angry at having been snatched so suddenly from everything that was precious to her? River Ripple stiffened as, one by one, the spirits of the dead began to lift from their bodies.

"Rainswept Flower?" Tall Shadow stared at the ghost of her campmate.

Jackdaw's Cry lifted from his corpse, sparkling in the moonlight. "Falling Feather!" His eyes glistened with sorrow as a ghost rose from the body beneath his. "I'm sorry!"

"I forgive you." Falling Feather touched her muzzle to Jackdaw's Cry's cheek. "I hope you forgive me, too."

River Ripple watched as the other ghostly cats padded from the ferns. They were no longer made of mist but of starlight, which lit the clearing.

River Ripple knew from the shock in the mountain cats' eyes that they saw them too. *A river divides us from them, but you will be the stepping stone that*

allows us to cross. He suddenly realized he was barely breathing. He'd made this happen. Had this been his destiny all along? To unite the mountain cats with their dead?

His thoughts quickened. Did *all* cats live on in starlight after their death? Hope sparked in his paws. *Flutter! Arc!* He hesitated. His heart ached. Was death the only way he'd see them again?

"You must understand!" Clear Sky's wail jerked River Ripple from his thoughts.

The tom was staring desperately at Storm. What had she accused him of?

Storm's gaze flashed toward Rainswept Flower's battered body. "Was killing her courageous?"

Clear Sky glanced at Gray Wing and Thunder as though hoping they'd support him, but they stared back in silence while Rainswept Flower's spirit watched Clear Sky with accusing eyes.

"I didn't want to see any cat starve," he protested. "My heart would break if I ever saw another cat die like my sister."

"*Fear* is what drove you." Storm looked at him. "Fear is a powerful instinct that only the strongest cat

can resist. But now you see there's no need to be afraid. We have shown that death is nothing for you to fear. It's not the end."

River Ripple looked around the clearing. There were more spirit-cats here than living cats, and he suddenly realized how many friends the mountain cats had lost. *And yet those lucky enough to survive sickness or accidents go on to kill each other. . . . It makes no sense.* He hoped Storm's reproach would make them realize how disgusting that was, even if the sight of so many bodies had not. Why had they used their claws when words were enough to solve any problem?

"Shaded Moss!" Tall Shadow was greeting a tom. Her mew was warm with affection.

On the other side of the clearing, Fircone shimmered in front of Gorse Fur. "We hunted as rogues," he purred. "Do you remember?"

Fresh pity pricked River Ripple's heart as a ghostly tom-kit wove around Gorse Fur's paws. Was it hers?

Storm purred suddenly, interrupting the greetings. "Have you guessed our message yet?" River Ripple's ears twitched self-consciously as she looked directly at

him. "What about you?" she mewed. "Do you know?"

He hesitated for a moment, and then calm washed over him again, filling him with the same warmth and stillness as when he'd been alone with the ghost cats. He knew why they had come, why they had chosen him. Their message was one he'd been carrying in his heart for moons. He had been watching the mountain cats, noting their eccentricities, wishing they could be different. He knew what he wanted to teach them. He sat down, curled his tail across his paws and answered her. "I think so," he mewed. He looked around the living cats. "The fighting must end," he told them. "It's torn us apart and—"

Clear Sky thrust his muzzle toward him. "How dare you come here, acting like one of us? This has nothing to do with you. You don't belong!"

Storm glared at him, fury burning in her gaze.

Clear Sky seemed to flinch.

"Stop arguing," she spat. "For once in your life, stop telling every cat who belongs and who doesn't. You don't get to decide!"

The branches of the oaks rustled overhead. River Ripple looked up. The wind was intensifying. Clouds

were crossing the moon once more, but before they swallowed it, a bright light flared beside them.

A falling star!

The other cats saw it too as it streaked through the darkness, their eyes reflecting its path across the crow-black sky.

“You all live under the same stars,” Storm mewed.

Fircone’s spirit padded forward. “And a single moon shines onto all your nests.”

Shaded Moss, the tom who Tall Shadow had greeted so fondly, added with a purr, “We came to tell you only one thing. Unite or die.”

River Ripple’s heart soared. It was what he’d longed to tell them since they’d begun bickering over territory. Perhaps they’d listen now. Perhaps they’d begin to change. Across the clearing, the starry cats began curling back into their bodies, as though settling down to sleep. The ghosts who’d drifted from the ferns turned back, growing paler, their starlight fading. A breeze swept through the hollow, brushing them away like mist. Their light was gone, and as clouds covered the moon, shadow drowned the clearing in darkness once more.

River Ripple tasted rain a moment before the first drops fell.

“What did we just see?” Clear Sky shifted uneasily.

Gray Wing blinked at him. “I’m . . . not sure.”

The rain began to thrum the hard earth.

River Ripple *knew* what he’d seen. He padded to the shelter of the huge rock at the edge of the clearing. “Did the dead walk among you in the mountains?” he asked.

Tall Shadow shook her head. “Stoneteller shared with our ancestors.”

Stoneteller? What a strange name. Had one of their group in the mountains been a stepping stone like he was now?

Tall Shadow went on. “We never saw them.”

“Perhaps you never needed to,” River Ripple mewed. It seemed that, without *Stoneteller* to speak on their ancestors’ behalf, the dead had been forced to intervene directly. It had been the only way to stop these cats from destroying themselves. And he’d been their way in.

Thunder stood in the rain beside Hawk Swoop’s

body and gently lifted her tail. With great care, he draped it over her muzzle, then settled beside her, his flank pressed to hers.

“What do we do now?” Clear Sky called through the downpour.

“I don’t know.” Wind Runner nodded toward the bodies as the rain washed their blood into the earth. “Whatever we decide, we’ve been given hope. We know that we can make a better future than this.”

River Ripple closed his eyes. Why had it taken so much suffering to persuade them to change?

Tall Shadow shook out her sodden fur. “But first, we must bury the dead.”

Her mew was heavy with grief, and River Ripple shook out his pelt and padded from the shelter of the rock. As the cats began to dig, he joined them. Rain streamed from his whiskers and the earth turned to mud as he helped hollow out a hole big enough to embrace the dead. They dragged the bodies one by one across the clearing and tumbled them in, and River Ripple hung back as the mountain cats said their farewells to their campmates. He turned away. He couldn’t look at those lost lives any longer. He was

exhausted, and grief seemed to have soaked into his bones along with the rain.

“This must never happen again.” Tall Shadow’s mew made him lift his muzzle. “I want a promise that all cats will respect one another. No more fighting over territory and prey. Too much has happened, and all of us need time to recover.”

No more fighting. River Ripple felt energy start to flood beneath his pelt once more.

Tall Shadow went on. “Indeed, I believe that any cat who needs help should receive it, whoever the cat, and wherever they’ve chosen to live. Do you agree?”

She looked solemnly at Gray Wing. But the gray tom didn’t look at her. Instead he turned to Thunder. “My young kin proved himself in the battle,” he mewed. “He is the one you should look to in times like this.” He was crouching as though crushed by the weight of the sky.

Thunder shifted his paws uneasily. He looked daunted by Gray Wing’s suggestion. River Ripple was surprised; he’d seen Gray Wing’s sharpness with the young tom. He must have realized Thunder’s worth at last, and River Ripple was relieved. Thunder was

strong and smart. He would more easily bear the responsibility of protecting his campmates than Gray Wing, who was clearly struggling even to breathe.

Gray Wing went on. "Thunder should take his rightful place as leader with you and Clear Sky and River Ripple."

Me? River Ripple stiffened. *Leader? Of what?* He had tried and failed to create his own ragtag group—for the most part, he lived alone on the island with Night. The suggestion seemed so ridiculous that he had to stifle a snort. And yet these cats seemed to mean it. Tall Shadow was gazing at him earnestly. Clear Sky looked at him as though taking him seriously for the first time.

River Ripple lifted his chin. The mountain cats had acknowledged him. He had no group to lead, but if becoming a leader would allow him to guide these violent, impetuous cats and show them how to live as their ghost cats wished them to live, then he would accept the title.

Tall Shadow's question still hung in the air. *Any cat who needs help should receive it. . . . Do you agree?* She was waiting for an answer.

River Ripple dipped his head. The answer seemed so obvious to him that it felt unnecessary to say it, but these cats seemed to need to hear it. “I will help any cat I can,” he told them.

River Ripple looked at Clear Sky. Would *he* agree to help any cat?

Thunder was clearly wondering the same. “Do you agree?” he asked Clear Sky.

The gray tom seemed uncertain how to reply. He hesitated, then mumbled, “Yes—yes, I agree.”

Unease wormed in River Ripple’s belly. *How come I don’t quite believe him?*

“Now it’s time for us all to go home,” Tall Shadow announced. “To the forest, or the hollow on the moor. Every cat is free to choose.”

River Ripple looked around at the gathered cats. “I don’t live in either camp,” he mewed. “But any cat is welcome to come with me to my island home.” He didn’t expect any cat to take him up on his offer, but a small glimmer of hope rose in his chest. After the trauma of the battle, there might be one or two cats who would welcome the sanctuary of his home beside the river.

He watched as the mountain cats divided, some choosing Tall Shadow and Thunder, others choosing Clear Sky. None chose him, and, although he felt a tiny pang of regret, he understood. Their losses tonight would make them cling harder to what felt familiar. But, in time, the right cats would come. At least he hoped they would.

He headed home as dawn showed above the forest and began to push back the darkness. The rain eased as he neared the island. Sunshine would soon make the river glitter. He padded into the clearing, wondering if Night was awake.

She hadn't stirred from her nest.

"Hi!" he mewed gently. He had so much to share.

She lifted her head and blinked at him sleepily through her den entrance. "You're back."

"You knew I was gone?" He was surprised.

"I woke and saw your nest was empty."

"Didn't you wonder where I was?" Hadn't she been worried?

Night stretched her forepaws over the side of her nest, yawning, then hopped out of it. "I figured you'd gone to make dirt or for a walk." She shook out her

pelt.

“What if I’d been in trouble?”

She looked at him, puzzled. “Were you?”

“No, but it would have been nice if you’d looked for me.” River Ripple knew he sounded petty, but he wanted to be part of a group where cats cared about each other.

“I thought you were doing your own thing,” Night mewed.

“I guess.” River Ripple sat down, feeling suddenly tired.

Night tipped her head to one side. “It’s not a big deal, is it?” She sounded worried. “It’s just how we live, right?”

“Yeah.”

She looked at him for a moment longer, as though trying to understand. Then she began washing.

Was now the right time to tell her that the dead mountain cats made of starlight had made him a leader? It felt even more ridiculous now that he was alone with her on the island. But she should know what had happened. And he needed to share what he’d seen. “The mountain cats had a battle last night,” he

mewed.

She carried on washing. “They’re always fighting.”

“Not like this.” River Ripple shuddered as he remembered the sound of screeching and the smell of blood. “Some of them were killed.”

“Killed?” She looked at him sharply. “They killed each other? Why?”

“They were fighting over land.”

Fear shone in Night’s eyes. “We should move.” Her tail twitched. “If they’re willing to kill each other for land, they won’t think twice about killing us.”

“No.” He shook his head. “They won’t do it again. Things have changed.”

“Why would cats like that change so suddenly?” Night mewed.

River Ripple wondered whether to tell her about the ghost cats. Would she believe him? He doubted it. She might think the whole thing had been a dream and refuse to listen to any of it. “They decided it must never happen again.”

“And you believe them?” Night growled.

“They’ve vowed to help any cat who’s in trouble,

no matter what group they belong to,” he told her.

“Even us?” She sounded unconvinced.

“Yes.”

She blinked at him. “Really?”

“Really.” He took a breath. “They want me to be one of their leaders.”

She stared at him. “Does that mean you’re going to *live* with them?”

“No.” He tried to find the words. “I’m leader . . .” This was hard. “I’d be leader *here*. Of our group.”

Her whiskers twitched with amusement. “Our *group*?” She nodded to the empty dens.

“You’re part of the group. . . .” He looked at her nervously.

Night huffed. “You want to be *my* leader.”

“I know it sounds silly,” River Ripple’s fur felt hot. “But I think we should try it. The mountain cats are finally ready to take us seriously, but I think it’s time that they see that we’re a group like them, with a leader and . . .”

She was watching him.

He pressed on. “And I hope you’ll stick around

and . . . help me.”

Her eyes narrowed. Then she got to her paws. “I’m going hunting.”

“Don’t you want to talk about it some more?” he called after her. She didn’t answer, and his heart sank as she reached the edge of the island. “Will you be long?”

“I’ll be as long as it takes.” Without looking back, she pushed through the reeds and disappeared into the water.

River Ripple’s heart began to pound. What had he done? He must have sounded like Clear Sky, trying to push other cats around. He should have explained that he didn’t want to be *like* the mountain cats. That he wanted a chance to create something better, a group that was true to his values and hers, but one that could face the mountain cats as equals rather than being dismissed as a bunch of loners.

What’s wrong with being a loner? he imagined her mewling.

But perhaps she wouldn’t even say it.

Perhaps she simply wouldn’t return.

His breath grew shallow. Had he destroyed even

the tiny group he had left?

He must have dozed, tired after the long night, because he opened his eyes to find the sun sinking toward the moortop and lifted his head, wondering what had woken him.

Paws were padding across the clearing, and he turned to see who'd come.

It was Night, and she was carrying a large trout between her jaws.

He sat up, joy rising in his chest like a bird lifting into flight. "I didn't think I'd see you again." He was so grateful she'd returned that he wanted to bound around her like a kit. But he held back. He didn't want to scare her.

She dropped the trout at his paws and blinked at him. "I figured you'd need help if you were going to face the mountain cats."

His paws fizzed with excitement. "I was hoping some of them would join us."

"They will," she mewed simply. "I can't imagine any cat who wouldn't want to live by the river." She purred. "Besides, you'll make a good leader." Her tail twitched. "Just don't start giving me orders. I'm only

staying so I can help.”

“I know,” he mewed eagerly. “Thank you.”

“A dreamer like you needs a practical cat beside them,” she mewed. “And, if any cat does join, we can’t have a beginner teaching them how to swim.”

“No.” He was glad she wanted to help. She was as strong and brave and clever as any mountain cat. Together they would build a group to be proud of. A group that would be so successful that other groups would want to be like them. He poked the trout happily with his nose. “Can we eat this now?” he asked. “I’m starving.”



Chapter 13



River Ripple crossed the meadow. The long grass curled over his back, seeds catching in the soft fur of his tail as it brushed after him. The early morning chill had burned off with the sun. A moon had passed since the battle, and although the days were shorter and the leaves had turned orange, the wind had remained warm, and sunshine bathed the riverbanks day after day.

River Ripple paused as he smelled cat-scent. His nose wrinkled. It was pungent. Were mountain cats nearby? He scanned the meadow but couldn't see any. And yet the scent hung in the air, a little sour as though it belonged to a cat who'd forgotten how to wash. His pelt ruffled along his spine. Had Clear Sky's cats begun marking borders again?

They'd kept themselves to themselves since the battle. River Ripple had barely seen them, or Tall Shadow's cats. There had been no more squabbles over prey or bad-tempered bickering. He hoped peace was here to stay.

He relished the calmness of a life spent fishing and meditating on the riverbank. And he had more campmates now. Hollow had returned with Mist a half-moon earlier. Croak had appeared a few days later. They'd barely questioned his new role as leader. Indeed, they'd seemed relieved to have some cat take responsibility for the island camp. He organized the hunting to make sure that the prey pile was always full, suggesting where the best fish might be caught after rain and noticing when easy land prey was around. And, when he began weaving rushes among the reeds to strengthen the camp walls against the weather and planning dens for recruits who might one day join the group, they'd begun to help. First they'd cleaned out their own neglected dens and then built new ones. They'd even begun to bring back fresh shells and stones to decorate them, and River Ripple was starting to believe they would stick around, for the cold months at least.

He was still a little disappointed that none of the mountain cats had joined his group, but perhaps it was for the best: they were so different from him. He'd find cats more sympathetic to his love of peace among

the loners who'd pass this way over the coming moons. Some of them would stay, if only because an island camp would offer protection against the coldest weather and shared hunting would make up for the scarcity of prey.

Now as he trekked through the meadow, a breeze stirred the grass. It washed the cat-scent over him once more, and he frowned. This wasn't a mountain cat—they smelled of the forest or the moor, not of stagnant water. This must be a loner. But he didn't stop to look for them; he didn't want a cat who never washed as part of his group. He snorted and headed for the sweeter air of the river.

He'd only taken a few steps when a growl made him stiffen. He turned his head. "Who's there?"

A snarling shape burst from the long grass and slammed into his flank.

River Ripple screeched with shock as claws hooked into his pelt and jerked him backward. Sour tom-scent choked him as strong paws hauled him onto his spine. Claws raked his muzzle, but River Ripple fought back. He kicked out fiercely with his hind legs, pushing his attacker away, and leaped to his paws, ears

flat, a growl rumbling in his throat.

A tom was facing him, head low, tail thrashing ominously. He was scrawnier than a weasel, his mottled ginger fur knotted and unkempt. He glared angrily at River Ripple through one eye. The other was sealed shut, a scar on an empty socket, and River Ripple shuddered, wondering how he'd lost it.

"This is my territory!" the tom hissed.

River Ripple's belly churned with frustration. He'd thought the days of squabbling over land had ended. But this wasn't a mountain cat. He narrowed his eyes. "Who are you?"

"One Eye." The tom showed his teeth.

One Eye. Mist and Hollow had mentioned this rogue when they'd returned. They'd heard about him from loners while they'd been wandering.

Hollow's hackles had lifted as they'd talked about him. "He's been prowling around for a while," he'd grunted. "We met at least three cats who'd had a run-in with him. They told us to stay clear of him. He's angrier than a wasps' nest."

River Ripple scowled back at the mangy rogue. "Before you decide you own this land," he growled,

“you’d better speak with Clear Sky or Tall Shadow.”

“Who are they?” One Eye growled.

“They live around here, and they’ll chase off any cat who tries to tell them where they can or can’t hunt.”

One Eye curled his lip. “Why haven’t they chased you off?”

“I don’t try to give them orders.”

One Eye curled his claws into the earth. His body was quivering as though it was an effort to hold himself back from lunging at River Ripple.

River Ripple didn’t want to fight this cat. He didn’t want to fight *any* cat. He suddenly thought of Hawk and his friends and remembered how long it had taken to recover from the wounds from *that* fight. Some cats seemed to *enjoy* pushing other cats around.

At least this cat seemed to be alone.

The rogue’s gaze burned into him, but River Ripple returned it as steadily as he could. “I’m River Ripple,” he mewed. “I fish in the river.” He paused. “Do you like fish?”

“I’m a cat, not an otter,” One Eye snarled.

“In that case, we needn’t trouble each other,”

River Ripple mewed. "I'll stick to hunting the river. You stick to hunting the land."

"I don't want to see you around here again," One Eye hissed.

"I feel the same way."

One Eye's glaze flashed with rage, but River Ripple turned away. He kept his ears flat and his tail low as though yielding. He was happy for the rogue to feel he'd won this fight. He half expected One Eye to lunge for him and was relieved when the rogue only stared after him, growling.

Frustration sparked in River Ripple's belly as he padded back to the riverbank. Why was there always *one* cat who wanted to spoil life for everyone else? He wondered for a moment whether to bring his rivermates back here to chase the mangy rogue off for good. But he pushed the thought away. He wanted to live like the river—to move at his own speed and flow around obstacles instead of trying to break through them. If he was drawn into fighting over land, he'd become like the mountain cats. He was determined to live his life as he wanted, not as other cats demanded.

River Ripple warned his rivermates that One Eye

had reached the river, and he suggested they hunt in pairs from now on. They took his advice, and in the days that followed, no one saw the mangy rogue. But when Night told him she was going to fish the shallows, he offered to come with her.

They decided to fish near the stepping stones, and she crouched in the river now, watching the water slide by. “He might move on,” she mewed hopefully.

River Ripple sat on the bank. “Perhaps.” He scanned the meadow nervously. Was One Eye there again?

“You never know . . .” Night pricked her ears as she spotted a shoal of loaches drifting toward her. “The mountain cats might take care of him for us.”

“Perhaps.” River Ripple had found himself quietly wishing the mountain cats would chase One Eye away, but it felt cowardly to expect them to fight battles he refused to fight himself.

“Whatever happens”—Night stiffened as the loaches neared—“this rogue mustn’t interfere with our hunting.” She shot out her paw, hooked a loach, and tossed it toward River Ripple. He caught it in midair and slapped it onto the shore, giving it a killing bite as

she hooked another and flung it toward him. Nimbly he grabbed it between his forepaws and killed it. They caught three this way, and when they'd finished, she waded from the water, looking pleased. "Do you remember when fish used to slip out of your paws?" she purred.

His whiskers twitched with amusement as he remembered his first fumbling attempts at fishing. "Of course."

Her gaze grew somber. "But we can't let One Eye stop us from fishing while we can. Cold weather will set in soon, and fish will be harder to catch. If the river ices over, we'll need to depend entirely on land prey. I don't want some rogue telling us where we can and can't hunt."

"We'll be okay," River Ripple told her. He'd sheltered with Twolegs during the last cold moons, but this time he trusted the river to protect him. Even beneath ice, the river would flow and keep flowing until the warm weather returned. All he had to do was flow with it. He whisked his tail encouragingly. "One Eye doesn't seem to have any friends here," he mewed. "And it's not just us he has to deal with; it's

the mountain cats too.” For once he was glad they were so territorial.

The bushes farther up the riverbank shivered.

Night froze as an unfamiliar cat-scent tainted the air. “Someone’s coming.”

River Ripple jerked his head around. It wasn’t One Eye’s scent. Perhaps he’d brought more cats with him, like Hawk had. He blinked in surprise as Dew nosed her way between the branches and padded toward them. This was one of Clear Sky’s rogues.

Night shifted warily, but Dew only blinked at them calmly, her blue eyes reflecting the river.

“I’m sorry for crossing into your territory,” she mewed.

River Ripple gazed back at her. “The river belongs to any cat who needs it.”

Dew looked hopeful. “Does that mean your offer is still open?”

Night narrowed her eyes. “What offer?”

“River Ripple said there was a place on his island for any cat who wants it,” Dew mewed.

River Ripple’s heart quickened. Did she want to join his group? He swallowed back his excitement,

warning himself to be wary. This wasn't a mountain cat; this was a rogue.

Night's gaze swept slowly along the she-cat's short, thick fur, then flitted to her ears, which were notched with battle scars. Her tail twitched. "As you asking to join us?"

"Yes." Dew kept her gaze on River Ripple. "If you'll have me."

River Ripple hesitated. Mountain cats were loyal. Loners, like Night and Mist, were easygoing. But a *rogue*? Rogues fought with strangers over prey, making an enemy of every cat. What did a *rogue* have to offer?

Dew's eyes rounded anxiously as he hesitated. "You said *any cat*," she pressed.

His pelt prickled self-consciously. He couldn't go back on his word. But doubt tugged in his belly. "Why do you want to live here?"

"I don't fit in with Clear Sky's cats," she mewed.

"But you chose to join them," River Ripple pointed out.

"Every cat needs a home." She stared at him steadily.

River Ripple blinked. After moons of anxiously hoping the loners in his group would stick around, here was a cat who *wanted* to plant her paws in one place. But could he trust her? “Why were you a rogue in the first place?” he mewed.

She looked at him sharply. “Who said I was a rogue?”

“Were you a loner?” he asked.

“Is there a difference?”

Night pushed past River Ripple and glared at Dew. “Of course there is! Loners simply like solitude. Rogues like to push other cats around.” Her ears twitched irritably. “Which is why Clear Sky allowed so many to join his group.”

Dew’s pelt was beginning to ruffle. “I’m just a cat looking for somewhere to belong,” she mewed.

River Ripple felt a flash of guilt. Why were they making it so hard for her to join?

“Wait.” River Ripple lifted his muzzle, feeling a little strange about what he was going to say. “Can you hunt?” *Is it fair to ask her if she’s useful before I let her join?*

Dew looked at him. “Of course I can hunt,” she

mewed.

“Can you fish?” Night asked.

Dew’s ears twitched. “No,” she mewed. “But I can learn.”

“I learned to fish.” River Ripple quickly reminded Night. “And you said yourself we’ll need land prey over the cold moons.”

Dew’s eyes brightened. “I’m great at catching rabbits,” she mewed. “I’ll make sure no one goes hungry.”

River Ripple felt hope flicker in his chest.

But Night’s tail was still twitching uneasily. “Why did you leave Clear Sky’s group?”

“I told you. I didn’t fit in.”

“Why not?” Night asked.

“Clear Sky is brave and loyal to his cats,” she mewed. “But he doesn’t tolerate weakness.”

“Are you weak?” Night shot back.

Dew shifted her paws. “Clear Sky thought I was too soft-hearted,” she mewed.

Night narrowed her eyes.

“If you think that’s a weakness,” Dew mewed quickly, “then perhaps I won’t fit your group either.”

River Ripple fluffed out his fur. He knew how badly Dew wanted to join his group, and that made her admission very brave. He suspected that he and Clear Sky had very different definitions of *softhearted*. In any case, he'd heard enough. "I think you'll fit our group very well," he mewed. "I want cats who look out for each other and who can work together."

Dew pricked her ears. "Does that mean I can join?"

"Yes." River Ripple glanced at Night, relieved to see her gaze had softened. "Do you want to come see the island? There are some spare nests. You can choose one."

Dew purred. "I'll choose one later," she mewed. "First I want to catch some prey to add to the prey pile."

She headed along the shore, her tail swishing happily.

River Ripple glanced at Night. "You're okay with this?"

She hesitated, then dipped her head. "She doesn't seem so bad," she mewed. "For a rogue." She began to head along the riverbank.

“Where are you going?” River Ripple called after her.

“I’d better keep an eye on her,” Night called back. “One Eye might be around. Besides, rivers are dangerous for cats who can’t swim, remember?”

As Night disappeared after the gray she-cat, River Ripple’s heart swelled with joy. At last, a recruit from the mountain cats’ group! The wind sent a flurry of leaves fluttering over the river. They settled on the surface and floated downstream. River Ripple felt a deep sense of contentment. The river had carried him here and had been his companion as he’d carved out a home for himself. Now it was bringing him everything he needed. Finally, his group was becoming—well, a real group! *My rivermates*, he thought fondly, and purred at the rightness of the word. Unlike the mountain cats, who fretted and fought over territory, he and his group would trust the river to guide them, and it would show them the way.

All they had to do was listen to its soft murmur.

Dew settled in well in the days that followed. She’d even learned to swim, although Night wouldn’t allow her to fish the deep waters yet. A chill sharpened

the air as she and River Ripple followed the shore past the stepping stones, where the forest reached down to the far shore. The trees shimmered as a breeze swished through their orange leaves.

River Ripple fluffed out his pelt and scanned the shallows near the shore for fish. A carp glided close, and River Ripple waded eagerly into the water. But it darted away, and he watched it slide past the stepping stones, wishing he'd spotted it a moment earlier.

"Look!" Dew's voice made him turn. Her excited gaze was fixed across the river, and he followed it. A rabbit was hopping along the far shore, stopping every few steps to browse on the thick grass edging the dying ferns. "Let's catch it," she mewed softly.

"That's Clear Sky's land," River Ripple reminded her.

"Clear Sky hasn't marked a border since the battle."

"That doesn't mean he's okay with us taking his prey." River Ripple found it hard to believe that Clear Sky no longer cared about territory.

"Didn't the spirit-cats tell us to unite or die?" Dew blinked at him. "Clear Sky seemed to take their words

very seriously. Besides . . .” She looked toward the forest. “When I was part of his group, we never really hunted here. We could find better prey near the pines.”

River Ripple watched the rabbit for a moment and imagined how pleased his rivermates would be when they carried it into camp. It had been a while since they’d eaten land prey. “Okay.” He scanned the river. The current was sluggish today. Dew should have no problem swimming across. “Let’s do it.”

He pushed out past the shallows, steering upstream so that they’d land without the rabbit seeing them, and glanced over his shoulder. Dew was swimming after him, moving easily through the water.

She waded behind as he padded onto the shore and shook out her pelt. “What’s the plan?”

River Ripple’s mouth was watering. The rabbit’s musky scent bathed the riverbank. It had found a patch of juicy grass and was nibbling hungrily. He glanced at Dew. “Stay close to the water,” he breathed. “I’ll come at it through the trees.”

She nodded, and he climbed the bank, slipping into the shadow of the forest as Dew crept along the shoreline, keeping low.

She slowed as she neared the rabbit and waited for River Ripple to pick his way softly between the trees. He climbed over the roots of an oak and peered around the trunk. The rabbit was two tail-lengths away. He caught Dew's eye, signaling her with a nod to wait. He'd attack first and drive it toward the water. From there it would be easy for Dew to chase it down.

As he dropped into a hunting crouch, his tail swishing, a gust of wind rattled the branches above him. Twigs showered down. The rabbit looked up in surprise. It met River Ripple's gaze and froze. Then, eyes bulging in panic, it darted up the riverbank, pushed between the ferns, and hared into the forest.

Dew leaped after it. She streaked past River Ripple. "Come on!"

Her hind paws kicked up fallen leaves as she raced after the rabbit.

Heart pounding, River Ripple chased after her.

Dew was clearly at home here. She zigzagged easily around the trees as the rabbit fled deeper into the woods. River Ripple struggled to keep up, his paws skidding at every turn. He had to concentrate so hard on avoiding roots and trailing brambles, he lost sight of

the rabbit and nearly crashed into Dew as she pulled up sharply.

“*Mouse dung!*” She was staring at a hole where the rabbit must have disappeared.

River Ripple stopped beside her, panting. “I’m out of practice,” he puffed.

“Me too.” Dew sat down heavily and began to catch her breath.

River Ripple padded forward and sniffed the hole. “It’ll come out eventually, right?”

“There’ll be entrances all over the woods,” Dew told him. “We should—”

A snarl cut her off. River Ripple spun around to see a flash of pale ginger fur. Dew yowled as a tom slammed into her and knocked her to the ground. He thumped his paws into her shoulders and pinned her down.

One Eye! River Ripple stared in dismay as the mangy tom leaned close to Dew and showed his teeth. “We’re not here to fight!” He darted toward his rivermate and shouldered One Eye aside, relieved when he let go of Dew and backed away. But the tom was glaring at him, his one good eye sparkling with

hostility.

“No cat steals *my* prey!” his snarled.

“Y-*your* prey?” River Ripple sputtered. Did this tom believe everything belonged to him?

“It’s on my land,” One Eye hissed.

“It’s on *Clear Sky’s* land,” River Ripple corrected him.

One Eye lashed his tail. “I’m one of Clear Sky’s cats now.”

Dew pushed herself to her paws.

River Ripple glanced at her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She shook out her pelt.

River Ripple turned back to One Eye, who was growling ominously. “Do you expect us to believe Clear Sky would take in a vicious mange-pelt like you?”

“Why wouldn’t he?” A mew sounded from between the trees behind them.

River Ripple jerked his muzzle around, surprised to see Snake stalking from the trees. His pelt pricked along his spine. This tom had killed a cat during the battle.

Snake padded past River Ripple and stopped

beside One Eye. "He's one of us now," he growled.

Dew moved closer to River Ripple. "We don't want trouble."

"Then get out of here," Snake growled.

"And *stay* out," One Eye snapped.

This wasn't a battle worth fighting. River Ripple wasn't even sure they could win. And he didn't want to provoke Clear Sky. He nudged Dew toward the river. She shot an angry look at the two toms and headed away. River Ripple followed, his pelt twitching as Snake and One Eye stared after them.

"What is Clear Sky thinking?" Dew mewed as they padded onto the shore. "It was bad enough having Snake in the group. He was one of the reasons I left. But Clear Sky must have thistledown between his ears to take in One Eye. Anyone can see that tom is trouble."

River Ripple padded to the water's edge. "Perhaps Clear Sky can see something in them that we can't." But he couldn't help agreeing with Dew. Snake and One Eye looked as vicious as badgers. They would never be anything but rogues. Why would Clear Sky allow them into his group? As he waded into the river

beside Dew and launched into deeper water, he decided he would keep a close eye on what was happening on Clear Sky's side of the river.

River Ripple fluffed out his pelt against the wind. If he was going to sit for a while, he'd be cold. He settled at the water's edge and closed his eyes. He felt content. The morning hunt had gone well; his rivermates worked well together, and the prey pile was nearly full already. But he was glad to find a moment to himself. This was the first time he'd been alone in days. He liked belonging to a group, and he enjoyed the company of his rivermates, but every so often he longed for the deep peace of solitude and a chance to meditate by himself.

The river here swept over stones and chattered as it passed. Comforted by the sound, River Ripple relaxed and let his thoughts flow with the current. He could smell the musty scent of fallen leaves and the tang of peat washed into the water from the moor. His nose twitched. Was that Gray Wing's scent? *Again?* He'd smelled it several times recently along this stretch and seen the gray tom more than once, padding along the track where the moor followed the forest to

the four trees hollow. He'd even shadowed him a few times and watched from the slope as Gray Wing had sat silently beneath the great oaks.

Why does he keep returning? River Ripple let the question settle in his mind, feeling the stirring of an answer in his belly but not knowing exactly what it was. The sound of the river washing past filled his mind; it flooded his body with energy and, like rich earth nurturing a seed, fed the stirring and let it grow until he finally understood. He blinked open his eyes. *He goes to mourn.*

At the thought, River Ripple felt a surge of grief. Gray Wing's loss hollowed out his heart as though it were his own. *I must go to him.* The words came with the same tug he'd felt when the spirit-cats had drawn him toward the battle. He got to his paws and hurried up the riverbank, pushing into the long grass that led toward the moor.

Gray Wing's track was easy to find, and River Ripple climbed the slope, skirting the forest and stopping as he reached the rim of the hollow. He looked down. Dead leaves rattled in the branches of the oaks. Gray Wing was sitting like a rock beside the

mound that marked the grave where they'd buried the dead.

River Ripple padded down the slope, pushing through ferns, which were browning in the cold weather. He nosed his way into the clearing and crossed it.

Gray Wing didn't turn his head even when River Ripple reached the grave.

His grief has overwhelmed him. River Ripple sat down beside the gray tom. "I never thought I'd see such death here," he mewed softly. "This is my first time back since the battle."

Gray Wing shivered. Was he remembering that dreadful night when he'd lost so many friends?

River Ripple wanted to ease the mountain cat's pain. "By next greenleaf," he mewed, "this grave will be covered in wildflowers." He dragged his gaze from the piled-up earth and looked at Gray Wing. "You should not keep returning, day after day."

Gray Wing glanced at him. "How do you know what I'm doing?" he asked. "I thought you said you hadn't been back here until now."

River Ripple blinked at him gently. Did this cat

think he noticed nothing beyond the river? “Oh, Gray Wing, have you learned nothing? I may be a loner, but I know more than any cat. I see what you all do and where you go.” The mountain cats didn’t seem to realize how transparent they were—as if their pride, their love of borders, their desperate longing for safety, and their strong attachment to their campmates were all great mysteries unfathomable to anyone but themselves. He touched his tail-tip to Gray Wing’s shoulder. “Stop tormenting yourself. There’s nothing for you here. Go back to the cats who love you.”

Gray Wing turned back to the grave. “I can’t bear to think of them all alone,” he mewed thickly.

“But they’re not alone.” Had Gray Wing forgotten? “Didn’t you see them among the spirit-cats?” Perhaps he simply hadn’t understood. “They’re not buried beneath the earth; they’re running with the stars.” He nudged Gray Wing gently. “Stop fretting—do you think your old friends are hanging around here, waiting for you to visit? Of course they’re not. You must think of the living. *They’re* the cats who need you now.”

Gray Wing didn’t move for a moment. Then he

faced River Ripple. He looked suddenly calm. "Thank you for being so kind."

River Ripple felt a glimmer of surprise as Gray Wing stretched his muzzle forward and touched his nose. He felt moved. Gray Wing was a gentle soul.

"Are you sure you won't come to live with the rest of us in the hollow?" Gray Wing mewed.

"Thanks, but no." Did Gray Wing still think of him as a loner? *He must not realize I have my rivermates now.*

"Okay." Gray Wing dipped his head. "But will we see you back here when we meet again?"

River Ripple remembered the full-moon gathering the cats had planned after the battle. "Yes, I'll come," he mewed. "I'll be too curious to stay away. And, in the meantime, if I catch you here again, I'll be demanding the prey from your next hunt." He blinked teasingly at Gray Wing. They both knew he had no hunting rights here.

"You'll have to catch me first," Gray Wing called as he padded toward the slope.

River Ripple watched him go, pleased he'd lifted some of the weight from Gray Wing's shoulders. Was

it his imagination or did the gray tom seem far older now than when River Ripple had first met him? He got to his paws. Mountain cats took everything so seriously, as though life were a test rather than a gift. No wonder they aged fast. He swished his tail. The afternoon stretched ahead. He didn't feel like meditating anymore. The prey pile must be full by now, but there was no harm in a little extra fishing. He could practice hunting against the current. It was more challenging than chasing fish downstream, but it was more fun too.

In the days that followed, River Ripple kept an eye out for Gray Wing. But the mountain tom seemed to have stopped visiting the grave. *He trusts the spirit-cats now.* The thought comforted River Ripple, but he preferred to trust the river. It took care of the living. The dead could take care of themselves.

The chill had hardened and the river was cold. His rivermates fished for shorter and shorter periods. Dew and Croak preferred to hunt land prey. Hollow stuck to the shallows. Only Night and Mist joined River Ripple hunting in the deepest channels, and even River Ripple could only stand the chill until it reached his bones.

When it did, he'd leave Night and Mist to fish alone while he ran through the meadow until his pelt had dried and he was warm.

The sun was sinking behind the moor as he picked a juicy trout from the prey pile and carried it to his favorite spot on the grass at the edge of the clearing. The wind had dropped, and for once the reeds stood still and silent against the darkening sky. Only the river moved. River Ripple could hear it lapping gently around the island. He sat down and took a bite of the trout. Night was a few tail-lengths away, sharing tongues with Mist. Dew had finished eating and was dozing on the other side of the clearing, while Croak washed and Hollow ate a second carp, purring with pleasure.

Paw steps sounded on the path outside. River Ripple lifted his head. Some cat was padding along the winding path that led to the camp entrance.

Croak looked up, her nose twitching. "It's Tall Shadow."

As she spoke, the black she-cat padded into camp. She stopped before she reached the clearing and looked around.

River Ripple got to his paws and hurried to meet her. "Welcome."

She didn't look at him. She was staring at his rivermates, her ears flicking. "I didn't realize you had so many campmates," she mewed. "I thought it was just you and Night." She sounded surprised.

"A cat can't be a leader without a group to lead."

"Of course not."

Her gaze flitted toward him, and River Ripple saw a new respect in it. *How amusing*. Mountain cats seemed to value the strangest things. Was the worth of a cat measured in how many other cats followed them?

He turned and led Tall Shadow across the clearing and sat down beside his trout once more. As she stopped beside him, he pawed it toward her. "Would you like some?"

"No thanks." Her nose wrinkled. "I've already eaten."

River Ripple hooked it back and took a bite. He was hungry. "Why have you come?" he asked, chewing. "Has something happened?"

"Not on the moor," she mewed. "But I'm worried

about Clear Sky's group."

River Ripple swallowed his mouthful. "One Eye."
"You *know* about him?"

"I've run into him a couple of times," he told her.

Tall Shadow frowned. "I can't imagine why Clear Sky let him join his group. I've never met such a sly and vicious rogue." Her tail flicked irritably. "He looks and smells like he never washes," she huffed, "and yet he calls himself a cat."

River Ripple eyed the trout. It would have to wait. Tall Shadow was worried. He blinked at her. "Clear Sky and the other mountain cats might have a good influence on him," he mewed hopefully.

"Clear Sky?" She looked doubtful. "'A good influence'?"

She had a point.

She went on. "I hear he's begun training his cats to fight."

Training? River Ripple was puzzled. "Don't cats *know* how to fight?"

"Clearly, he wants them to be able to fight better than other cats." Her pelt ruffled along her spine. "And that can only mean one thing. He's planning for

another battle.”

“Another battle?” River Ripple tried to imagine what Clear Sky could want enough to attack another group. “He has the forest. He doesn’t want to live on the moor or fish in the river. What’s left to fight over?”

“I’m beginning to think Clear Sky enjoys fighting for the sake of fighting,” Tall Shadow growled.

“Didn’t he learn anything from the battle?” Worry jabbed River Ripple’s belly.

“Obviously not.” Tall Shadow looked at him gravely. “I’m going to start training my own cats to fight,” she told him. “And if you’ve got any sense, you’ll train your cats too.”

“But the spirit-cats told us to unite or die,” River Ripple reminded her. “What will they think if we start practicing for another battle?”

“*They* don’t have to live next to Clear Sky.” Tall Shadow’s green eyes darkened. “I’m not going to risk my cats’ lives following advice from cats who are already dead.”

River Ripple searched her gaze. “Do you think there’ll be another battle?”

“I don’t know.” She looked anxious. “But if there

is, your group may well be part of it this time. If you've got any sense, you'll start training your cats as soon as you can."

River Ripple stared at her. How did one *train* a cat to fight? Surely it was something they only did by instinct. "What if I don't want to train them?"

She looked back at him solemnly. "I hope you will," she mewed. "I know you're different from us and that borders and territory aren't something you value. But if you want to keep your home here, you're going to have to choose between peace and survival."

These mountain cats! River Ripple flicked his tail irritably. "Why does everything have to be a life-or-death choice with you?"

"Isn't that what life is?" Tall Shadow stared at him.

"Only because you make it that way!" he mewed. "There must be another mindset."

She stared at him blankly. Then her gaze sharpened. "You won't leave, will you?" she mewed suddenly. "To avoid fighting?"

"No," he told her. "But I will do everything I can to avoid a battle."

“Good.” She looked relieved. “We need your group here.”

“Why?” He looked at her curiously.

“I don’t want aggressive cats on both borders,” she mewed simply. “And Clear Sky might learn something from you.”

River Ripple blinked at her. *You might learn something too.* The difference between the moor cats and the forest cats wasn’t as great as she imagined. Both carried scars from their life in the mountains, inside as well as out, and it had made them hard. He felt a pang of longing as he remembered the park cats. There had been nothing hard in them. But perhaps that was because they’d had enough food and shelter. Perhaps hardness came from suffering. Didn’t the mountain cats want to change? They’d said they *would* change, but already they were slipping back into their old ways. If only he could persuade them to meditate as he did, they might learn what was important in life and see themselves more clearly.

Tall Shadow dipped her head. “I’d better get back,” she mewed. “Think about what I’ve said. I don’t want to lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised.

“Then you need to be prepared.” She turned and headed for the entrance.

River Ripple narrowed his eyes as she disappeared between the reeds.

“I know some fighting moves.” Hollow was crossing the camp toward him.

Croak got to her paws. “Me too.”

River Ripple looked at them as they stopped beside him. “I wanted this to be a peaceful group.”

Hollow swished his tail. “If we can fight as well as the mountain cats and the rogues, we can *make* them peaceful.”

River Ripple’s belly tightened. How could you *make* any cat peaceful? Peace flowed from inside. Peace imposed from outside wasn’t peace at all. Only silence. “I don’t know if we can ever be a match for cats like Clear Sky and One Eye,” he warned.

Night stood up. “We can if we learn from each other.”

River Ripple felt a flash of surprise. Was *Night* suggesting they train to fight? What had happened to the gentle loner who longed for peace?

“I know a move or two,” she went on. “And Mist used to be a great fighter before we came to the river.”

River Ripple looked around at his rivermates. Their eyes sparked with determination. Wasn't this what he wanted? Cats who'd fight to protect each other. To protect their home. But he couldn't help feeling that he was losing something precious. The quiet life he'd dreamed of was quickly darkening into a reality he didn't want to face.

River Ripple jerked awake, his heart pounding, and blinked against the light. The setting sun glittered orange between the reeds. He'd been napping at the edge of the clearing while his rivermates practiced their newly learned battle moves. When he'd drifted off, they had been working on stalking techniques. But now they seemed to have moved on to actual *fighting*, and the sight alarmed him.

Night glanced at him as he sat up sharply. “Are you okay, River Ripple?”

River Ripple shuddered.

“Bad dream?” Night padded toward him.

River Ripple wasn't sure. Sorrow had opened up in

his chest like a wound. It felt like grief but was edged with a sense of desolation that made his heart ache as though frozen in ice.

“I need to speak to the river,” he told Night.

She watched him curiously. He’d tried to explain before how his thoughts seemed to flow with the river and that sometimes he needed its guidance. She didn’t really understand, but she respected his beliefs. “You’d better go.” She stepped aside, and he hurried toward the entrance.

Something was wrong. He needed to find out what was burrowing into his heart with claws sharper than any cat’s. Were the spirits calling him to another battle? Had Clear Sky and One Eye launched an attack on Tall Shadow’s cats?

He followed the path, emerging between the reeds near the stepping stones, instantly reassured by the river’s presence. The last rays of sunshine were sparkling on the surface, and he padded to the edge, stopping when the chilly water touched his forepaws. “What is it?” He gazed into the shallows, reaching for an answer.

The water washed past and he closed his eyes. Its

soft murmur lulled him deep into thought. Then, with a suddenness that made him stiffen, images of the battle beneath the four oaks filled his mind. He smelled blood and heard shrieks. He shivered.

Are they fighting again?

He saw the grave, the earth disturbed and another body lying there.

Gray Wing! His heart lurched. *He's at the hollow!*

He opened his eyes and turned from the river. Then he raced up the bank, leaped over the bushes at the top, and pelted toward the hollow. Was Gray Wing dead? Was he hurt?

He reached it, panting, not stopping at the top of the slope but plunging down through the ferns, barging through them until he burst into the clearing.

Relief swamped him as he saw Gray Wing sitting in the darkness beside the untouched grave. River Ripple pulled up. The gray tom was alive, but something was wrong. He looked as though he were struggling to sit up, as though grief were sucking him into the earth, pulling him down with a strength he could barely resist. And he was trembling.

The air was cold, but not so cold it could pierce the

thick fur of a mountain cat. But Gray Wing was shaking, his paws resting on the edge of the grave. He lifted his muzzle to the sky, and for a moment River Ripple half expected him to howl like a dog. But he only stared silently at the darkening sky.

River Ripple padded toward him. "I thought I told you to stay away from this place." He could feel Gray Wing's grief flooding the clearing until every breath felt like an effort. He must drag Gray Wing free of his sadness before it crushed him completely. He stopped and pressed his flank against Gray Wing's, letting his warmth flow into the mountain cat's freezing pelt. Last time, River Ripple had told him to return to his campmates, but it clearly hadn't helped him. Perhaps the peace of the river would ease the tom's suffering. "This isn't doing you any good, Gray Wing. Come back to my island with me."

Gray Wing looked at him, his eyes flashing with surprise.

I mustn't give him time to find an excuse. River Ripple turned away and headed for the slope. He lifted his tail. "Well?" he called breezily over his shoulder. "Are you coming, or what?"

When Gray Wing didn't move, doubt pricked in River Ripple's belly. *Please come with me.* He fought the urge to turn back and beg the mountain tom to come. *He has to want this too.* He kept walking.

As he reached the ferns, his paws pricked anxiously. *Please, Gray Wing.*

Fur brushed the earth behind him. Hope flickered in River Ripple's chest. Gray Wing was getting to his paws.

"Yes."

River Ripple's heart soared as Gray Wing agreed. He kept walking as the gray mountain cat began to follow River Ripple up the slope.



Chapter 14



“It’s no use!” Gray Wing waded from the shallows, his wet pelt pricking with annoyance. “I’ll never learn to fish.”

River Ripple blinked sympathetically at the gray tom. Gray Wing had been living on the island for nearly a moon, and he’d still caught nothing more than a pawful of waterweed. He’d tried to contribute to the prey pile by hunting for land prey, but the tightness in his chest was so bad that he didn’t have the speed or energy to catch more than a lame vole or an old mouse. He apologized over and over again for eating the fish River Ripple and the others had caught, but no cat minded having an extra mouth to feed. The group seemed happy to have him around, and as far as River Ripple knew, Gray Wing hadn’t returned to the grave site since he’d joined them. If his health hadn’t yet improved, at least the weight of his grief seemed to have lessened.

“We could try fishing from the stepping stones again,” River Ripple suggested. “That’s where I

caught my first fish.”

“So you keep saying.” Gray Wing was wheezing now, but he went on, flicking his tail with exasperation. “But I’m not quick enough.”

Gray Wing had been sounding more and more short of breath during the long afternoon, and River Ripple was worried about him. He’d hoped that spending time on the island would help Gray Wing recover from whatever ailed him, but the gray tom seemed worse than ever. If it was caused by smoke from the night of the fire, shouldn’t he have recovered by now? That had been moons ago. Why did it sound like he’d only just escaped from the burning forest?

River Ripple hopped out of the shallows. It was cold here. Perhaps it had been unwise to let Gray Wing get his fur wet. “Let’s head back to the island. You sound like you need a rest.”

“Stop treating me like an elder.” Gray Wing marched past River Ripple and began to climb the bank. “I smelled a mouse nest at the edge of the water meadow yesterday. Let’s go find it.”

River Ripple wondered if Gray Wing would be any faster on land than he had been in water, but he didn’t

say anything. Gray Wing didn't seem to want to admit how sick he was, so he'd tag along and keep an eye on him. He followed the mountain cat up the riverbank and through the reed bed toward the field where water pooled between wide swaths of grass. At least there were hedgerows around the water meadow, which would protect him from the bitter wind whisking down from the moor.

"What did you think of that strange she-cat who appeared at the gathering last night?" he asked as he fell in beside Gray Wing. It had felt strange to attend a meeting of the mountain cats in the hollow beneath the four trees, but he was a leader now, and they'd invited him. And he'd been curious, as well as hopeful that he could guide them if they started arguing again.

"Star Flower?"

"Is that her name?"

"Yes." Gray Wing followed the trail between the reeds. "I heard her introduce herself to Thunder."

"Thunder seemed smitten," River Ripple observed. "He could barely take his eyes off her, and when she spoke to him, he looked like he didn't know where to put his paws."

Gray Wing grunted. "I hope he's not thinking about taking her as a mate."

River Ripple couldn't help agreeing. There was something unsettling about the way Star Flower had appeared from nowhere, acting as though she were one of them. He didn't trust the strange she-cat. "Do you know who invited her?"

"I assumed she came with Clear Sky," Gray Wing mewed.

"Clear Sky didn't act like she was part of his group," River Ripple mewed. "He barely looked at her."

"He had other things on his mind." Gray Wing pushed through a gap in the hedge as they reached the water meadow and waited for River Ripple to squeeze after him.

"At least One Eye didn't show up," River Ripple shook twigs from his thick fur.

"I hope he was too ashamed," Gray Wing mewed. "Any cat who kills a campmate and wounds another has no place among us."

At the gathering, the mountain cats had shared news of a fight in Clear Sky's group in whispers, as

though they were frightened One Eye might be listening.

"I'm just glad Clear Sky kicked him out," River Ripple mewed.

"By the look of that scratch on Clear Sky's ear, One Eye didn't go quietly." River Ripple couldn't shake the worry that the mangy rogue was still roaming the forest.

Gray Wing scanned the hedge, nodding to a thicker stretch where grass clumped at the bottom. "That's where I smelled the nest."

River Ripple followed as Gray Wing padded toward it. "I just wish Clear Sky had chased One Eye off the first time he saw him."

"Me too. Now that he's got his claws into such rich hunting grounds, he won't want to let go." Gray Wing stopped and tasted the air. "But Clear Sky's always been rash. And conceited. One Eye probably flattered him." His gaze flitted toward a small patch of shivering grass stems. He dropped into a hunting crouch. "I fear we're all going to have to face the consequences."

River Ripple dropped beside him. Mouse-scent

touched his nose and he saw a tail twitching between the stems. Gray Wing unsheathed his claws. He leaped, but River Ripple held back. He wanted to see which way the mouse would run. Gray Wing landed accurately, but a moment too late. The mouse shot from beneath him, and River Ripple darted forward, snatching it up with a paw as it tried to flee. He gave it a killing bite and dropped it on the grass.

Gray Wing sat up. "It's not my day for hunting."

"It was great teamwork," River Ripple mewed.

"It shouldn't take a team to catch a mouse," Gray Wing huffed.

"No, but it's more fun." River Ripple nodded along the hedgerow. "Let's catch another," he mewed. "Where there's one mouse, there's usually more."

They followed the hedge, but River Ripple's thoughts were still on the gathering. The mountain cats had been worried about infected prey that had been spreading illness. River Ripple was relieved that so far the river prey and his rivermates had been unaffected. But that could change. "Are you worried about the sickness?" he asked.

Gray Wing's eyes darkened. "Yes," he mewed. "I

just hope that if the groups stay separate and isolate the sickness, it'll stop the spread." He broke into a coughing fit.

River Ripple glanced at him anxiously. Would Gray Wing's breathing difficulties make him more vulnerable to the other sickness? "We should go back to camp."

"With *one* mouse?" Gray Wing objected, snatching at a breath.

River Ripple frowned. "Okay," he mewed. "I'll catch another. You wait here." Gray Wing should be in a warm den, not out in the wind. He was beginning to think Gray Wing shouldn't be here at all but back in his own camp. Dappled Pelt could help him. He glanced at the mountain tom, hunched over as he fought for breath, noticing how thin he'd grown. His heart ached. *Please let him recover from this.*

In the days that followed, Gray Wing still didn't manage to catch a fish. But he was determined to add *something* to the prey pile, and, on a crisp, sunny morning, less than a quarter moon later, he led River Ripple downstream to search for voles.

The riverbank steepened as they neared the rapids until it became a sharp drop onto a narrow strip of

shore. They padded along the top until Gray Wing spotted a small hole among the roots of a hawthorn bush. "Stay here," he ordered, and began to sniff his way toward the edge.

River Ripple waited obediently beside the hole as Gray Wing scrambled down the bank and clattered onto the pebbles.

He seemed to find something at the bottom. "Okay," he called up to River Ripple. "Scratch at the hole, and yowl into it as loud as you can."

He must have found the other end. River Ripple began to claw at the hole, then leaned down and yowled into it. If there were voles hiding inside, his voice should flush them out. He stopped and listened, excited as he heard frantic squeaking and scuffling coming from inside. Quietly, he blocked the tiny entrance with his paws and strained to see over the edge of the riverbank.

Gray Wing's pelt flashed below as the gray tom darted one way, then another. From the happy flick of his tail, River Ripple guessed he'd caught something. He hurried to see. "Did you catch—"

A dark shadow flashed over him, and a harsh cry

sounded above. Heart lurching, he looked up. A hawk was plunging toward them, its talons stretched. It dived past River Ripple at the top of the bank. "Watch out!"

But Gray Wing had already leaped out of the way. He rolled over the pebbles as the hawk snatched something from the shore. As it lifted up and away, Gray Wing scrambled to his paws and stared at the spot on the shore where it had swooped. Two voles lay on the pebbles. From Gray Wing's angry expression, River Ripple guessed one had been stolen.

"Let's get out of here," he called down. It wasn't safe to stay. The hawk might return for what was left. "We don't need all this prey. We have more than enough on the island."

Gray Wing sniffed the voles, his pelt prickling irritably. He must be checking for signs of infection. River Ripple's heart sank as he realized they'd need to inspect all prey before they ate it if they didn't want to get sick.

Gray Wing seemed satisfied and picked them up before he leaped up the bank. He dropped them at River Ripple's paws. "I just wanted to contribute." His ears twitched self-consciously. "To feel useful."

River Ripple felt a jab of pity for the gray tom. "You don't need to prove yourself to me," he mewed softly. "I've seen everything you've done, the way you've led your cats. But any cat can see that you have been hurting, and I was happy to give you a place to retreat to." He'd enjoyed having Gray Wing around and had grown fond of him, and part of him wished the mountain tom would join his island group. But he couldn't shake the feeling that Gray Wing was out of place beside the river. If Gray Wing hadn't learned to fish or swim by now, he probably never would. And he was sick. He should be with his kin. "Maybe you know other cats who could use some food?" River Ripple pushed the voles gently toward him. He'd seen queens and kits in the mountain cats' camp on the moor. They probably needed this prey more than his rivermates did. "Some kits, maybe?"

"How did you know?" Gray Wing blinked at him. "It's true: I haven't been able to stop thinking about Pebble Heart and Owl Eyes . . . and poor Sparrow Fur."

The mountain tom spoke of the kits as though they were his own, which touched River Ripple deeply,

especially now because he knew their parents, Turtle Tail and Tom, were both dead.

Gray Wing dipped his head. "I think it's time for me to go home."

River Ripple felt suddenly at peace. It was the right decision. He dipped his head in return. "I wondered how long it would take for you to realize that," he mewed. "But should you ever need refuge, you know where we are."

Gray Wing's eyes glistened with emotion. He leaned forward eagerly. "Would you like to come back to the hollow with me?" he asked. "Maybe you and Night and Dew could—"

River Ripple shook his head.

"That's not what we agreed at the four trees, remember? We need to separate and isolate this sickness. Besides, the island is my home. I could not live anywhere else."

Gray Wing looked disappointed but lifted his chin. "I know," he mewed. "But I'll miss you, River Ripple. Thank you for all your help. I'll never forget what you've done for me." He touched noses with River Ripple, and a twinge of sadness pierced River Ripple's

heart as Gray Wing turned and padded away. He'd become a good friend, and River Ripple felt almost as close to this mountain cat now as he did to his rivermates.

But this was right. Gray Wing needed to be with his own cats.

At the river's edge, as the sun set beyond the moor, River Ripple closed his eyes. In the quarter moon since Gray Wing had left, the camp had seemed quiet, and River Ripple had meditated alone more and more. It wasn't just that he missed the mountain tom. Worry was tugging in his belly. He'd heard across the borders that the sickness was spreading, and that there was upheaval among the mountain cats. One Eye had returned, just as River Ripple and Gray Wing had feared he would, and had driven Clear Sky from his group. *Holding on to my dream of peace feels more and more like trying to hold water between my paws.* Now he let his body settle and his thoughts begin to flow with the current. *Guide me,* he silently begged the river. *Show me how I can bring peace here.*

He felt himself lift from his body and soar up, like a

hawk, until he was looking down on the moor and the forest and the river. Three groups, three hunting grounds. They seemed to form a whole that should feel complete, and yet something swirled in his heart, like water that wouldn't settle—an eddy in the stream that kept whirling around a stone wedged in the riverbed. Only removing the stone would allow the river to run smoothly once more.

A vision swept through him, like roaring wind. As it left him, he opened his eyes, his heart racing. The vision had been so dark, it frightened him. The river had delivered its answer—it had shown him a way to remove the stone. But its answer filled River Ripple with dread. He remembered Tall Shadow's words: *You will have to choose between peace and survival.* As the last rays of sunshine set the river aflame, River Ripple got to his paws. Survival must come first. Grimly, he began to pad toward the island.

River Ripple fluffed out his fur. The cold had been intensifying, promising frost, and finally it had come. He sat at the edge of the path winding from camp to the stepping stones and watched the river flow past his paws. The morning sun sparkled on the frost-coated

reeds. He lifted his face toward its warmth. His vision had haunted him these past few days, but the sunlight, burning orange through his closed eyes, seemed to banish his fear for a few moments.

He pricked his ears. Mews sounded upstream. Opening his mouth, he let the damp air bathe his tongue and recognized Thunder's scent. Lightning Tail was with him. Their voices drifted now over the quiet river. He tipped his head curiously. Their mews were edged with sharpness as though the pair were bickering. He opened his eyes. Did the mountain cats *ever* stop arguing?

Thunder snapped at Lightning Tail. "Does that mean you'll quit nagging me about Star Flower?"

"Just come on," Lightning Tail snapped in return.

River Ripple grunted. *Star Flower*. By the sound of it, Thunder *was* smitten with the rogue she-cat. Why else would he sound so defensive? Why was she still hanging around? His tail twitched uneasily. He suspected Star Flower was the sort of cat to stir up trouble wherever she went.

Thunder and Lightning Tail were crossing the stepping stones now. They weren't even trying to

disguise their approach. He heard every step, and every irritable growl as their paws splashed into water or were sucked down by mud.

Calmly, River Ripple got to his paws. He padded along the water's edge and slid between the bushes, staying out of sight as Thunder and Lightning Tail rounded a corner and appeared on the path. "Not very subtle, are you?" he mewed.

Lightning Tail pulled up, startled, and looked around. Thunder's pelt ruffled with surprise.

River Ripple padded out onto the path. "You're as bad as a pack of dogs," he mewed. "I heard you coming ages ago. What can I do for you?"

Thunder dipped his head politely. "We have news and a request," he mewed.

River Ripple's gaze flittered over him. What could this tom want from a river cat? He sat down. Lightning Tail sat down too and began to wash, but Thunder stayed on his paws.

"We've found a cure," Thunder began. "For the sickness."

River Ripple leaned forward, his heart lifting. "What is it?"

“An herb called Blazing Star.”

River Ripple’s heart quickened. This seemed too good to be true. “Do you have some?”

“We gathered a whole bunch.” Thunder mewed. “But One Eye stole it.”

River Ripple’s tail twitched.

“He ambushed our patrol,” Thunder explained. “Clear Sky was leading it.”

River Ripple had already heard that Clear Sky was staying with Tall Shadow’s group while One Eye led his group. He was lucky they’d taken him in after he’d brought One Eye to the forest. He would rather invite a fox into his camp. River Ripple’s pelt rippled angrily along his spine. “What else is Clear Sky going to let One Eye steal?”

“That’s why we’re here,” Thunder mewed.

Lightning Tail looked up from his washing for the first time. “We need your help.”

River Ripple narrowed his eyes.

Thunder met his gaze. “One Eye has more rogues with him now.” He leaned closer, his tail swishing slowly behind him. “The only way to chase him away is for us to fight him together.”

He stared expectantly at River Ripple, but River Ripple didn't speak. His vision was flashing in his mind, tugging at him, forcing him to see what lay ahead. He resisted. *I can't*. It wasn't fear that held him back. Agreeing to fight with the mountain cats would set his paws on a path he'd been resisting since he'd first arrived at the river.

Thunder held River Ripple's gaze. "Will you join us to drive One Eye away?"

River Ripple stared back at him. He wanted to say no. He wanted to return to his island and ignore the mountain cats' troubles. But he had decided to become one of them when he'd taken the role of leader; he'd been to their gatherings. What would happen if he didn't stand with them now?

He knew the answer. One Eye would grow stronger and more hostile. Eventually River Ripple and his rivermates would have no choice but to fight him or leave. Wasn't it better to fight now, with the mountain cats at their side? He closed his eyes for a moment. Tall Shadow had been right. If they wanted a peaceful home beside the river, he and his rivermates would have to fight for it.

“I will.” He met Thunder’s gaze. “But I’ve had problems with One Eye in the past, and believe me, he won’t back down.”

As he spoke, the vision flooded his thoughts, blotting out the sunshine and the sound of the river. One Eye was lying on a bloody stretch of grass, his head thrown back, his body stiff. Claw marks glistened crimson on his mangy pelt. It was all River Ripple could see, and it filled him with dread. He’d seen One Eye’s death, and now he was going to make it a reality.

“It’s not a question of driving him out,” he mewed grimly. “You’ll have to kill him.”



Chapter 15



“Follow me!” River Ripple’s heart pounded as he fled toward the river. How had the battle gone so badly? Had his vision been wrong?

He looked back, relieved to see that One Eye and his rogues weren’t chasing him. Gray Wing was at his heels, his campmates just behind. Dappled Pelt, Lightning Tail, and Thunder were among them. And kits, too. *Kits!* These mountain cats seemed ready to fight the moment they were born. River Ripple was amazed by their courage and skill. They never would have escaped the rogues’ ferocious attack if it hadn’t been for the courage of Owl Eyes and Sparrow Fur. They’d hurled themselves at the crowd of rogues from the thorn tree where they’d been hiding and startled them, giving the mountain cats time to flee.

How had the rogues known about the tunnels beneath the moor? *Star Flower!* She was One Eye’s daughter and had been spying for him all along! The treacherous she-cat must have told them when she’d revealed the mountain cats’ plan to ambush One Eye. *I*

was right not to trust her. At first they'd managed to repel the rogues who'd exploded from the tunnels and attacked Clear Sky, claws slashing, hissing with rage. But more had come from the forest like a swarm of cockroaches—Star Flower among them—and One Eye had welcomed her with such glee that rage had roared like fire in River Ripple's chest.

He'd been so sure of victory.

Now they were fleeing like rats.

Night and Dew were with him, pounding across the grass, heads low, tails down as they ran. Mist stayed close while Croak trailed behind, her eyes flashing with anger as she glanced back at the rogues, yowling on the hillside.

They'd trapped Clear Sky, cutting him off from escape.

River Ripple turned his gaze forward, pulling up just in time as the steep riverbank dropped away ahead of him. He scrambled down it, ducking clear as the others half jumped, half slithered down behind him, landing clumsily on the shore as they sought the shelter of the river.

Night wove through the crowd. "Are you okay?"

she panted.

“Yes.” He blinked at her anxiously. “Did every cat get away?” He hesitated. “Apart from Clear Sky.” He shuddered as he wondered what the rogue cats were doing to the defeated tom.

“We lost Wind Runner and Gorse Fur,” Night told him, snatching breaths between words.

Horror sparked beneath River Ripple’s pelt. “*Lost?*”

“I think they ran the other way,” she mewed quickly.

“The rogues didn’t get them?”

“Not as far as I know.”

Jagged Peak blinked from among the huddled mountain cats. “What are we going to do?” He stared bleakly at River Ripple. “Clear Sky is still out there. We can’t leave him.”

We won’t. Clear Sky was a pawful, and a terrible instigator, but he was one of them. River Ripple shouldered his way through the crowd and began to head upstream. “Come on! Over here!”

Gray Wing was the first to follow him. The gray tom was wheezing, but somehow he managed to keep

up as River Ripple led them along the narrow strip of shore between the water and the steep riverbank.

Night caught up. "You're taking them to the tunnel, aren't you?" She'd shown him the quick way onto the moor shortly after he'd arrived, but River Ripple never used it. He preferred to feel the wind in his fur and see where he was going.

"Yes. This way will bring us back onto the moor, close to the rogues," he told the others as he stopped beside a hole in the sandy riverbank.

Tall Shadow pushed past her campmates and peered into it warily. "There could be anything living down there."

"It was a badger set, but the badgers are long gone," River Ripple told her. "You'll have to trust me. Do you want to save Clear Sky or not?" He ducked into the tunnel. She'd followed him across the stepping stones on the night of the fire. She'd follow him now.

He felt tree roots snaking along his spine as he hurried along the tunnel. The smell of damp earth filled his nose and he blinked, hoping his eyes would grow used to the dark. It pressed around him, and he could hear his heart beating over the brush of fur on the

tunnel walls as the others followed.

Were Croak and Hollow staying close? They'd been nervous before the battle, and although he hadn't been able to promise that they would escape unscathed, he'd known that at the end of the day, if his vision was correct, One Eye would be defeated. Was it still true? His belly pricked with worry. What if his vision had failed to take into account Star Flower's betrayal?

He pushed the thought away. He couldn't turn back now.

He sensed a side tunnel open next to him, air swirling from it, and slowed. Was he going the right way? *Follow the slope upward.* He kept going straight, hope rising in his chest as the floor of the tunnel lifted beneath his paws. Behind him, no one spoke; the only sound was their breath and their paws scuffing the earth.

At last, he saw faint light filtering ahead. It grew until it became a wide circle of daylight. *We're almost there.* At the tunnel entrance, he halted. "We need to be careful." Pressing himself against the earth, he crept toward the opening. "Wait here while I see

what's outside.”

Cold air washed over him, and he breathed in deep as he slid out, relieved to be beneath the sky once more. The tunnel had come out in the middle of a gorse thicket. *Good*. They had cover. “You can come out,” he called quietly back to the others.

They began to emerge, creeping like beetles from the hole, narrowing their eyes against the bright sunshine that was glittering over the moor.

Gray Wing padded forward and peered through the branches. River Ripple pushed in beside him. He stiffened as he saw One Eye and the rogues. They had backed Clear Sky against a rock and were surrounding him, yowling insults and threats.

“Mange-pelt!”

“Fox-dung eater!”

“We’ll spread your guts all over the moor.”

One rogue after another padded from the crowd to aim vicious kicks at Clear Sky’s ribs with their hind legs. Clear Sky was still on his paws, glowering at them defiantly through the blood dripping around his eyes. He staggered but didn’t fall as another rogue padded forward and shoved him back against the rock

with a fierce kick.

Gray Wing was trembling. “We have to stop this before they kill him.”

He jerked his muzzle around as the gorse rustled and Wind Runner and Gorse Fur pushed through. River Ripple’s heart lifted as he saw they were safe.

“We waited for you,” Wind Runner mewed quickly. “We knew you’d come back. One Eye has been too busy torturing Clear Sky to worry about where you went. What should we do now?”

Gray Wing hesitated as the eyes of every cat turned toward him. He glanced upward through the gorse, his eyes turning to slits as the daylight seemed to dazzle him. “We can use the sunshine against them.”

River Ripple frowned. *How?*

“We need to get high up.” Gray Wing began to outline a plan, and River Ripple leaned closer as he went on. “Maybe in the thorn tree where Sparrow Fur and Owl Eyes were hiding.” His eyes lit up and he began to sound more confident with every word. “We’ll climb into the tree and call out to One Eye. He’ll come to investigate, peering up with the sun in his eyes. He won’t be able to see that the tree is full of

cats. And then we pounce.”

As the mountain cats began to slip out from the gorse thicket, one by one, Croak stopped beside River Ripple. “We’re not climbers,” she mewed.

Dew stopped beside her. “You must have climbed a tree once in your life,” she mewed. “You’re a cat.”

“I guess,” Croak mewed hesitantly.

“It’ll be easy,” Hollow reassured her.

Mist and Night exchanged glances.

River Ripple whisked his tail. “If we can swim, we can climb,” he told his rivermates, hoping it was true.

Croak lifted her muzzle. “I’ll do my best.”

River Ripple ducked after Dappled Pelt and led his rivermates across the grass, keeping low as they slipped behind the rogues. The mountain cats had already climbed into the branches of the thorn tree by the time he reached it.

“You can do this.” River Ripple waved Night and the others past him with a flick of his tail and waited at the bottom as one by one they hauled themselves up the trunk. He began to see how Gray Wing’s plan could work as he watched them. Sunshine was sparkling between the branches, blinding him so he

could barely make out the cats clinging to the tree.

He narrowed his eyes against it and followed Mist up, hooking his claws into the bark and pulling himself onto the lowest branch. Dappled Pelt was already there, watching the rogues. They were surrounding Clear Sky, who was slumped now, ragged and bloody, on the ground. But still the mountain tom kept trying to get to his paws and face his attackers.

Sparrow Fur called from above. "Hey, One Eye!"

River Ripple looked up. It had started.

"You'd like another fight with me, wouldn't you?"

Sparrow Fur yowled.

One Eye slowly turned and looked toward the thorn tree. His eyes narrowed.

"You and you!" One Eye pointed with his tail at a couple of rogues. "Guard this piece of mange-fur. The rest of you, follow me, and surround that tree."

The rogues obeyed him, racing fluidly over the moor toward the thorn tree. When they were in position, One Eye followed more slowly. "Is that you, Sparrow Fur?" he snarled. "If you want a fight, I'll give you one you won't forget—because you'll be dead."

“Flea-pelt!”

The branches above River Ripple shivered as Sparrow Fur leaped into a higher branch, and then a higher one, always moving into the sun.

One Eye padded closer and closer to the tree, craning his neck upward to see the spot where Sparrow Fur had gone. He slitted his eyes against the glittering sun.

“Now!” Gray Wing whispered.

Energy surged beneath River Ripple’s pelt. Twigs showered over him as the mountain cats hurled themselves from the branches. Below, the rogues shrieked as claws and teeth flew at them. He dropped, snarling, and landed on the back of a ginger tabby. He dug in his claws and clung on as Croak dived past him and knocked a tortoiseshell back with a powerful swipe. Night and Mist landed, one then the other, and reared together on their hind legs. They began to drive a brown-and-white rogue back across the grass with a flurry of blows. Their strikes interwove so seamlessly, it seemed as though they’d fought side by side for moons.

River Ripple felt the ginger tabby writhe between

his paws. He dug his claws in tighter and, with a growl, hauled the tabby onto his side. Hanging on, he raked the tabby's spine until the tabby screeched in agony and tore himself from River Ripple's grip.

River Ripple let him go, leaving blood and fur clumped beneath his claws. Yowling in panic, the tabby hared away over the moor. Croak's tortoiseshell was already streaking across the hillside. Night and Mist's rogue turned tail and fled. All around them, rogues were running for their lives.

"Come on!" Night's eyes shone. "Let's make sure they don't come back."

She charged away, and River Ripple chased after her. Exhilaration pulsed beneath his pelt as the rogues fled across the hillside, past the heather, past the gorse, away from the mountain cats' land, leaving a trail of fur in their wake. *Mouse-hearts!* How had One Eye thought he could win with such mangy cowards as allies?

Night pulled up as the rogues disappeared over a rise.

River Ripple slowed and stopped.

Her pelt was bristling with excitement. "Did you

see them run?”

River Ripple purred with joy. “It was easier than chasing crows from dead prey.” His heart was pounding. His paws fizzed. “I wish they’d put up more of a fight!”

“You *enjoyed* it.” Night sounded surprised.

River Ripple stared back at her. He *had* enjoyed it. He even felt disappointed the battle was over. Guilt roiled in his belly. *But I love peace, right?* His fur pricked self-consciously. *Am I more like a mountain cat than I thought?* He shook out his pelt. “It had to be done,” he mewed gruffly. “We couldn’t let them kill Clear Sky.”

Night eyed him curiously. “I guess not.” She flicked her tail. “Let’s check that the others are okay.”

As Night headed back toward the thorn tree, River Ripple hurried after her. “I never liked Clear Sky. . . .” He found himself wanting to explain. “But that doesn’t mean I wanted to see him hurt.”

“I understand,” Night mewed. Why did she sound amused?

“We had to take a stand against One Eye,” River Ripple insisted. “For the sake of the group.”

“I agree.” As they reached the thorn tree, she scanned the battle scene. Only the mountain cats remained, and Star Flower.

The golden she-cat was staring in distress at the mountain cats as they clustered together. Gray Wing was glaring at her, blocking her from getting close to them. She tried and he kicked her, hard. She cringed back, whimpering.

“What are they looking at?” Night mewed. The mountain cats seemed to be surrounding something.

Croak, Mist, Dew, and Hollow hung back, their flanks heaving as they caught their breath.

River Ripple’s fur twitched uneasily. Was Clear Sky dead? He smelled fresh blood. As the mountain cats backed away, River Ripple could see Thunder, Lightning Tail, and Cloud Spots standing over a body. He padded nearer and looked past them.

One Eye was lying on the grass, head twisted back, his body stiff, claw marks glistening on his knotted pelt. River Ripple’s vision had come true.

“He’s dead,” Thunder meowed.

Star Flower let out a moan and dragged herself across the grass to touch her nose to her father’s.

“Get her away from there,” Thunder ordered, his voice cold. “She doesn’t deserve to grieve. Drive her out.”

River Ripple felt a flash of pity for the rogue she-cat, and for One Eye. He felt no satisfaction at his death. *It had to happen.* He stared grimly at the rogue’s battered body. *He would have killed more cats if he’d lived.*

Clear Sky was lying on the grass beyond them, bloodied but still breathing.

“We did it!” Hollow padded happily to River Ripple’s side.

“We fought like mountain cats.” Croak sounded proud.

“Yes.” River Ripple looked at them, remembering his own exhilaration. “But we must remember that a cat has died today.”

“He was more like a fox than a cat,” Hollow muttered.

“A *cat* has died,” River Ripple mewed again. He was not going to celebrate any death. And yet he knew something inside him had changed. He’d stood with the mountain cats to protect his group. As much

as he loved peace, he'd chosen war: today he'd accepted that survival must be fought for.



Chapter 16



River Ripple fluffed out his fur. The night air was cold. He peered down the slope at the mist drifting around the four great oaks. He could see spirit-cats moving between them, their pelts sparkling with starlight. *This is a dream.*

He'd closed his eyes in his nest only a few moments ago. Now he stood at the edge of the four trees hollow, feeling the familiar tug drawing him down toward the spirit-cats.

He plunged through the ferns and bounded down the slope. As he burst out into the clearing, Tall Shadow turned and looked at him. Gray Wing blinked a greeting from beneath one of the oaks. Wind Runner dipped her head. Were the other leaders sharing the same dream? River Ripple nodded back and padded across the clearing, sending mist swirling in eddies around him. Thunder was here too, his ginger pelt blanched by the moonlight. He looked around, clearly as surprised as River Ripple to find himself here.

Clear Sky was talking to a spirit-cat. Storm? River

Ripple narrowed his eyes. Her silver tail was flicking crossly, and a kit stood beside her, glaring angrily at Clear Sky. Had the spirit-cats brought them here to lecture them? Moon Shadow and Jackdaw's Cry were approaching Tall Shadow, their eyes dark with determination, as Storm left Clear Sky with the kit and headed toward Thunder.

River Ripple waited to see who would approach him. *I have no dead friends to greet me.* He tensed. *Unless . . .* He scanned the starry pelts, hardly daring to breathe. Were any of his park friends here? *Dart? Shine?* He swallowed. *Arc? Flutter?* He wanted to see them, but in life, not here. Relief unwound in his belly as he saw they weren't among the spirit-cats.

"River Ripple."

He blinked surprised as Frost padded toward him. This was the white tom who'd been killed by Snake in the battle. Petal and Fox came with him. These were Clear Sky's rogues. *Why do they want to talk to me?*

Petal must have read the uncertainty in his eyes. "You have no dead here to mourn." She stopped in front of him. "But I hope you will listen to us."

"Of course." River Ripple dipped his head. "I

stand beside the mountain cats. Their dead are mine now.”

Frost padded closer. His eyes flashed angrily. “Why haven’t you fulfilled your destiny?”

River Ripple stared at him. “My destiny?” What did the white tom mean? Hadn’t he fulfilled it when he’d helped the dead cross into the living world?

“We told you to grow and spread like the Blazing Star,” Frost mewed sharply.

“You told the *mountain cats* to spread—”

“You stand beside them now, remember?” Fox flicked his tail. “Their destiny is *your* destiny.”

River Ripple’s pelt ruffled. “But I only want peace.” Did standing with the mountain cats mean becoming swept up in their never-ending squabbles?

“Not even the dead can find peace.” Petal looked at him gravely.

“Grow,” Frost mewed.

“Spread,” Fox growled.

“I get it,” River Ripple mewed irritably. “‘Like the Blazing Star.’ But how? I’ve tried to make my group bigger. I’ve taken in any cat who wants to join. Am I supposed to go *looking* for loners?”

Petal held his gaze. "You must do whatever it takes."

"And if I don't?" River Ripple asked.

"You will lose everything you've fought so hard to gain."

River Ripple watched minnows darting between the reeds. The bright afternoon sunshine had done little to warm him. The cold wind plucked the last dying leaves from the branches above him and sent them tumbling along the riverbank. He shivered as he thought back to last night's unsettling dream. All he'd wanted was a quiet life beside the river with campmates who shared his love of peace. But he'd been drawn into the battle with One Eye, and now it seemed he was entirely caught up in the mountain cats' fate. *You must do whatever it takes.* He could feel their destiny twining around him like brambles, binding him so tightly that he struggled to breathe.

He closed his eyes and let the river's gentle flow calm him, remembering his advice to Tall Shadow. *The river is far stronger than you. Don't resist the current.* It had led him here, and now, if the spirit-cats wanted to guide his paws, he'd let them.

The reeds rattled behind him and he turned as Croak burst out, panting.

“Shattered Ice and Dappled Pelt are in the camp!” she mewed.

He blinked at her. “Why?”

“They asked for you,” she puffed.

He stiffened. Was Tall Shadow’s group in trouble? “Did they say what it was about?”

“No.” She shook out her pelt. “They only said they wanted to talk to you.”

River Ripple brushed past her and nosed his way through the reeds to the path that led to camp. As he reached it, he broke into a run. Had Tall Shadow sent for help? He forced his pelt to smooth when he spotted the entrance. Taking a breath to calm himself, he padded inside.

Shattered Ice and Dappled Pelt stood in the middle of the clearing. Hollow and Mist were watching them curiously from the edge. Dew and Night sat, heads together, talking softly, their gazes on the mountain cats.

As Croak followed him into camp, River Ripple crossed the clearing and stopped in front of Shattered

Ice and Dappled Pelt. "Is something wrong?"

Shattered Ice dipped his head. "We'd like to join your group," he mewed. "If you'll have us."

River Ripple looked from Shattered Ice to Dappled Pelt. "Why? Has something happened?"

"Tall Shadow's leaving the moor," Shattered Ice told him.

"Thunder, too," Dappled Pelt added. "Our group has broken up."

Was this their way of spreading and growing like the Blazing Star? "And you want to come here?"

"Yes." Dappled Pelt whisked her tail. "We only settled on the moor because it was the first place we stopped when we arrived. The group decided it was time we *chose* where we wanted to live."

"Tall Shadow's taking most of the group to the pines," Shattered Ice explained. "She's leaving the moor to Wind Runner's group."

"Thunder's going back to Clear Sky's group with Lightning Tail," Dappled Pelt mewed.

Again? River Ripple narrowed his eyes. Thunder kept moving between the moor and the forest. Would the restless young tom ever settle?

“We chose the river,” Dappled Pelt told him as Shattered Ice looked hopefully around the camp.

Dew stepped forward eagerly. Night padded closer. Mist and Hollow were watching with wide, expectant eyes.

River Ripple felt a tug of worry in his chest. “Does Tall Shadow mind you coming here instead of going with her?” He didn’t want to be accused of stealing cats.

“She let us decide where we wanted to be,” Dappled Pelt told him.

“We chose *here*,” Shattered Ice mewed.

“The river is very different from what you’re used to,” River Ripple cautioned.

Night pushed past him, her tail swishing. “Are you trying to make them change their minds?” She dipped her head to Shattered Ice. “We’ll be pleased to have you join us.” Her gaze flitted to Dappled Pelt. “I think you’ll fit in well here.”

Dappled Pelt’s eyes shone. “Is that a yes?” She glanced toward River Ripple.

River Ripple swallowed back a purr. Coming right on the paws of his odd dream, this seemed too good to

be true. Dappled Pelt had refused his invitation to join his group moons before—now she was asking to join, and she'd brought a campmate. "Yes," he mewed happily.

Dappled Pelt purred. "I'm looking forward to learning to fish."

"We've watched you from the moor." Shattered Ice lifted his tail. "It looks like so much fun when you bob up with a fish between your jaws."

"Won't you miss the moor?" Dew glanced toward the distant hills.

Shattered Ice shook his head. "Too many memories."

Dappled Pelt moved closer to the gray-and-white tom. "Shattered Ice used to tunnel with Jackdaw's Cry," she mewed softly. "And the camp still feels empty without Hawk Swoop and Rainswept Flower." The two mountain cats glanced at each other; then Dappled Pelt went on. "We need a fresh start."

Mist nodded toward the reed dens woven at the edge of the clearing. "I'm glad we built extra nests."

Hollow puffed out his chest. "We'll need extra territory if we keep growing like this," he mewed.

River Ripple shot him a look. “We’re never going to fight over territory,” he mewed firmly.

“But—”

River Ripple cut him off. “The river will provide everything we need.”

“But, surely, we’ll protect what we have, won’t we?” Hollow mewed anxiously.

River Ripple snorted. “Who’s going to steal the river from us?” he mewed. “We’re the only cats who like fish.”

Shattered Ice and Dappled Pelt settled in quickly, proving River Ripple wrong when they gulped down their first fish and, licking their lips enthusiastically, asked how soon they could start learning to catch their own. Night had already begun teaching them to swim, but it would be a while before they were skilled enough to swim alone.

A quarter moon after they’d arrived, River Ripple led Shattered Ice toward the water meadow, fluffing his fur against the rain. “Do you miss the moor?” he asked the gray-and-white tom.

“A little,” Shattered Ice mewed. “Being so close to the sky reminded me of the mountains.”

River Ripple was intrigued. "I've never seen mountains," he mewed. "What are they like?"

"Cold," Shattered Ice told him. "And bleak."

"But you miss them?" River Ripple mewed.

"Only the sky." Shattered Ice shivered. "I felt like I could touch it. But I don't think I'd ever been completely warm until we came here."

"Are you warm enough on the island?"

"Yes." Shattered Ice purred. "Reeds make good dens." He sounded surprised.

"What did you make dens from in the mountains?"

"We lived in a cave."

River Ripple shivered. "And what did you hunt?"

"Buzzards, eagles, rabbits," Shattered Ice mewed.

"Anything we could. It was hard, and hunting during the cold moons could freeze your paws into lumps of ice." He looked at River Ripple. "Have you always lived beside the river?"

River Ripple's whiskers twitched. It amused him that other cats thought he'd always lived here, when it still felt like he'd only recently arrived. "I lived in a park most of my life."

"A *park*? What's *that*?" They rounded a corner,

and a gust of wind sprayed freezing rain into their faces. Shattered Ice narrowed his eyes against it.

“It’s a Twoleg place,” River Ripple explained. “With lawns and Twoleg dens and stone pathways.”

“And *Twolegs*, by the sound of it.” Shattered Ice looked unimpressed. “Wasn’t it scary living right next to them?”

“They only came during the day,” River Ripple mewed. “At night we’d have the park to ourselves. And there was always plenty to eat and shelter when we needed it.” He realized how distant his life there felt, almost as though he were talking about another cat’s life. He tried to remember Dart’s mew and where the gray splotches were on Shine’s pelt. Were Arc’s eyes green or yellow? He slowed. Were his friends slowly drifting from his memory? Would he realize one day that he’d forgotten about them altogether?

He suddenly noticed that Shattered Ice had stopped. The tom’s ears were pricked. “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“A cry.”

River Ripple listened and heard a low moan of pain. A cat was in trouble. "Come on." He pushed through the reeds, opening a path across the muddy earth as the moan sounded again.

Ice Shattered followed. "Do you recognize it?"

"Doesn't sound familiar." River Ripple slid out into an opening in the reed bed. On a small stretch of mud, a brown tabby she-cat lay on her side, her head tipped back as she let out another agonized wail. He hurried toward her and crouched down. "What's wrong? Are you injured?"

She jerked her muzzle toward him, staring at him with wide, terrified eyes until pain seemed to seize her again and she let out a low groan, her flanks twitching. River Ripple glanced at Shattered Ice. "Go and fetch Dappled Pelt!" The moor cat had had already begun storing herbs in a gap in the wall of her den. River Ripple had been pleased to have a healer in the group at last. And he needed her now. "Tell her a cat is in trouble."

Panic flashed in Shattered Ice's eyes. "What's wrong with her?"

The tabby she-cat was panting now, her eyes

screwed shut as she struggled against the pain.

“I don’t know!” River Ripple snapped. “Just hurry!”

Shattered Ice turned and pushed his way through the reeds. “I’ll be as quick as I can,” he called over his shoulder.

“Someone’s coming to help,” River Ripple told the she-cat. What was wrong with her? Had she eaten something bad? River Ripple flinched away as a darker thought crossed his mind—had the sickness returned? The mountain cats seemed to have contained the outbreak after fetching Blazing Star and treating their campmates. And no sick prey had been found in the forest or on the moor for a while. But that didn’t mean it couldn’t come back. His thoughts quickened. Did Dappled Pelt know where to gather more Blazing Star?

The tabby she-cat dug her claws into the mud, a deep and agonized yowl rolling in her throat. Was she dying? River Ripple leaned closer. “What’s your name?” he asked, hoping to distract her.

She moaned, her voice trembling. Then the pain seemed to ease and she lay back and caught her

breath before looking at him blankly. Fear shone in her eyes.

“What’s your name,” he asked her again.

“Kite.” The tabby seemed to be searching his gaze. Perhaps she was wondering if he was dangerous.

“I’m going to stay with you until my rivermate comes,” he mewed. “She’s a healer. She’ll know how to help you.”

She looked at him warily.

“You’re safe here,” he promised.

As he spoke, another violent spasm seemed to grip her. She tensed, yowling long and deep. He ran his tail over her flank, hoping it might soothe her. If she was a loner, she was clearly a good hunter. She was very plump. He wondered suddenly if she had escaped from a Twoleg den. “Are you a kittypet?” he asked.

She shook her head, gritting her teeth against the pain.

“It’s okay,” he mewed. “Dappled Pelt will be here soon.”

Time seemed to slow as he waited. Kite trembled and groaned through one convulsion after another until

River Ripple wondered if she'd die before Dappled Pelt arrived. At last, the reeds trembled and Dappled Pelt burst out, a bundle of herbs between her jaws. She nosed River Ripple out of the way and dropped the herbs beside the she-cat.

"She's called Kite," River Ripple told her as Shattered Ice slid through the reeds behind her.

Dappled Tail didn't take her eyes from the tabby. "Where does it hurt, Kite?"

The tabby stared at her with round, frightened eyes, then glanced along her belly.

Dappled Pelt followed her gaze. Her pelt smoothed. Her shoulders loosened.

River Ripple peered over her shoulder. "Is she going to be okay?"

"She's having kits," Dappled Pelt told him.

"Kits?" River Ripple's tail twitched.

Dappled Tail shot him a look. "Didn't you guess?"

"I've never seen a cat having kits," he mewed sheepishly. He was relieved to hear Dappled Pelt sounding so relaxed. This was clearly something she knew how to deal with.

She laid a paw on the tabby's belly. "Find a stick

for her to bite on,” she mewed over her shoulder. “Something that won’t splinter.”

River Ripple was relieved to have something useful to do. He pushed through the reeds and began to scout along the path for a piece of wood.

Shattered Ice followed him. “Let’s look along the hedgerow,” he suggested.

They scoured the roots of the hawthorn bushes lining the water meadow, pulling out twigs and stems and discarding them when they seemed too thin or brittle.

At last, Shattered Ice found a stout lump of wood, still so green and pliable that it wouldn’t splinter. He carried it back to Dappled Pelt, River Ripple at his heels.

They heard a mewling.

River Ripple stared in surprise. A tom-kit was lying on the mud beside Dappled Pelt. Another lay at Kite’s muzzle, where she lapped it eagerly.

“There’s another one coming,” Dappled Pelt told him. “Then we should get them all to a warm den.”

He should warn his group they were coming. “I’ll go and—”

“Shattered Ice can go,” Dappled Pelt interrupted. She turned her head and looked at the gray-and-white tom. “Make sure the nest is clean and lined with moss, and send Dew here to help carry the kits back to camp.”

As Shattered Ice headed away, Kite looked up. “Camp?”

“It’s where we live,” Dappled Pelt told her.

Kite’s eyes widened hopefully. “Are you one of the groups that lives around here?”

“Have you heard of us?” River Ripple looked surprised.

“I’ve heard other loners talk about you,” Kite mewed. “I was hoping to find you so my kits would have a—” Another convulsion cut her off and she began to groan.

“That kit needs washing,” Dappled Pelt told River Ripple. She nodded to the tiny tom-kit lying in the mud. “It needs to be clean, dry, and warm.”

River Ripple picked it up by the scruff. It was lighter than a mouse, and his heart swelled as happily as if it had been his own. He sat down, placed it between his forepaws and began to lap it gently. It

mewled and wriggled, and he felt it grow warmer and begin to purr as it snuggled deeper into his belly fur.

“There!” Dappled Pelt pawed a freshly birthed kit away from Kite and inspected it. “It’s a she-kit,” she told the tabby.

“The last one?” Kite asked.

“Yes.”

Kite looked relieved and began to wash the tom-kit beside her muzzle as Dappled Pelt picked up the newly born she-kit and dropped it beside her.

“You did well,” she purred.

“Thank you.” Kite purred at her gratefully.

River Ripple suddenly remembered the tabby’s words. *I was hoping to find you.* He looked up from washing the tom-kit. “Why were you hoping to find us?”

“I wanted my kits to have a safe home.” Kite blinked at him. “I thought maybe you’d take us in.”

River Ripple blinked at her. *Another* recruit?

As he hesitated in surprise, Dappled Pelt answered for him. “Of course we will.” She looked at him. “That’s okay, isn’t it?”

He flicked his tail happily. “Yes.”

Kite looked relieved and suddenly very tired.

A moment later, Shattered Ice returned with Dew. “Night and Mist are getting the nest ready.”

Dew hurried to Kite and, bending over the she-kit, sniffed it gently. “She’s very beautiful.”

River Ripple picked up the tom-kit and placed it gently beside its littermates. Then he backed away and watched Dew and Dappled Pelt fussing over them while Shattered Ice peered over their shoulders. Would these kits be the first kits to grow up in his group? With any luck, they’d spend their whole lives here and raise kits of their own.

Pain suddenly pricked his heart. Why couldn’t Flutter be with him? *Their* kits should be the first of generations to live beside the river. It wasn’t fair. He realized, with a pang so sharp it left him breathless, that he’d probably never see Flutter again, and, despite being surrounded by rivermates, he felt a loneliness that seemed to stretch on forever into the future.

Sadness swept over him as he watched Dew and Shattered Ice pick up the kits while Dappled Pelt helped Kite to her paws. His group was growing. There was going to be new life on the island. But he

felt left behind, dragged back by the past, which tugged him with claws still curled deep in his heart. Would he ever be free to move forward without betraying the cats who had once been as close to him as kin?



Chapter 17



“Don’t let him rile you.” River Ripple brushed against Clear Sky.

The half-moon sat in a star-specked sky. Leaf-bare—what the mountain cats called the cold moons—had set in fast, and icy air pooled at the bottom of the four trees hollow. River Ripple faced Slash. Tall Shadow and Thunder stood beside him while Clear Sky pleaded.

River Ripple’s pelt ruffled angrily. Slash had been one of One Eye’s rogues. He’d been hanging around the forest ever since One Eye died. He’d snatched Star Flower and had been holding her hostage for a quarter moon. And now he was standing on top of the great rock, flanked by six skinny, mean-eyed rogues, glaring down at them, his lip curled with malice. He’d promised to return Star Flower tonight, but she was nowhere in sight.

Clear Sky had taken in the treacherous she-cat and made her his mate. River Ripple could still hardly believe it. After she’d lied to everyone! And hadn’t it

been *Thunder* who'd loved her, not Clear Sky? The young ginger tom must have turned his back on Star Flower after she'd betrayed the mountain cats to One Eye. It was likely that he still had a lingering affection for her, which should have been respected. But then, when did Clear Sky ever show respect for another cat? And Clear Sky was Thunder's father. What kind of father stole their son's almost-mate? And now she was carrying Clear Sky's kits. Perhaps that was why Thunder had left Clear Sky's group and started his own in another part of the forest.

But Clear Sky must love her. Why else would he be pleading with a rogue like Slash? And Slash was playing with him as though playing with prey before he killed it. River Ripple flexed his claws. No cat would die here tonight. "He wants to cloud your thoughts," he whispered to Clear Sky. "But you need to keep a clear head,"

Clear Sky seemed to take hold of himself and steadied his voice. He glared at Slash. "You promised to return Star Flower if I brought the other leaders here."

Slash tipped his head. "If I gave you Star Flower

now, what incentive would you have to honor the agreement we will make here tonight?”

Clear Sky lifted his chin. “No one will agree to anything until Star Flower is safely returned.”

Slash peered over the edge of the rock nastily. “I’m afraid that isn’t something you get to decide. If you want to see your mate or your kits alive, you will meet my demands.”

Thunder stepped forward. “What are your demands, exactly?”

“For every five pieces of prey you catch, I want one,” Slash told him. “My rogues will visit you each day to collect our share.”

River Ripple narrowed his eyes. He hadn’t expected Slash to bring Star Flower. The rogue was too much like One Eye—devious and a liar. The other leaders had also guessed he would hold on to Star Flower. That’s why they’d come up with a way to save her. But they hadn’t shared it with Clear Sky. It was important that he not know their plan. He needed to be sincere in his desperation if Slash was to believe him.

River Ripple eyed the rogue coldly. “Why do you

stay? The moor, the river, and the forest mean nothing to you. New lands stretch as far as the horizon. Why not go and hunt somewhere else?"

"Why should we bother when we have you to hunt for us?" Slash began to pace the edge of the rock, his rogues moving back to let him pass. "You pride yourself on your hunting skills. Isn't this a perfect chance to show them off? And I think I've given you enough incentive. . . . Remember, if you don't share your prey, Star Flower will die."

Clear Sky's pelt spiked along his spine. "What if we give you one piece of prey in ten?"

Slash's ears twitched. "That's not very generous."

"One in *seven*?" Clear Sky sounded desperate.

River Ripple felt a jab of pity for the arrogant tom. He wasn't going to let Star Flower die, and neither were the others. He lifted his muzzle. "Our campmates will not go hungry to feed yours," he told the rogue firmly.

Clear Sky looked at River Ripple in disbelief. "You can't do this!" His gaze snapped to Wind Runner. "You have to help save her!" Tall Shadow backed away as Clear Sky glared at her. "You promised you'd help

me!”

A low growl sounded in Slash’s throat.

Clear Sky turned to face him. “Give me a chance to persuade them!” he begged.

Slash scowled. “Clearly your friends don’t care if Star Flower dies,” he snarled. “But don’t worry. You won’t be the only one to pay for this.” His claws scraped the stone. “None of you realize the danger you face. My rogues outnumber you. They are more savage than any of you can imagine. If you value your prey more than the lives of your kits and your campmates, then you are free to refuse me.”

Thunder lifted his chin. “You’re bluffing.”

Tall Shadow hissed at Slash. “Why should we believe a word you say?”

River Ripple hoped they were right. If the rogues were as many and as vicious as Slash boasted, even if the mountain cats’ plan worked, they and his own rivermates could be badly hurt.

Wind Runner snorted. “For all we know, every one of your campmates is beside you right now.”

“Are you willing to take that chance?” Slash eyed her menacingly.

River Ripple felt a surge of respect for the moor cat as she replied without flinching. "Yes."

Thunder stared at the rogue defiantly. Tall Shadow lashed her tail. None of them were going to give ground to Slash.

"No!" Clear Sky looked desperately at River Ripple. "Don't you understand? He's going to kill Star Flower!"

River Ripple avoided his gaze. It felt cruel to pretend that they didn't care about Star Flower. But Slash had to believe they were willing to abandon her, and Clear Sky's despair would convince him. "We can't give in to this bully," he growled. "He will only return with more demands until we all starve."

"So you're going to sacrifice my mate?" Clear Sky stared in disbelief. "The mother of my kits?"

"Very well." Slash's mew was hard with rage. "If that's your decision."

"No!" Clear Sky looked up at him pleadingly. "I'll hunt for you! You can have *all* my prey. Just give me Star Flower!"

Slash's gaze flashed with contempt. Then he turned and disappeared down the back of the great

rock. His rogues filed after him. Clear Sky stood as motionless as rock as they swished away through the bracken, and River Ripple forced himself not to move as Clear Sky stumbled and slumped onto his side. *We're going to fix this*, he promised silently. He swapped glances with the other leaders. Thunder nodded. Gray Wing lifted his chin. They were ready.

River Ripple padded to Clear Sky as he lay sobbing and wretched. "Clear Sky," he mewed gently.

Clear Sky didn't lift his head. "You've killed her. And my kits." He buried his nose beneath his paws. "Leave me alone! I never want to see any of you ever again."

Wind Runner padded closer and looked at River Ripple, then glanced down at Clear Sky. It was time to tell him. But Wind Runner was never a cat to do things gently.

"Clear Sky!" She raked Clear Sky's ears with a swipe and thrust her muzzle close to his cheek. "Sit up and stop acting like a kit."

Clear Sky looked up in surprise. He stared at the other leaders as they gathered around him. "Don't you understand?" he wailed. "Star Flower's going to die!"

“You fool,” Wind Runner hissed. “Do you think we have no hearts?”

Thunder leaned down and nosed Clear Sky’s shoulder with his muzzle. “Get up.”

“Why?” Bewildered, Clear Sky let Thunder help him to his paws.

Tall Shadow lifted her tail. “Come with us,” she told him. “We have something to show you.”

“We should have rescued her as soon as we knew where she was!” Clear Sky mewed angrily.

River Ripple followed wearily as they crossed the border from Tall Shadow’s territory into Clear Sky’s and climbed the rise. Wind Runner, Thunder, and Tall Shadow were still with them. They’d told him of Gray Wing’s plan to rescue Star Flower while they kept Slash and his rogues busy in the hollow. It hadn’t taken more than a moment for Clear Sky to puff up into his old self, indignantly hurling accusations at the others for keeping their plan from him and not giving him a chance to rescue Star Flower. Tall Shadow had tried to explain that this had been the best way to trick Slash, but Clear Sky was hardly listening as he marched back to his camp, which was where Gray Wing would take

Star Flower after he'd rescued her.

“Clear Sky!”

Gray Wing's mew sounded from the bottom of the rise, and Clear Sky wheeled around at his brother's call.

“Clear Sky!” Gray Wing sounded out of breath. Why was he alone? River Ripple's belly tightened. Where was Star Flower?

Clear Sky bounded down the slope toward Gray Wing. “Did you rescue her? Is she safe?”

“We got her away from the rogues,” Gray Wing told him. “But the kits are coming.”

“Already?” Clear Sky pelt spiked.

“It's too soon!” Tall Shadow raced to join them.

“Where is she?” Clear Sky demanded.

“We took her to Tall Shadow's camp,” Gray Wing told him.

River Ripple hung back. *More* kits. Envy pricked his heart like a thorn. Kite's kits were growing well. Snow Tail, Trout Fur, and Willow Stream were already exploring the camp and eager to try swimming. But as fond as he'd grown of the group's newest recruits, whenever he saw them darting across the clearing or

chasing each other in and out of the reeds, he felt a pang of longing for the kits he'd never had with Flutter. And now, here was Clear Sky, starting a *second* family. It seemed so unfair.

Wind Runner was already hurrying away. Tall Shadow began to follow, then glanced back at River Ripple questioningly. She seemed to be inviting him to join, but he waved her on with a flick of his tail.

"Too many paws at a kitting will just get in the way," he mewed. Did he sound callous? "Please send word that Star Flower and the kits are all right," he added quickly. With a nod, she headed after the others, leaving Thunder and Gray Wing behind.

Gray Wing was gazing warmly at the ginger tom. "Thanks for agreeing to meet with Slash tonight," he mewed. "It gave us the time we needed to rescue Star Flower."

"It was a good plan, Gray Wing," Thunder answered. "I'm glad I got the chance to help."

River Ripple was still thinking of Flutter. There was no reason for her to come here, and he couldn't go and look for her. Not now. He was a leader. He couldn't leave his group. He had to face it: he was

destined to grow old alone, and never have kits.

Miserably, he dipped his head to Thunder and Gray Wing, wondering if Star Flower's first kit had been born yet. "Let's hope the stars are on our side," he grunted. "Early kits rarely survive." He turned away without waiting for them to respond.

Guilt burrowed beneath his pelt. *Early kits rarely survive.* It had been a cruel thing to say, and he regretted it at once. *Don't let your jealousy get in the way of being kind.* He lifted his chin. He must accept that part of his heart would always ache for the life he would never have with Flutter and focus on his group. If nothing else, he was going to become the leader they deserved.

River Ripple lay at the edge of the clearing in a patch of sunshine so weak it barely warmed his pelt. Dew and Mist were sharing tongues on the other side of the clearing while Dappled Pelt laid out watermint to dry nearby. Shattered Ice was helping Hollow and Croak clear musty reeds from one of the dens. Night had gone to look for Kite, who'd gone hunting just after sunhigh but hadn't returned yet.

The morning's frost still sparkled on the reed beds

even though it was well into the afternoon. River Ripple was pleased to see that the prey pile was heaped with fish. The colder weather had sent the largest carp and trout to seek shelter in the deepest channels, but his rivermates were good hunters and were determined to catch as much as they could before the river froze over.

Even Kite had insisted on contributing to the daily catch, although she'd only slip out for a short while each afternoon to fish in the shallows while her rivermates kept an eye on Snow Tail, Trout Fur, and Willow Stream.

River Ripple watched them now, jostling each other as they chased a moss ball around the clearing. He flicked his tail out of the way as they charged past.

In the moon and a half since Star Flower had delivered three healthy kits, River Ripple had managed to let go of much of his envy and longing. Meditating had helped, but although he'd let the river carry away his pain, a small pang remained. He felt it now, lifting his tail again as Pine and Drizzle hared after Snow Tail, Trout Fur, and Willow Stream.

Pine and Drizzle had arrived with their parents,

Dawn and Moss. Slash's rogues had turned out to be not as many or as savage as Slash had warned. Indeed, they'd been little more than a ragtag group of unhappy strays, bullied into following him. Slash cared even less about them than they cared about him. He had abandoned them when the mountain cats had infiltrated his camp, disappearing with a pawful of followers into the forest, where he was still stealing prey and making a nuisance of himself.

The mountain cats had shared his abandoned campmates between them, offering a brown tom, his ginger-and-white mate, and their kits to River Ripple. River Ripple had been happy to expand his group. Indeed, all the leaders had welcomed the strays, except Clear Sky, of course. He refused to let any strangers into his camp now that he had kits to protect.

River Ripple liked Pine and Drizzle, but he still had reservations about Dawn and Moss. They weren't keen to get their paws wet and kept apart from the other cats—distrustful, perhaps, after their time with Slash. They were talented at hunting land prey, which River Ripple appreciated in the middle of leaf-bare. But he wasn't convinced that they were sharing all

their catches.

They'll learn to fit in. River Ripple was determined to stay hopeful. He watched Pine dart past Trout Fur. The black tom-kit snatched the moss ball from the younger tom's paws, flicking his tail triumphantly as he began to bat it across the clearing. Trout Fur chased after him and flung himself onto Pine's back. He clung on, and as Pine slowed under his weight, Willow Stream dived at the moss ball and knocked it clear.

Give each kit their own trainer. A moon earlier, at the gathering in the hollow, the groups had decided that mentoring would bring out the best in their youngest campmates. As River Ripple wondered who would make good trainers for them, the reeds swished at the camp entrance and Night padded in. River Ripple was relieved to see Kite following. The tabby queen had not yet learned to swim, and he never felt comfortable when she went hunting alone. As she dropped the loach she'd caught on the prey pile and turned to greet her kits, Night crossed the clearing.

She sat down next to River Ripple and began to wash. "You look thoughtful," she mewed between

licks.

“I was wondering who should train the kits.”

“Are they old enough?” She paused and blinked at him.

“They’ll never be smarter or quicker than they are now,” he mewed. “Training will be good for them.”

Night looked at Pine and Drizzle, who were still chasing the moss ball. “I wish I had their energy.”

“Mmmm.”

She looked at him. “You’ve been distracted since they arrived. Are you still missing Flutter?”

He’d still hadn’t grown used to her sudden flashes of insight. “Yes,” he admitted.

Night followed his gaze toward Trout Fur and Willow Stream as they clambered over Kite. “It’s hard to let go of the past,” she mewed, sounding suddenly sad.

He remembered her mate and lost kits and wondered suddenly how *she* felt about being surrounded by new kits and their loving parents. He blinked at her, wondering whether to ask, but she returned to her washing and he guessed she’d rather not talk about it.

“I thought Dew would be a good match for Drizzle,” he mewed. Drizzle could be quite solemn for a kit, and he wondered if Dew’s natural lightheartedness could rub off on her.

Night stopped washing again. “Mist would be good for Pine. He could teach him to direct some of that energy.”

River Ripple agreed. “Croak might help draw Snow Tail out of himself.”

“What about Trout Fur and Willow Stream?” Night drew a paw over her ear.

“Dawn and Moss?” he ventured.

Night looked at him, narrowing her eyes as though considering the idea. “It might bind them more tightly to the group.”

River Ripple clearly wasn’t the only one who was worried about their aloofness.

Before he could respond, the two strays padded into camp. He sat up and tried to catch their eye with a welcoming look, but Dawn and Moss both avoided his gaze. He frowned. They were avoiding *everyone’s* gaze, looking at their paws as they crossed the camp.

“There’s plenty of prey on the prey pile,” he called

to them.

Moss glanced at him awkwardly. “Thanks, but we’re not hungry.”

“Of course they’re not hungry.” Night’s nose was twitching. “They reek of rabbit.”

River Ripple’s heart sank. They’d been hunting secretly again. He’d let it slide until now, hoping that eventually they’d bring their prey back to camp. They might not yet be ready to share their catch, but they could at least be honest about hunting for themselves.

Hollow was watching them. Croak too, her pelt prickling along her spine. They must have also smelled rabbit. They looked annoyed.

River Ripple got to his paws. If he was going to keep the peace, he couldn’t let this pass any longer. “You’ve been hunting.” He stared straight at Moss.

The dark brown tom froze, his eyes glittering as though caught in the glare of an owl.

Dawn lifted her gaze. He saw guilt there. He braced himself. Would they resent his challenge? Would they argue? What if they left? His chest tightened. The camp wouldn’t be the same without Pine and Drizzle.

Moss's tail twitched. He looked River Ripple straight in the eye. "We were hungry."

River Ripple saw Hollow stiffen. Croak's tail flapped angrily. He spoke before they could react. "We're a group," he mewed steadily, holding Moss's gaze. "That means we hunt for each other. Not only for ourselves."

"They should have learned that by now," Hollow growled.

River Ripple shot him a warning look. He didn't want this to escalate.

"We take care of each other," he told Moss. "We *share*. It's what makes us strong. It's what holds us together." He took a breath. "You must know this," he went on. "You lived with Slash. You saw what life is like when cats only take care of themselves. When campmates have to fight each other to survive." He forced his breath to remain slow. "Slash still lives like that. He roams the forest, stealing and bullying. But you and your kits are here. You're safe." He paused, hoping he'd reached the two strays. "If you'd rather live as loners, then leave. But don't live as loners here."

Dawn nudged Moss. Moss glanced at her.

Croak and Hollow watched in silence, their pelts ruffling. River Ripple held his breath as Dawn met his gaze.

“You’re right,” she mewed. “We were ashamed of not being able to fish yet. And we didn’t want to be accused of stealing your food.”

Croak got to her paws. “It’s not my food or your food.” She padded forward and blinked at the orange-and-white she-cat. “It’s *our* food. What we catch belongs to you and what you catch belongs to us. We share.”

Dawn dipped her head.

River Ripple watched Moss. Would he agree?

The brown tom lifted his chin. “From now on, whatever we catch, we’ll bring to the prey pile.”

River Ripple’s shoulders loosened. He took a slow, deep breath. “Good.” He glanced around the clearing. Hollow’s pelt had smoothed. Night blinked at him approvingly. Kite, with a flick of her tail, beckoned Pine and Drizzle to join her own kits and, when they did, began washing them.

River Ripple felt weak with relief as the cats

settled once more. For the first time, he felt that they were truly a group. He'd seen stirrings of loyalty over the past moons, and they seemed to be growing. He hoped that one day these cats would see each other as more than rivermates: that they'd see each other as close to kin, just as his parkmates had.

Snow covered the riverbanks. The river was frozen. *No kits on the ice.* River Ripple had given the order at the gathering, but Drizzle and Snow Tail had still snuck away from the island the next morning, creeping across the frozen river to go exploring. Hollow had found them on the far shore, bright-eyed and excited, and brought them home to a stern lecture, first from Kite Wing and Dawn Mist, and then from River Ripple.

Now, two days later, he led them along the riverbank with Willow Stream, Trout Fur, and Pine Needle. The river had frozen over just when they'd all learned to swim. No wonder they were bored and frustrated. Hopefully, an expedition along the riverbank in search of voles would cheer them up.

They thronged around him as he crunched over the snow-covered shore, their fur fluffed against the cold,

their tails sticking up eagerly.

Trout Fur darted ahead, racing to an indentation in the snow. "Is this a vole hole?"

"Vole hole!" Drizzle purred at the rhyme.

Trout Fur glared at her. *"You're a vole hole!"*

River Ripple stopped beside the mottled brown kit and sniffed the small hollow.

"Is it?" Trout Fur looked at him eagerly.

"I'm afraid not." He scraped away the snow to reveal a twisted root.

Drizzle padded past them. "If we find a vole, can we eat it?"

"Of course." With the river frozen, prey was scarce. River Ripple blinked at the she-kit. He was more grateful than ever that her family had joined the group. Their skill at catching land prey had meant the prey pile had never been entirely empty.

Pine Needle stopped beside his sister. "When will the river stop being frozen?"

"I'm not sure," he mewed. "There's probably a thaw on the way. Snow never lasts long beside the river." He hoped it was true.

"Come on, Drizzle." Pine Needle nudged his sister

with his nose. "Let's find the first vole."

As they darted ahead, Snow Tail watched them solemnly. "Why didn't *Drizzle* change her name at the gathering?" he asked thoughtfully.

"She likes being *Drizzle*."

Snow Tail seemed to accept the answer and padded after the others as they followed Pine Needle and *Drizzle* upstream.

The strays from Slash's group had decided to change their names. Kite had already changed her name to Kite Wing, and it seemed a good idea for the others to follow her example. It would be a way for them to put their past behind them and help them feel more part of the groups they'd joined. Dawn and Moss had changed their names happily at the gathering. They were Dawn Mist and Moss Tail now. Pine had chosen Pine Needle. Tall Shadow's cats had agreed too: Juniper and Raven were now Juniper Branch and Raven Pelt. And Violet from Thunder's group had become Violet Dawn. When *Drizzle* had asked if she could keep her own name, River Ripple had felt a surge of pride in the young kit. She had spoken up in front of all those cats. He knew that her decision to

remain Drizzle had not been a rejection of the mountain cats' values but an affirmation of herself, and River Ripple was pleased she was so comfortable in her own pelt.

Only Ember, one of Slash's former followers who'd joined Thunder's group, had petulantly refused. "Thunder lets me sleep in his camp," he'd mewed. "Does that mean I have to act like we're kin?"

It had been then that Slash had barged into the meeting with his small band of rogues, and it had been no surprise when Ember had chosen to support his former allies. Slash had invited the others to leave with him, and River Ripple had enjoyed watching them all refuse. But Slash had a thick pelt. Their rejection didn't seem to bother him. He'd even asked Thunder to join him, even though he must have known the loyal forest cat would refuse him.

Slash had left with a warning as usual. *You'll learn quickly enough the price you've paid for defying me.* River Ripple had tried to put it out of his mind, dismissing it as another empty threat. But he couldn't help worrying that the vicious rogue would still cause more trouble.

Now he headed along the shore, following the kits as they scrambled across a deep drift of snow. Their paws must be cold, and he hoped they found a vole soon so that he could take them back to the island.

“River Ripple!” A deep mew from across the river made him jerk his muzzle around. Thunder and Clear Sky were standing on the far shore.

They looked grim, and River Ripple’s belly tightened. Had Slash struck already?

“Pine Needle! Drizzle!” The two kits turned as he called. “We’ll hunt for voles tomorrow,” he told them. “I need to speak with Thunder and Clear Sky.”

Snow Tail and Willow Stream were already staring wide-eyed at the two toms on the far side of the river.

“Take the others home.” His order was directed at Pine Needle and Drizzle. They were the oldest, and he hoped they would be most sensible. “Go straight to the island and stay off the ice.”

Pine Needle dipped his head, clearly taking his responsibility seriously.

“We won’t let them get into any trouble.” Drizzle puffed out her chest.

Trout Fur shot her a look. “If anyone gets into

trouble, it'll be you," he sniffed, and stomped past her and began to head back downstream.

River Ripple was relieved they weren't going to argue. "*Straight* home!" he called after them as the kits headed by the reeds. When they were out of sight, he hurried to the stepping stones. He didn't trust the frozen river to take his weight.

Thunder and Clear Sky tracked him along the opposite bank and waited, their eyes dark, as he crossed. River Ripple felt a prickle of foreboding. Why had they come?

Thunder's expression lightened for a moment as he reached them. "You look like a mother duck with all those kits."

"They needed to stretch their legs," River Ripple explained, searching the ginger tom's gaze. Despite his playful tone, sadness shimmered there. "They had a touch of camp fever."

"Tiny Branch, Flower Foot, and Dew Petal are the same," Clear Sky mewed. River Ripple was astonished by the fondness in the mountain cat's mew. Could Star Flower's kits have softened the arrogant tom? "They hate being stuck in camp, but it's too cold

outside.”

Again, through the warmth, River Ripple detected melancholy. Thunder’s tail hung with a heaviness River Ripple had never seen before. Loss hollowed Clear Sky’s gaze. Their light-heartedness was clearly no more than politeness, a softening before they broke bad news. River Ripple’s tail twitched. “What’s happened?”

“We’ve brought news,” Thunder’s mew cracked.

Clear Sky looked away, his eyes brimming.

Foreboding settled like a crow in River Ripple’s belly. He forced his fur not to ruffle. Had Slash done something terrible? No, there was only one cat who would affect both Clear Sky and Thunder like this. It had to be Gray Wing. Was the mountain tom sick again? *Really* sick? He waited for the familiar tug that always drew him toward the gray tom in his darkest moments. But he felt nothing. He looked toward the moor. Snowcapped and glistening, it looked bleaker than ever, and River Ripple felt its emptiness as though a hole had opened beneath his paws. His heart dropped like a stone in his chest. “Is he dead?”

Clear Sky looked frozen, too overcome to speak.

Thunder nodded. "He died peacefully in his den, with his family."

Anger suddenly flared in Clear Sky's eyes. "Slash took his kit!"

River Ripple stiffened.

"We got him back," Thunder mewed quickly.

"Was he hurt?" River Ripple pricked his ears.

"Just shaken," Thunder told him. "But he got a chance to say goodbye to Gray Wing."

Fear was twining barbed stems around River Ripple's heart. "And Slash? Is he still around?" Were his own group's kits at risk?

"He and his rogues fled over the Thunderpath," Thunder mewed.

"They'd better not come back." Clear Sky was trembling with rage. "If I see any of them again, I'll kill them."

River Ripple waws relieved. "How's Tall Shadow?" He remembered the black she-cat's despair after her brother's death. Would she take the loss of Gray Wing just as badly?

"She's grieving," Thunder mewed. For the first time since River Ripple had met him, the ginger tom

looked beaten. "We all are."

"Gray Wing may be lost to us," River Ripple mewed softly. "But he's with friends." He looked encouragingly at Thunder. "And we'll see him again." The spirit-cats had come to gatherings in the past. They'd come again in the future.

Thunder blinked at him gratefully, but Clear Sky was staring into the distance, his gaze hard. Was he still thinking about Slash? "He named us Clans before he died," he mewed.

"*Clans*?" The word was new to River Ripple

"We're not groups anymore," Thunder explained. "We're *Clans*."

Didn't *clan* mean "family"? River Ripple tipped his head thoughtfully. He liked the word. It was far better than *group*. It reflected the kinship he was beginning to feel for the cats he hunted and slept beside.

Thunder went on. "And we each have a name."

"Mine is SkyClan," Clear Sky told him.

"Mine's ThunderClan," Thunder mewed. "Wind Runner's group will be WindClan."

Sky. Thunder. Wind. "So Tall Shadow's group would be . . ." River Ripple hesitated. Not TallClan,

surely?

“ShadowClan,” Clear Sky told him. “And yours will be RiverClan.”

River Ripple’s heart seemed to settle like a leaf whisked on the river catching at last between stones. “RiverClan.” The word felt easy on his tongue.

“We’re five Clans now,” Thunder mewed.

“Like the five petals of the Blazing Star.” River Ripple looked at him steadily. “Just like the spirit-cats told us.” His gaze drifted toward the frozen river. The ice was glowing pink beneath the setting sun. It would thaw soon. He was certain now. The water would flow again, and now, more than ever, it would be part of him. More than that—it would be part of his Clan.



Chapter 18



River Ripple looked up at the cliffs towering above him. *Highbones*. It seemed to him that Moth Flight, Wind Runner's daughter, had always had a mind like a butterfly, flitting from one thing to another. But now he understood that her restless thoughts had led her here, to this bare stretch of rocky soil dotted with patches of heather. And here she had found something that would change the Clans forever.

He'd seen these cliffs from the moor when he'd tried to find his way back to the park, and now they loomed over him, only a short, steep walk away, swathed in shadow as the sun disappeared behind them. The final glittering rays blinded him, and he looked away, squinting.

"Come on." Dappled Pelt beckoned from farther along the path.

Night hung back. "Don't we have to wait until moonhigh?"

"We need to be there before that," Dappled Pelt mewed. "When the Moonstone—" She stopped.

“When the Moonstone *what?*” River Ripple’s paws pricked nervously.

“Just come.” Dappled Pelt beckoned him again with a flick of her tail. “You need to see it for yourself.”

Moth Wing had discovered the Moonstone deep inside Highstones. She’d spoken to the spirit-cats there. They were a Clan now too—StarClan. They’d chosen medicine cats for each living Clan, to heal their Clanmates when they were hurt or sick and to advise their leader. Then, when Wind Runner had been fatally wounded, Moth Wing had brought her to the Moonstone. And now Wind Runner was well again and called *Windstar*. After her remarkable recovery, the WindClan leader had visited RiverClan—indeed, *every* Clan—to share the news. Her eyes had glowed as she’d told her story, that she’d died of her injuries and come back to life after visiting StarClan and receiving nine lives. River Ripple still found it hard to believe. Every leader from now on would receive nine lives, here at the Moonstone.

“Hurry!” Dappled Pelt called from up the slope. She had been here already with the other medicine

cats—Cloud Spots, Pebble Heart, Moth Flight, and Acorn Fur—to share with StarClan, and now she'd brought River Ripple to receive his nine lives.

It sounded too amazing to be true. Night clearly thought the same. She was looking up at the large square mouth of a cave high on the cliff face. "Are you really going to go in there?" Her pelt ruffled along her spine.

"I guess." River Ripple followed her gaze. "Are you sure you won't come too?"

"Dappled Pelt said it has to be just you and her," Night mewed. "But I'll wait outside, and if I hear anything strange, I'll come and find you."

He was grateful for her loyalty. "I'm sure it will be fine," he mewed. "I trust Dappled Pelt."

What would he do with nine lives? So many lives seemed like *forever*. He shifted his paws. *Will I have to die nine times?* The thought frightened him, and he took a deep breath and shook out his fur before following Dappled Pelt along the rocky path to the mouth of the cave.

As he hopped onto the ledge that led into shadow, Night stayed on the path behind them.

“Good luck,” she called, her ears twitching uneasily.

Dappled Pelt whisked her tail. “He won’t need luck,” she mewed. “It will be fine.”

The sun had dipped below Highstones, and shadow stretched as far as the moor now. Night’s eyes, as round as an owl’s, reflected the rising moon.

“Come on.” Dappled Pelt padded into the darkness. “We should hurry.”

River Ripple felt the shadow sweep his pelt like icy water as he followed her in. The fading light outside didn’t reach far into the wide, square-cut cave. He sensed openings in the walls around him, which seemed to swallow the sounds of their paw steps instead of reflecting them back.

“This way.” Dappled Pelt padded into one of the openings. By now River Ripple couldn’t see even the white patches on her pelt.

He blinked, hoping his eyes would grow accustomed to the dark. “How do you know you’re going the right way?” he asked nervously.

“I’ve been here before, remember?”

The rough stone sloped downward beneath his

paws. The air was damp and tinged with an acrid scent that reminded him of burnt wood. He could hear Dappled Pelt's breath and stayed close. She was following a smooth, straight wall that was too angular to have been worn down by water. It must have been cut by a single sharp claw so huge it couldn't have belonged to any forest creature. He remembered the huge paws of the Twoleg monsters that had invaded the park. Even *they* hadn't had claws big enough to slice a path through this stone. He shuddered. "Do monsters live down here?" he asked.

"I think they did once." Dappled Pelt's mew echoed in the darkness. "But not anymore."

He moved closer, comforted as the tip of her tail flicked against his cheek.

"It's okay," she mewed. "We'll reach the Moonstone soon."

The tunnel twisted and turned, spiraling now as though coiling like a snake deep into the earth. *Nine lives?* River Ripple still couldn't believe it was true. If it was, he'd be able to protect his Clan for moons to come. But he also might outlive every cat he knew. His paws pricked. If he wasn't going to see Flutter and

Arc again in this life, he'd thought at least he would see them in the next. But how long would it be before he *reached* the next life? Would they think he was never going to join them? *I have to find them and explain before they die.* But how could he? His Clan needed him more than they did. If only there were a way to get word to them, and to tell them that he still thought of them, still longed to see them, and that, though they might have to wait a long time, he'd see them again.

Dappled Pelt stopped.

"Are we here?" River Ripple stopped beside her, his flank brushing hers.

"Nearly."

He suddenly smelled the crisp scent of fresh air. How was that possible this deep underground? It chased away the heavy dankness and made his pelt tingle. Something strange lay ahead. He could feel Dappled Pelt's fur ruffle with excitement.

"This way."

As she led him forward, he felt the tunnel open around him and stepped into a cavern glimmering with watery starlight. The walls were in shadow, but a huge

rock jutted up from the middle of the floor. Above it, a hole in the roof showed stars in the dark night sky.

“I can see outside.” The idea surprised him. They had come so far down.

“Quick.” Dappled Pelt was looking up too. The moon was sliding into sight. “It’s coming.”

“What?” Alarm sparked through River Ripple’s pelt.

Before she could answer, the rock burst into light. Dazzled, River Ripple flinched. The great rock was glittering as though it were made of countless waves reflecting sunlight. The cave shimmered in its glow.

“Touch your nose against the Moonstone,” Dappled Pelt told him.

He blinked at her doubtfully. Would it hurt?

“Like this.” She padded to the shining surface and lay down, pressing her belly to the floor.

River Ripple padded after her. Would this dazzling rock really give him his nine lives? How? He crouched beside her on the hard floor, cold against his fur, and stretched his nose slowly forward. Closing his eyes, he touched the tip to the chilly stone.

The cave rushed away, and River Ripple felt

himself swept through blackness. It was like being swallowed by the waterfall, and he struggled to find his paws as he seemed to tumble deeper and deeper into darkness. *Help!* What was happening? Had Windstar tricked him into coming here? Was he going to die?

Forcing himself to relax, he remembered his words to Tall Shadow. *The river is far stronger than you. Don't resist the current. Don't swim against it. Use its power to lift you and guide you.* He stopped struggling and let himself be carried through the engulfing darkness until suddenly, with a jolt of surprise, he felt grass beneath his paws.

He opened his eyes. He was in a hollow. The night sky stretched overhead, filled with stars. They began to move, to swirl like water swept into a whirlpool, and spiral down toward him, bathing him in silvery light. He smelled the river and the forest and the moor as though all the Clans were merging, and suddenly the slopes around him sparkled with starry pelts.

He recognized them, one cat after another. Storm, Hawk Swoop, and Falling Feather were among them. These were the spirit-cats who'd come to Fourtrees after the battle. But they were joined by others now,

some he knew, some he didn't. So this was StarClan. He felt peace settle like a sleeping bird in his chest.

Then he stiffened. What if Flutter and Arc *were* here? *No!* They mustn't be dead. It was too soon. He scanned the starry pelts, panic welling his chest, searching for Flutter's soft ginger pelt and Arc's short black fur, relieved when he didn't see his old parkmates.

As his shoulders loosened, he realized that the cats of StarClan were watching him. He shifted his paws self-consciously, his heart quickening as he saw Gray Wing. His throat tightened. "I've missed you."

"But I haven't left you." Gray Wing padded forward, his golden eyes warm, and stopped in front of him. "I'm here. I always will be." His eyes shone. "Thank you, River Ripple," he mewed. "For taking me in when I needed help and giving me a place to grieve. You are a good friend."

"I—" River Ripple tried to speak, but his throat closed as emotion overwhelmed him.

"You have a kind soul," Gray Wing murmured. "And I'm glad of it. The Clans need your gentleness and your wisdom."

River Ripple was lost for words and could only gaze back at him, hoping the gray tom knew how much his words meant.

“Are you ready to receive your nine lives?” Gray Wing asked.

My nine lives! River Ripple had forgotten for a moment why he’d come. His chest tightened. He dipped his head. “Yes,” he mewed huskily.

Gray Wing closed his eyes and stretched his muzzle forward. He touched his nose to River Ripple’s head. “With this life, I give you clarity and perspective.” A chill flooded River Ripple’s body. “Even when you’re swept up in emotion, be aware of the situation as it truly is.” The chill reached deep into his bones and spread into every hair on his pelt, refreshing him like a cool wind on a still, hot day. He felt as though the sky had opened inside him. So this was what it was like to receive a life. He wondered if it had been the same for Windstar. As the sensation eased and he became aware of his own weight once more, Gray Wing turned away, and another starry cat padded forward.

River Ripple recognized the older she-cat; her blue

eyes looked like Gray Wing's, and there were snowy white hairs around her muzzle. "I'm Quiet Rain," she mewed. She glanced at her son as he took his place once more among the other starry cats. Then she touched her nose to River Ripple's head. "With this life, I give you kindness and humility. Show the compassion you show to your Clanmates to *every* cat you meet. Remember, you might walk in their paw steps one day and they in yours." Heat radiated from her touch, spreading warmth through his body. The pleasure of it brought a purr to his throat, and he felt a sharp sadness when she pulled away and padded back among the others.

Moon Shadow stepped forward. River Ripple was pleased to see that his starry coat showed no sign of the injuries he'd suffered in the fire. He looked younger too, sleek and fit. River Ripple dipped his head, and as he did so, Moon Shadow touched his muzzle to it. "With this life, I give you patience. You will need it."

River Ripple felt a hardness in his chest. As he stiffened, resisting, it seemed to melt and seep through his body, softening his muscles, easing the tension

beneath his pelt, until he felt calmness pool in his heart. He wanted to hang on to the feeling and sit with it forever, but Moon Shadow padded away and Storm took his place.

You want to belong. He remembered her words when he'd witnessed the battle. She'd known all along why he stayed by the river, that it had been his destiny to live alongside the mountain cats. She blinked at him fondly. "You were our stepping stone," she mewed. "But you will be so much more. With this life, I give a wise, nurturing heart so that you may support and encourage your Clan and, one day, your kits."

He blinked at her. "Kits?" Did this mean he'd be reunited with Flutter? Before he could ask, she touched her nose to his head, and love blossomed in his chest, more intense and more powerful than he'd ever felt. It snatched his breath and made him sway on his paws, and he felt the pounding of his heart slow as though matching the rhythm of the hearts around him, falling in time with them until they beat as one.

As the sensation ebbed, he opened his mouth to thank Storm for such a wonderful gift, but she'd already turned away, and Jackdaw's Cry padded

toward him.

River Ripple blinked happily at the brave young tom, his black pelt glittering like the night sky. Jackdaw's Cry blinked back, hesitating for a moment before touching his nose to River Ripple's head. "With this life, I give you resilience. You must endure when others fall, but you cannot let suffering change you."

Pain sparked from his touch. It burned through River Ripple like fire, and he swallowed back a cry as it deepened and filled him, scorching every muscle and searing every bone. He wanted to recoil, to free himself from the tom's agonizing touch, but his paws wouldn't move, and he could only suffer until, suddenly, it stopped. He swayed, limp with relief, and caught his breath. "Why—"

But Jackdaw's Cry had turned away, and Hawk Swoop took his place, facing him with her clear amber gaze.

She leaned forward and touched her muzzle to his head. "With this life, I give you initiative, so you will always lead and never follow. Even if your courage fails, your imagination will find a way to guide you."

Energy fizzed in River Ripple's paws, up through

his fur, sparking along his spine into his tail and his ear tips until he felt as though stars must be sparking in *his* pelt too. He shivered at the intensity of the sensation, and even as it ebbed, the memory of it lingered in his muscles so that he longed to run and leap and feel the wind in his fur. "Thank you."

But another cat had already stepped forward. *Rainswept Flower*. With a pang of grief, he remembered her corpse. Now, as she approached, she seemed more alive than any living cat. Her eyes were bright, and her soft pelt was lit by starlight.

River Ripple leaned forward, eager for her gift.

"With this life, I give you honesty." She touched his head. "Lies come from the head, but truth comes from the heart. With honesty, you can ensure that every cat who knows you will trust you with their lives."

River Ripple waited for a new sensation to sweep through him, but none came. Instead, images filled his mind. He saw the river tumbling past, swirling around him, his Clanmates struggling to swim in the fast-moving water. Panic filled their faces as their wails rose to the sky. Then he saw himself sweep a paw around them and gather them up, as strong as a tree as

they let him lift them to safety.

As the vision faded, he saw that Frost had taken Rainswept Flower's place. The white tom blinked at him steadily, his blue eyes shining. "With this life, I give you fairness." As Frost's muzzle touched his head, River Ripple's thoughts cleared. "Deal with enemies as you would deal with friends," Frost mewed. "And deal with friends as you would deal with kin."

River Ripple became aware of the balance that shaped his life—the darkness of the night and the brightness of the day, the chill of leaf-bare and the warmth of greenleaf, the speed of the river and the stillness of the earth, his weight shared equally between his four paws. No one thing had more importance than another, and he felt the solemnity of this with a heavy satisfaction that felt like weariness after hunting.

Was that every life? He'd lost count, and as he looked around the shimmering cats, he wondered if he should leave. But how? If he closed his eyes, would he find himself in the cavern again?

Another cat stepped from among the others. Her ginger fur was long and soft and rippled like silver

water as though each hair had been dipped in starlight.

River Ripple stared at her. *Flutter*. Grief pierced his heart. He'd been so sure she wasn't here. Perhaps she wasn't really dead. Perhaps she was sleeping peacefully in her nest and this was no more than a dream for her. If StarClan could grant lives, they could do anything. He was alive, and he was here. That meant they could bring the living with them as well as the dead—didn't it?

"I'm sorry." Her mew was as sweet and melting as honey.

"No." He closed his eyes, hoping to be swept back to the Moonstone cavern. "Please."

"I was killed by a monster." She spoke simply, as though it meant nothing.

He felt his heart crack in two and opened his eyes. "But I saw Twolegs taking you away."

"They did," she mewed. "But I escaped, and when they chased me, I ran onto a Thunderpath."

River Ripple could hardly breathe against the sorrow flooding through his heart. He fought back a wail. "I should have been there to save you."

"No one could have saved me," she mewed. "Not

even you.”

“But we were supposed to be together,” he mewed. “To be mates. To have kits.” He hadn’t realized now how hard he’d held on to this dream. No matter how many times he’d told himself it was impossible now, hope had lingered in his heart. But she was here with StarClan. His dream was gone, and emptiness stood in its place, so bleak and lonely that he felt his heart would never heal. “I should have gone back,” he mewed weakly.

“You couldn’t have made it in time,” she told him gently.

“I should have *tried*.” At least he’d have known she was dead. And she would have known how much he’d loved her.

“It was my destiny to be here, just as it is your destiny to be beside the river.” She blinked at him, love shining in her eyes. “I must be the one to give you your last life, and with it, you will change the lives of so many others.”

“I don’t want it.” River Ripple didn’t feel like a leader. The gifts StarClan had granted him seemed beyond his reach. His loss overwhelmed him. “I don’t

want you to be dead.”

She reached her nose toward him, and he hesitantly closed his eyes. He wished with all his heart this weren't happening. He felt as though he were trading *her* life for this one. “With this life, I give you courage,” she mewed. “So that you will stand beside your Clanmates against whatever they face and you will fight for them no matter how defeated you feel.” At her touch, he felt power flood him, as though the river flowed in him, churning in full spate, bursting its banks, dragging mud and stones and branches downstream with a force that frightened him. It drove the grief from his heart. It filled his chest with a fierce determination he'd never felt before. Strength pulsed in every muscle until he felt he could sweep away a forest to save his Clan.

He opened his eyes, gazing back at Flutter as she began to purr softly. He purred with her, grateful now just to see her. She was with StarClan, and though he'd lost the life with her he'd longed for, she'd always be with him now. This was not the way he'd wanted it to be, but nonetheless, their separation had finally come to an end.

Gray Wing stepped forward once more. “We’ve given you the gift we give all leaders,” he told River Ripple. “The gift of nine lives. Take Night as your deputy. She will give you strength when you have none of your own. She is a good and honorable cat, who will be a leader herself one day.” His eyes glowed with happiness as he went on. “Go home now and lead your cats, Riverstar.”

Riverstar’s belly tightened as he heard his new name. Could he be worthy of it? He felt responsibility swirl around him, pressing in, thickening the air he breathed. *Courage*. He remembered Flutter’s gift and lifted his chin. He would face this. He would take it on, and he would be the best leader he could be.

StarClan began to call his name.

“Riverstar!”

“Riverstar!”

Flutter’s mew was the loudest. It echoed around the hollow, rising above the others into the empty, black sky. He blinked gratefully at her and closed his eyes. He was Riverstar, leader of RiverClan. It was time to return to Dappled Pelt. They needed to climb up out of the earth to find Night waiting outside, and to begin the

journey home.



Chapter 19



The late greenleaf sun felt hot on Riverstar's pelt. The banks of the river were lush and the water teemed with fish. As the days grew longer, hunting had become as much a pleasure as a duty—the river's shallows were deliciously warm, its deep channels refreshingly cool. Riverstar glanced across the water as he led his patrol upstream. Croak trotted at his heels while Hollow padded beside him. Spider Paw had rushed ahead as usual, and Pine Needle hurried to keep up with his younger denmate.

Spider Paw was Moth Flight's kit. After discovering the Moonstone and naming StarClan, the WindClan medicine cat had decided to devote her life to healing and had given her kits to the other Clans to raise. RiverClan had taken Spider Paw happily, and as his homesickness for Moth Flight and WindClan had eased, he'd become as comfortable beside the river as any of his Clanmates. Riverstar had been right about him: his broad shoulders made him a good swimmer, and the extra claw on his forepaw made him a skillful

fisher.

Spider Paw stopped now up ahead, where the river narrowed and deepened as it flowed into the gorge. "Let's fish here!" he called back to Riverstar. The waters ran fast, churning and frothing as they washed around rocks. All the young cats liked fishing here; sometimes salmon came this far upriver, and trout was always plentiful. But Riverstar knew it wasn't the prey that made it a favorite hunting spot for his young Clanmates. They liked the speed of the water and testing their swimming skills around the rocks.

Riverstar glanced at Mist. "Are you up for riding the rapids today?"

"Sure." Mist whisked his tail.

As Croak watched the river swirl away downstream, a silver-scaled fish leaped, showing above the surface for a moment before disappearing into the white water. She licked her lips. "I haven't tasted salmon in a while."

Spider Paw was already leaning over the edge of the riverbank, preparing to dive. Pine Needle was beside him, scanning the surface, his eyes bright.

"Wait!" Riverstar hurried toward them. The rocks

could be perilous. If they were going to fish here, they should fish together.

Hollow followed, but Croak didn't move. Her nose was twitching. "ThunderClan cats are near." She frowned. "With another cat."

Riverstar tasted the air and recognized the scent of ThunderClan toms and something else. It triggered a twinge of longing deep in his belly. He'd smelled it before, in another life, but he couldn't place it here. Then he smelled blood. He quickly beckoned to Spider Paw and Pine Needle with a flick of his tail. "Come back," he ordered. "We'll hunt later."

"Why?" Spider Paw blinked back at him.

"ThunderClan's here." *And there's something's wrong.*

"So?" Spider Paw held his ground. "Why should ThunderClan stop us hunting?"

"They've come for a reason," Riverstar told him. "We need to find out why."

"We can hunt while you ask them," Spider Paw mewed.

Riverstar swallowed back impatience. While he admired the young tom's spirit, it was dangerous here.

“You can’t hunt the rapids alone,”

“Pine Needle’s with me,” Spider Paw objected.

“We’ll hunt *later*,” Riverstar repeated firmly.

Shoulders sagging, Spider Paw headed slowly back. Pine Needle followed.

Mist’s gaze had flicked up the riverbank. Lightning Tail and Cloud Spots had appeared at the top, a third tom drooping between them, clearly hurt.

Riverstar bounded to meet them. Why were they bringing a sick cat here? “What’s happened?” He stopped in front of them. “Who—” He broke off, his heart skipping a beat as he recognised the battered and bleeding cat propped up between them. “*Arc?*”

The black park cat lifted his gaze, barely able to focus. Blood soaked the fur around his mouth.

Riverstar stared at him, hardly daring to believe his eyes. “Is that you?”

“Ripple.” Arc’s mew was hoarse.

Riverstar’s heart began to pound. No one had called him Ripple in moons. It felt as though Arc were referring to another cat. “What are you doing here?”

“I need . . .” Arc struggled to speak. “I need your help.” His eyes rolled and he collapsed, slithering down

between Lightning Tail and Cloud Spots onto the ground.

Was he dead? Riverstar rushed forward and crouched beside his former mentor, panic sparking in his fur. Arc looked so thin, and his pelt was ragged. Scratches marked his flanks, while blood welled at the tips of his ears. He heard Arc's rasping breath with a surge of relief and jerked his gaze toward Lightning Tail. "Did you do this to him?" he growled.

Lightning Tail blinked at him. "What do you think we are? Foxes?"

"We found him like this," Cloud Spots told him. "I wanted to take him back to our camp to treat his wounds, but he insisted we take him to a cat named Ripple."

Lightning Tail looked at Riverstar. "We guessed he meant you."

They carried Arc between them, and Dappled Pelt put ointment on his wounds. He was weak and exhausted and she gave him poppy seeds to make sure he slept through the pain and rested deeply enough to fight off infection.

Riverstar paced the clearing, his heart pounding.

Why had Arc come? Why now? Who'd hurt him? *If I find the cat who did this*—Riverstar's paws throbbed with rage. His thoughts whirled, unable to settle. Memories rose inside him like floodwater. Arc's scent, the curve of his shoulders, the deep black of his pelt—things Riverstar had known since he first opened his eyes as a kit—woke feelings he thought he'd left behind when he'd made the river his home.

Dappled Pelt lay at the edge of the camp, eating trout and watching him. "You might as well go hunting with the others," she mewed with her mouth full. Most of the Clan were hunting along the river, taking advantage of the long, hot afternoon. Kite Wing had gone to fish with Snow Tail and Croak near the stepping stones, while Dawn Mist and Moss Tail taught Trout Fur and Willow Stream battle moves in the water meadow. The three kits had grown into skillful fighters and hunters; they even called themselves *warriors*—a title the cats from the other Clans had begun giving themselves lately. Spider Paw had returned to the rapids with Pine, Drizzle, Mist, and Croak. Dew and Drizzle were collecting moss in the thicket with Shattered Ice. Only Hollow and Night were still in

camp, sharing tongues in the shade of the reed wall, glancing from time to time toward the medicine den as though still curious about the new arrival.

“Hunting?” Riverstar stopped pacing and looked at Dappled Pelt. “I don’t think I’d be able to concentrate,” he mewed.

Dappled Pelt watched him through narrowed eyes. “Does Arc mean that much to you?”

“He raised me.” Riverstar didn’t remember his parents, only Arc. He’d been found as a newborn kit beside the park entrance, and Arc, along with the other park cats, had cared for him as though he were one of theirs. “He taught me everything I knew before I came to the river.”

Night looked up from washing, a playful twinkle in her eye. “Nothing useful, then.”

Riverstar bristled. “He taught me how to meditate and to be kind and to share with other cats and—” He stopped. He was the leader of a Clan now, and it was true, none of these sounded like useful skills for a *warrior*, but they had made him who he was. “He taught me to be myself,” he told her firmly.

“Then he did very well,” she mewed fondly.

Riverstar started pacing again. He looked hopefully at Dappled Pelt. “When will he be well enough to talk?”

“I *told* you.” She swallowed a mouthful of fish. “Not for a day or two. He’s exhausted. Rest is more important to him than food right now, and *far* more important than talk.” Her tail twitched. “Go and join Croak’s patrol. Snow Tail always likes it when you take an interest in his training. It might take your mind off Arc.”

Nothing could take his mind off Arc. But at least he’d be doing something useful, and she was right: Snow Tail seemed more confident when Riverstar was around. He headed upriver, his thoughts as ruffled as his fur. He’d begun to think, since seeing Flutter in StarClan, that his parkmates were firmly in the past. But here was Arc, reminding him of where he’d come from and what he’d been before his life on the river. He could never have imagined in those peaceful days in the park—scavenging for Twoleg food, lazing among the flower beds—that one day he’d be a Clan leader responsible for lives other than his own. Perhaps the river had brought Arc to him for a reason. Perhaps it

wanted to remind him where he'd come from. His ears twitched nervously. Perhaps it didn't want him to forget.

The two days until Arc woke, hungry and able to get to his paws, felt like the longest in Riverstar's life. When Arc finally emerged, blinking, from the medicine den, Riverstar leaped to his paws and hurried to help his old friend across the clearing.

"Don't fuss." Arc nosed him gently away. "I'm feeling better." Dappled Pelt's ointment had dried up his wounds, and his eyes had lost the glassy look of sickness and exhaustion. But he was still weak, and, as the sun lifted high in the bright blue sky, he padded slowly across the clearing and settled in a patch of soft grass at the edge of the clearing.

Hollow had taken a patrol hunting, and Croak was checking the borders with Snow Tail, but Night, Moss Tail, and Dawn Mist were still in camp, resting after a morning spent fishing. Dew and Drizzle were patching the wall of one of the dens, which had recently been extended to make room for more nests.

Riverstar fetched a salmon from the prey pile and laid it in front of Arc. "Have you tasted fish before?"

“Not one fresh from the river.” Arc sniffed its glistening silver flank with interest. He took a bite.

Riverstar watched him eagerly.

Arc swallowed, then licked his lips. “I can see why you never came back.”

Was Arc gently rebuking him? Riverstar felt a prick of guilt. Did he think he’d abandoned his parkmates because of greed? “I tried to get home,” he mewed. “But I was injured and lost, and I didn’t think I could find my way . . .” He blinked apologetically at Arc.

“I understand,” Arc mewed. “I rode the river here, most of the way on a log, and I’ve been worrying about finding my way home.”

“You’re going back?” Riverstar felt a tug of unease in his belly. Had Arc come to fetch him? After all this time?

“Of course I’m going back,” Arc mewed.

“But the park was destroyed.”

“Yes.” Arc took another bite of fish and Riverstar’s pelt twitched impatiently as the black tom slowly chewed and swallowed it.

“Where have you been living?” Riverstar asked.

“Did you find a new home?”

Arc’s whiskers twitched with amusement. “Of course,” he mewed. “We followed the river and settled upstream, outside the Twolegplace.”

“*We*?” Riverstar pricked his ears. “Are you still with our parkmates? What happened to Dart and Shine?”

“Dart escaped,” Arc told him. “He left Shine behind. But Shine’s happy. He *wanted* to be a kittypet.”

Riverstar felt a wash of relief. “Are Moth and Stoat okay?”

“They’re fine,” Arc told him. “Squirrel too, and we have some new parkmates now.”

Riverstar felt a chill run along his spine. Neither of them had mentioned Flutter. Did Arc know she was dead? “Have you heard about Flutter?” he asked quietly.

Arc searched his gaze. “Have *you*?”

“I saw her when . . .” Riverstar hesitated. How could he explain the nine lives ceremony? “While I was meditating. She said she’d been killed by a monster—” He broke off.

Arc looked away. "I'm sorry," he mewed. "I was there when the monster hit her. She died quickly."

Riverstar wanted to tell Arc that Flutter was with StarClan now. *But he doesn't even know what StarClan is.* There was so much to tell Arc about his life here, but there was something more important, a question that had been nagging him since Lightning Tail and Cloud Spots had brought Arc to the river. "Why did you come?"

On the other side of the clearing, Moss Tail and Dawn Mist were watching the park cat, their ears pricked. They'd clearly been wondering the same thing. Dew glanced over her shoulder as she threaded a reed into the den wall. Drizzle turned and looked at Arc, not hiding her curiosity. Only Night seemed uninterested. She carried on washing her face.

Arc didn't answer. Instead he looked around the camp. "This island seems very sheltered," he mewed.

"It is." Riverstar's tail twitched impatiently, but Arc's gaze was flitting around the other warriors.

"And it looks like you have a lot of friends." He blinked fondly at Riverstar. "But I'm not surprised."

Riverstar shifted his paws.

“Dappled Pelt keeps calling you Riverstar,” Arc mewed suddenly. “Why?”

“That’s my name now.”

“What was wrong with Ripple?”

Drizzle answered him. “*All* the leaders are called star,” she mewed. “And River suits him better.”

But Arc was still looking at Riverstar. “So you’re a leader.”

“Yes.” Riverstar’s pelt felt hot. The park cats never had leaders. And they kept the names their mothers gave them their whole lives. Would Arc think he’d changed too much? And for the worse?

But there was no disapproval in Arc’s eyes. “It seems as though the river brought you here for a reason,” he mewed.

Riverstar felt a rush of relief. “I’m *meant* to be here.” He wanted to tell Arc how he’d been the stepping stone for the mountain cats’ dead to cross to the living world, and how he’d helped pacify the Clans by offering common sense when the mountain cats’ own common sense failed.

Arc’s gaze narrowed into a frown. “The river brought me here for a reason too,” he mewed.

Dew had stopped work. The gray she-cat padded to Drizzle's side. Moss Tail sat up and Dawn Mist narrowed her eyes.

Riverstar's heart quickened. He trusted the river. The reason it had brought Arc here must be a good one.

"I need your help." Arc stared at him steadily.

Riverstar was puzzled. "But how did you know where to find me?"

"I met a friend of yours recently." There was an edge to his mew.

Riverstar saw Arc's pelt ruffle along his spine. "Not one you liked, by the sound of it." Who could it be?

"He told me you lived a long way downriver."

Had one of the loners found their way to the park cats? Silver? Woodlouse? "Who?"

"Slash."

Dawn Mist sat up sharply. Moss Tail's pelt rippled nervously.

A chill ran along Riverstar's spine. "Slash is no friend of mine," he growled.

"He's no friend of *any* cat," Dawn Mist snapped.

“We’ve realized that much,” Arc mewed darkly.

“Is he the one who hurt you?” Riverstar glanced at the wounds along Arc’s flank. Surely they were too fresh?

“One of your Clan friends did this.” Arc ran a gentle paw over his scratched ear.

Riverstar could guess who. “Skystar?” he hissed in annoyance.

“He said I was trespassing on his territory.”

Riverstar flexed his claws. He would *discuss* Arc’s injuries with Skystar at the next Fourtrees Gathering.

“He said the forest belonged to him.” Arc went on. “I’ve never heard anything so crazy. As if *land* can be owned.”

Dawn Mist padded across the clearing, stopping halfway, her ears twitching. “What’s Slash doing?”

“He’s moved into the park and brought rogues with him,” Arc mewed.

Moss Tail padded to Dawn Mist’s side. “Be careful of him. He’s dangerous.”

Arc looked at them. “He’s worse than dangerous,” he mewed grimly. “He’s evil. We’ve had to hide our

elders for their own safety. Dart and Squirrel smuggle food to them when they can.”

“We know what he’s like.” Dawn Mist’s gaze darkened. “We belonged to his group once. He’d kill a cat just to take their prey.”

“And he’d watch a cat starve just for the fun of it,” Moss Tail added.

Drizzle blinked at her father anxiously. “Will he come back here?”

“He wouldn’t dare,” Moss Tail growled. “The Clans would chase him off as soon as they saw him.”

Arc’s eyes brightened. “Really?” He looked eagerly at Riverstar. “Is he scared of them?”

“We defeated him and his rogues once,” Riverstar told him. “But it took moons to drive him off our land.”

“*Our* land?” Arc’s gaze sharpened. “So you have land too?”

“Every Clan has land.” Riverstar watched his friend closely, wondering how he would react. Truthfully, owning and defending territory still felt strange to him, but it was part of being a warrior. “Our boundaries keep the peace.” It was how he had begun to think about them. When Arc didn’t respond, he went

on. "The Clans haven't fought each other since the Great Battle."

Arc's ears twitched in alarm.

Drizzle whisked her tail. "There won't be another battle," she told him. "Riverstar will make sure of that."

But Moss Tail was still staring at Arc. "Some things are worth fighting for," he growled.

"If Slash is living in your park," Dawn Mist mewed, "eventually you'll have to fight. If not against him, then *for* him. Slash wants to own everything and everyone."

Arc looked around them, as though weighing up the defiant gleam in their eyes. Then he dipped his head. "You're right," he mewed. "Park cats love peace, but not a peace we have to pay for with hunger and fear. That's why I came. We can't fight him alone." He looked at Riverstar. "We need help driving him away, and from what he said about you and your Clans, you might know how."

"You want the Clans to help?" Riverstar hesitated. How could he persuade the other leaders to travel so far upstream?

Arc flicked his tail. "I don't want all the Clans," he mewed. "I can't help feeling that a cat like Skystar would cause more trouble than he'd solve. But if you came"—he looked beseechingly at Riverstar—"you might be able to show our parkmates how to stand up to Slash. The way your Clans did."

Riverstar didn't move. How could he refuse Arc? But he couldn't leave his Clanmates.

Dawn Mist's eyes glittered with worry. "You won't go, will you?"

"You're *our* leader." Dew whisked her tail indignantly. "Not theirs."

"What if you get hurt?" Moss Tail mewed.

Drizzle's ears twitched. "What if you don't come back?"

Night had stopped washing. She looked at Riverstar. "Think carefully before you decide, Riverstar," she mewed gravely. "Your Clan's future might depend on your answer."

Riverstar stared back at her. She was right. He must think. He looked at Arc. "Come with me." He needed to talk more with his old friend, but he didn't want to worry his Clanmates.

Arc got stiffly to his paws, and Riverstar led him to the entrance. He felt the eyes of his Clanmates on his pelt as he padded out of camp. *I promise I'll make the right decision.*

He led Arc along the path through the reeds to the shore and stopped at the edge.

The river flowed smoothly past his paws, and he watched the water, wondering how something that kept changing always stayed the same. He'd changed, but surely he was the same cat Arc had known all those moons ago?

Arc mewed as he stopped beside him. "Your Clanmates seem fond of you."

"They need me."

"Why?"

"A Clan needs a leader," Riverstar mewed. "To guide them. Like the river needs riverbanks."

"Can't someone else be the leader?"

"I was chosen." *By StarClan. They gave me nine lives.* He knew how strange it must sound to Arc. It still felt a bit strange to Riverstar, though he believed what StarClan had told him. RiverClan was his now to protect and defend, and he cared too much for his

Clanmates to ever let them down.

“I’m not asking you to come home for good,” Arc told him. “Just to show us how to get rid of Slash.”

Home. The word opened a wound Riverstar assumed had healed. He thought he’d stopped missing his old life, stopped longing to go back. But seeing Arc again, hearing his voice and hearing that his old parkmates were in trouble, had brought memories flooding back, memories he couldn’t ignore.

“Can’t your Clan guide itself just for a while?” Arc pressed.

“They’d be vulnerable without me.”

“Vulnerable to what?”

“To the other Clans.”

“I thought your boundaries kept the peace.” Arc glanced at him.

“They need to be guarded,” Riverstar mewed.

“Then tell your Clanmates to guard them while you’re gone.”

“That might not be enough,” Riverstar told him. “

“Are the other Clans really so greedy for your land?” Arc was staring at him in surprise. “Surely they have land of their own? What do they need yours for?”

Don't they have prey on theirs?"

"Of course they do." Riverstar felt his pelt ruffling. Arc seemed to be focusing on the one thing he found hard to accept about the Clans: their love of territory and boundaries. *Don't make me defend what I'm still learning to accept. . . .* "But cats always need more prey."

"More than they can eat?" Arc looked puzzled.

"The cold moons can be brutal here," Riverstar tried to explain. "It's not like the park. There are no Twolegs to leave food. We have to survive on what we can hunt, and if it snows or there's a flood and prey is scarce, we go hungry."

"So you live in fear of hunger and of each other." Arc stared at him blankly. "And this is the life you want?"

"The river brought me here."

"Does it make you stay?"

"I'm needed here."

Arc's gaze darkened. "You're needed back home."

Don't say that! Riverstar's tail twitched with frustration. "Why don't you bring the park cats here?"

They could live on the island. They could become part of the Clans.”

“So that they could live in fear of hunger and the other Clans too?”

“They’re living in fear of Slash now!” Riverstar snapped.

Arc dipped his head. “True,” he conceded. “But do you think Slash would let them go? He has a group of defenseless cats to boss around and bully. He’s not going to give that up easily. Besides, Rust, Midge, and Owl are old. They’re safely in hiding, but how could they travel here? They’d never survive the journey.”

Riverstar stared at him, his thoughts whirling. He’d promised to protect his Clanmates. He couldn’t protect every cat.

Arc seemed to read his thoughts in the silence that hung between them. He looked away, defeated. “I understand,” he growled. “You have obligations here. I’m proud that you’re so loyal to your Clanmates, and perhaps if I were in your pelt, I’d want to stay here too. But I promised our parkmates I’d find you and ask you and I’ve done that. Now I’d better go home. I have obligations too.”

“No!” Panic scorched through Riverstar’s fur at the thought of saying goodbye to Arc so soon. “Stay and rest a little longer. Your wounds need to fully heal. It’s no use heading home if you’re going to get sick on the way. You’ll be safe here until you’ve properly recovered.”

Arc looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. “Very well,” he mewed. “But only for a few more days. Then I have to go home.”

“Where’s Arc?” Dappled Pelt looked up from the herbs she was mixing on the floor of the medicine den.

Riverstar fidgeted in the entrance, unsure why he’d come. “He wanted to watch the river.”

“You left him *alone*?” Dappled Pelt paused.

“I asked Dew and Drizzle to keep an eye on him.”

“Good.” Dappled Pelt returned to her work. “Rivers are dangerous for cats—”

“Cats who don’t swim.” Riverstar finished her sentence. “You’re starting to sound like Night.”

She looked up. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No.” He lingered in the entrance.

“Come in or go out,” she mewed. “You’re blocking the light.”

Riverstar padded in, not sure why he'd come. Suddenly he felt like he didn't belong on the island—he was just a park cat who'd wandered too far from home.

"You must be pleased to see him again," Dappled Pelt mewed, picking shriveled leaves from among the herbs.

"Yeah, I guess."

"You don't sound too sure." She looked at him. "I thought you two were close when you lived in the park."

"We were." Riverstar's heart ached as he remembered chasing Arc across the lawns as they'd played mouse-and-cat, waiting beside Twoleg food nests for Twolegs to drop delicious scraps, Arc teasing him when he ate so eagerly that he didn't notice the food stuck to his nose. "But he feels like a stranger now—" He stopped. That wasn't entirely true. "*I feel like a stranger. Like I'm not the cat he knew.*"

"You probably aren't," Dappled Pelt mewed softly. She went back to her herb mixing.

"He must be disappointed in me." Riverstar looked at her, hoping she'd argue, and felt ashamed that he

needed reassurance.

“He’s probably proud of the cat you’ve become.”

“Do you think so?” His heart lifted for a moment.

“But he doesn’t think much of the Clans.”

“Nor did you at first.” She glanced at him.

“Perhaps I should never have become part of one.” Riverstar looked away. His conversation with Arc had stirred up doubts he’d pushed aside long ago. Had he betrayed his beliefs?

“Why did you?”

“Because I wanted them to be better.” He stared at her herbs. “Am I wasting my time?”

“Only you know that.” She sat up and blinked at him. “But StarClan doesn’t think you’re wasting your time,” she mewed. “Or they wouldn’t have given you nine lives.”

The thought didn’t make him feel any more certain of where he belonged. Was he a Clan cat or a park cat? Should he go back with Arc and help save his old group from Slash? Or stay here and protect his Clan? He thought suddenly of the dream he’d shared with the other Clan leaders, when StarClan had encouraged him to grow and spread his Clan however he could manage

it. Could leaving be a way to do that? He stared at her earnestly. "Can I be loyal to both my old friends and my new friends? Or must I choose?"

She blinked back at him. "Whenever I don't know the answer, I go to the Moonstone to ask StarClan."

StarClan. Yes, StarClan had set his paws on this journey. "Do you think they'll tell me what to do?"

"I think they'll help you decide." She got to her paws. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"Yes." Riverstar began to feel his shoulders loosen. "Please."

Dawn was turning the sky pale above the forest as Riverstar followed Dappled Pelt across the moor. The moon was fading and the stars were long gone. They'd reach the island soon. Riverstar's paws ached from the long trek to the Moonstone and back. But he had his answer.

The moment his nose had touched the brilliant rock, a vision had flooded his mind. He'd been floating on a river, carried on a log, moving quicker and quicker, the current whisking him downstream. Ahead, a great rock had split the water, and the river had branched around it. *You must choose.* Flutter's voice had

echoed in his vision as he sped closer to the rock.

“Which way?” he’d wailed as the river carried him faster and the rock loomed ahead.

You must choose! Flutter’s voice sounded again.

As the shadow of the rock touched him, he knew what StarClan wanted. He had to decide what sort of cat he was, a park cat or a Clan cat, and suddenly he knew. Leaning sideways, he steered the log to one side of the rock, missing it just in time as he was swept downstream.

As the vision ended, he’d opened his eyes. The moon had shifted above the cavern and the Moonstone was a dull, lifeless rock once more. *I’m Riverstar, leader of RiverClan. My place is here, beside the river.*

He bounded down the slope after Dappled Pelt now, zigzagging around the clumps of heather. She knew the trail well. He’d almost forgotten she’d been a moor cat once. It would be leaf-fall soon. A cool wind streamed through his fur, and he felt wide awake though he hadn’t slept since yesterday. His heart felt light and his paw steps firm as they crossed the border into RiverClan territory, but as he smelled the river

scents and saw the reed beds in the distance, a small voice sounded in his head: *Arc came for a reason.*

He tried to push it away. *He needed help but I can't help him.*

Then who can? The voice nagged at him.

We have different lives now, he argued.

But you were once like kin, the voice replied.

My Clanmates are my kin now! He'd made his choice! StarClan wanted him to stay.

But the voice hadn't finished. *So you're going to send Arc home alone.*

His heart seemed to break, but he wasn't going to be swayed by sentiment. He was a Clan leader. He had to put his Clan first.

As they neared the island, Dappled Pelt slowed. Riverstar pulled up behind her as he glimpsed a figure waiting in the dawn light. *Arc.* Drizzle ran up behind him, chattering to him excitedly, but Arc replied quickly, nodding at her and tapping her back with his tail-tip. Drizzle spotted Riverstar approaching, then nodded and hurried away.

Dappled Pelt glanced back at Riverstar, then dipped her head to the black tom and padded past him

toward camp.

A mist hung over the river, weaving between the reeds.

“Have you decided?” Arc mewed.

“Yes.” Riverstar looked gravely at his old friend.

Arc seemed to guess the answer. His shoulders drooped. “In that case, I’ll leave at sunhigh. I’ve enjoyed teaching your cats about meditation, but it’s a long journey, and my parkmates will be waiting.”

Guilt seared Riverstar’s pelt. “Do you know the way?”

“I’ll go the way I came,” Arc told him.

“You said you floated down the river on a log.”

“Only part of the way.”

“Stay one more day.” Riverstar gazed at him hopefully. “You’ll travel quicker if you spend another day healing.”

“Very well.” Arc dipped his head and turned back toward the camp. “I’ll leave tomorrow at dawn.”

Riverstar fell exhausted into his nest. His heart ached, but he knew he’d made the right decision, and as he drifted into sleep, he hoped Arc would one day come to understand.

As he sank into dreams, he found himself swimming in the river. The water was warm and the current strong. It was pushing against him, trying to sweep him downstream. But Flutter was waiting on the shore. He could see her, sitting silently in the sunshine, dragonflies darting around her while willows shimmered at the water's edge. *I must get to her! I have to reach her!* But the river was fighting him, pushing him back, and no matter how hard he swam, the current outmatched him.

No! Suddenly, he was a young tom again—a park cat who was in love with Flutter. His heart seemed to cry out to her; his passion was stronger than any current. He'd been sure of himself then, confident of his future, knowing exactly what his life would be. He pushed harder against the river.

He remembered his vision—the fork in the river. *You must choose.* He'd thought StarClan had been asking him to choose between being the park cat he once was and the warrior he'd become. But that hadn't been the choice at all. The choice had been something deeper. He had to be true—not to his past, or to his future, but to himself. It wasn't the river he'd

been following all this time, but the flow of his own heart, and he must follow it now, even if it meant swimming against the current.



Chapter 20



The following morning, the sun was already spilling over the top of the reed wall by the time Riverstar heard the rustle of Arc's nest and the black tom slid from his den. He'd been waiting outside since first light, and the damp river air filled him with anticipation. A heavy dew lay over the reed beds. Leaf-fall was on its way. His paws tingled with excitement. And yet he felt calmer than he'd been in days.

"It's a good day for traveling," he mewed as Arc blinked against the sunshine.

Night ducked out of the warriors' den, yawning. Moss Tail and Dawn Mist were sharing scraps from the prey pile. Mist and Pine Needle were warming their pelts in the sunshine, while Spider Paw stretched beside the camp wall, his snowy white fur still ruffled from sleep.

Arc shook out his pelt. "I just hope the fine weather holds until I'm home."

Riverstar glanced guiltily at his Clanmates. He hadn't told any cat of his plan. He lifted his chin. *It's*

the right thing to do. He gazed steadily at Arc. "I'm coming with you."

Arc blinked in surprise.

Night jerked her muzzle toward Riverstar. "You're what?"

Spider Paw hurried across the clearing. "You can't leave!"

Moss Tail dropped the stale trout he'd nibbling.

Riverstar pressed his paws into the earth. He made his decision. "I have to go," he told them.

Mist looked at him. "You *made* this group," he mewed. "You can't abandon it."

"I'm not abandoning it," Riverstar told him.

"But you're going home!" Alarm glittered in Night's eyes.

"Only to help my old friends," Riverstar told her.

Pine Needle's pelt was twitching along his spine. "What if you decide to stay there?"

"Hollow said you only stayed here because you couldn't find your way back to the park," Spider Paw mewed anxiously. "If you find it now, you might never ____"

Riverstar cut him off. "That wasn't the only reason

I stayed,” he mewed. “I was meant to be here.”

“Then stay here,” Night snapped.

“If I did . . .” Riverstar hesitated. He hadn’t realized his Clanmates would make it so hard for him to leave. *Please understand*. “I wouldn’t deserve to be RiverClan’s leader.”

Mist’s tail flicked angrily. “That doesn’t make sense. How can leaving your Clan make you a good leader?”

“Are you choosing your parkmates over us?” Night demanded.

“We need you.” Spider Paw’s green eyes glittered with panic. He looked as bereft as he had the night Moth Flight had given him to RiverClan.

Riverstar looked at the young tom. “I’m coming back,” he promised. “RiverClan is part of me. But Arc and the park cats are part of me too.”

“Do you want to be a *park cat* again?” Moss Tail looked puzzled.

“I want to be a cat who’s loyal,” Riverstar mewed. “Who protects those who protected me. Who feeds those who fed me. Who cares about those who cared about me.” He looked at the faces of his Clanmates,

relieved to see them beginning to soften. "Isn't that what you want in a leader?"

They glanced uncertainly at each other.

Riverstar pressed on. "I can't be a good leader to you if I can't be a good friend to Arc."

Mist's tail grew still. Pine Needle's pelt smoothed. But Spider Paw was still looking anxious.

Riverstar padded toward him and touched his nose to the young tom's head. "I will be back," he mewed. "I promise."

Night was still staring at him. "*When?*" she demanded.

Riverstar looked at Arc. "How long will the journey take?"

"Three days, at least," Arc told him.

Riverstar whisked his tail. "I'll be back in a half-moon," he told Night.

"The sooner we leave, the sooner we get back." Arc padded toward the camp entrance.

Night nudged Riverstar sharply away from the others. "Do you *promise* you'll come back?" she hissed.

"Yes." He looked at her as their Clanmates

murmured anxiously to each other on the far side of the clearing. "I couldn't break a promise to Spider Paw, or to you, or to the Clan. You believe that, don't you?"

She returned his gaze, her eyes dark with worry.

"Have I ever let you down?" he pressed.

"No," she conceded.

"And I never will."

"But what if something happens to you?" she worried. "You're going to help them deal with Slash. And the journey will be dangerous. You were scared of making it before. How is it any safer now?"

"Arc will be with me." He gazed at her calmly. "And I'm a different cat now."

"That doesn't mean you'll be safe."

"I have nine lives, remember?"

"What if that's not enough?"

"Then you will take my place," Riverstar told her.

"Me?" She stared at him in disbelief. "You want *me* to be leader?"

"I can't think of a better one," Riverstar mewed.

"But I'm a loner!" Night's pelt ruffled.

"You *were* a loner," Riverstar reminded her. "But

you joined my group.”

“Not to become leader!” she shot back. “I joined because of *you*—” She broke off, her ears twitching self-consciously.

Because of me? He looked at her, confused. Did Night feel something for him? *Does she love me?* His pelt grew hot. “I’m so sorry. I never realized—”

“Not like *that*, you flea-brain!” she snapped. “I mean because I *believe* in you! You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, and I trust you with my life. If you lead a Clan, I want to be part of it. But if you’re gone, then . . .” Her mew trailed away.

“I understand,” he mewed. Without him, Night would return to being a loner. But he couldn’t let that happen. “You have to think of your Clanmates. If I’m gone, they will need a strong cat to lead them. Do you remember what you said when I told you I was going to become the leader of our group?”

“I said I was only staying so I could help.”

“You said ‘a dreamer like you needs a practical cat beside them.’”

“It’s still true.”

“But a practical cat would be the best leader the

Clan could have if something happened to me.” Riverstar reached as deep into her gaze as he could. She *had* to agree to take his place if he couldn’t return. “Don’t you see that?”

“Hollow is practical,” she mewed. “So’s Dew.”

“They are not leaders,” Riverstar told her. “They will put their Clanmates first when things are going well, but when things aren’t, they will think of themselves first.”

“And I wouldn’t?”

“No.” He suddenly realized why he trusted Night so much. “You wouldn’t. Which is why you must take my place if I don’t return. RiverClan needs you, and it *must* carry on.”

“Why does it need to carry on?” she asked. “We could live as loners again.”

“But to live as a warrior—” He broke off. How did she not understand? “Isn’t it better to live an honorable life? To take care of the cats around you? To make a place where kits can grow up safely and become the best cats they can be?”

She looked at him, grief suddenly sharpening her gaze. Was she remembering her own lost kits? They

might not have been lost if they'd been part of a Clan.

He kept going. "And what about StarClan? As a RiverClan cat, you'd have a place with them when you die. Don't you want to a chance to guide and care for your Clanmates and kin even after you leave them?" He gazed at her intently. Surely, she must have wondered if her lost mate and kits were waiting for her with the other spirit-cats? "Don't you want to see your loved ones again?"

She flicked her tail briskly. "Okay! Okay!" she snapped. "I'll be leader if you don't come back."

"Two moons," Riverstar mewed. "If I'm not back in two moons—"

"You said *half* a moon."

"I'll try," he mewed. "But if I'm not back in two moons, go to the Moonstone with Dappled Pelt and get your nine lives."

She stared at him for a moment, then dipped her head.

Relief swept over him. He was leaving the Clan in safe paws. He turned and padded toward the others.

Spider Paw looked at him with wide, round eyes. "You're really going?"

“I’ll be back before you know it,” Riverstar told him.

“Be careful,” Mist mewed.

“Watch out for foxes,” Moss Tail warned him.

Pine Needle lashed his tail. “Make sure you get rid of Slash for good this time!”

Riverstar blinked at the young tom, remembering with a shudder the sight of One Eye’s corpse. *Can I kill again?* He hoped there would be another solution. “I’ll do my best.”

He headed for the entrance. “I’ll see you in half a moon,” he called over his shoulder, hoping it was true. His heart felt suddenly heavy. He was going to miss his Clanmates as much as he used to miss his parkmates, if not more. They were like kin now. But he had to do this. He paused beside Arc. “Let’s go.”

The black tom glanced at him, then headed through the reed entrance.

Riverstar followed, ignoring the tug that seemed to pull him back. *StarClan, look after them,* he prayed. If anything happened to his Clan while he was away, he’d never forgive himself.



Chapter 21



Riverstar led Arc across Clan lands. Now that he knew the moor better, he was able to trace a route around the waterfall that had blocked his return all those moons ago. He didn't want the other Clans to know he was leaving RiverClan unprotected, so he kept a watchful eye for Windstar's patrols as he guided Arc through the wide swaths of heather. Then they changed course to meet the river above the falls as it wound away from Highstones.

When they left Clan lands, Riverstar let Arc take the lead. As the long day passed, his paws began to ache, but his former parkmate pushed on without slowing. Riverstar was impressed: Arc hadn't aged at all, and it felt comfortable to fall into their old roles of mentor and apprentice. From time to time, Arc would glance over his shoulder, encouraging Riverstar with a flick of his tail or a nod, and Riverstar was content to follow as he had when he was a young tom in the park.

And yet he felt uneasy. As they followed the river,

he couldn't shake the sense that someone was watching them. Had he been careless on the moor? Had one of Windstar's cats spotted them? They might be following, planning to report that Riverstar had left his Clan. He looked back nervously and scanned the shore. Was he imagining they were being followed? He wouldn't put it past the other Clans to take advantage of his absence to steal land from RiverClan.

He pushed the thought away. *No one else wants the river. And Night will take care of them.* But worry lingered like a burr in his pelt.

As the sun began to set, they reached a stretch of river where the shore gave way to steep cliffs and sheer rock cut straight down into the water. There was no way through.

Riverstar stopped and stared at the river washing against the stone. "What now?"

"We'll have to cross." Arc nodded toward the far side.

Riverstar followed his gaze. The riverbank was rocky there, but they could clamber over it and keep following the river. "How do we get there?" Swimming would be dangerous, even for him. The current was

strong here where the cliffs pressed in and hurried the water along. There would be a fierce undertow that could drag a cat beneath the surface and hold him there.

He realized with a jolt of alarm that Arc was looking at a row of sharp rocks jutting from the water. There was one near the bank, another farther out, and two more closer to the other side. But they were craggy and widely spaced. And they were wet. It would be easy to slip. Leaping from one to another would be risky. "It's too dangerous," Riverstar mewed. "We should go back and find an easier place to cross."

"The sun will set soon," Arc mewed. "Let's make the most of the light."

"Can you swim?" Riverstar blinked at the black tom.

"I won't fall in." Arc sounded calm. Riverstar had forgotten his mentor's unwavering sense of certainty, gained from moons of meditation. He wished suddenly with a pang that he'd not let the habit slide. Since becoming leader, he'd found so much of his time taken up with organizing patrols and training and taking care of his Clan. It had been nearly a moon since he'd sat

beside the river and let his thoughts flow with it. He looked at the water now, churning around the rocks, and wondered if the river resented him for turning his back on its wisdom. *No*. He shook out his pelt. *The river is my friend*. He lifted his chin. "Let's do it."

Arc gazed at him. "Remember to focus on your breathing and trust your paws to find their way."

Riverstar nodded, but breathing wasn't going to help him here. Balance was what he needed most.

"I'll go first." Arc padded to the edge and drew his paws close, his gaze fixing on the first rock. It was jagged but wide enough for a firm landing if Arc's paws hit it just right.

Riverstar held his breath as Arc leaped. The black tom landed perfectly, his body relaxed as though he were hopping into his nest. His gaze moved to the next rock, and with another smooth leap he landed, his paws finding crevices as though they knew they'd be there. The next leap was farther, and Riverstar held his breath as Arc sailed over it, forepaws outstretched. As he landed, his hind paw dipped into the water. He wobbled, and as Riverstar's heart leaped into his throat, Arc seemed to freeze, hanging over the water

for a moment. Then his body softened and collapsed toward the rock as though melting into it.

Riverstar watched in awe. Even as he'd nearly fallen, Arc's pelt hadn't ruffled. *He knew he'd be okay.*

Arc made the last jump with ease, then leaped onto the bank. He looked back at Riverstar. "Take your time and keep breathing."

Riverstar realized he was still holding his breath. He gulped in air, his paws trembling. Forcing himself to relax, he padded to the spot Arc had jumped from. Focusing on the first rock, he leaped and landed deftly. He felt a flicker of excitement. *I can do this.* It was easier than he'd imagined. He jumped to the next stone, wobbling a little when he landed but forcing himself to balance, relieved when his paws found safe holds on the jagged rock.

The water swirled darkly between him and the next rock, and he found his gaze following it downstream.

"Focus on your breath, not the water!" Arc called from the far side.

Riverstar dragged his gaze from the river and

looked at the next rock. If he put enough power into his jump, he'd make it without his hind paw touching the water as Arc's had done. He bunched his muscles, ignoring his pounding heart, and leaped. He landed, his hind paws clear of the water. But the rock was uneven. He curled his claws to get a grip, but they only scraped against the slippery stone, unable to find a hold. He felt himself slip, felt the weight of his shoulders tug him sideways, scrabbled to hold on, failed, fell. Panic sparked in his chest as he crashed into the water. The current grabbed him like a buzzard snatching dead prey and dragged him downstream.

He fought it, trying to find a rhythm that would match the swiftness of the water. But it tumbled him over and dragged him deeper. Water shot up his nose and filled his mouth, and he screwed his eyes shut and lashed out blindly. *Focus.* He could hear Arc's voice in his mind. He had to let the water carry him and forced himself to fall limp even though every muscle screamed at him to fight. *The river will protect me.* As his lungs burned for air, he rolled with the current until he felt a pocket of slack water. This was his chance. He pushed himself into it, unfurling, stretching

out as the current lost its grip for a moment. Then, pushing up, he reached for the surface, hope flaring in his chest as his paw struck wood. A branch! He grabbed it, felt it bend in his grip, prayed it wouldn't break, and pulled himself up. He broke the surface and burst into fresh air. Grabbing the branch with both paws, he opened his eyes to see that it was firmly anchored to a twisted tree on the riverbank. He clung on as he caught his breath, then began to claw his way along it, dragging himself to shore. Panting, he hauled himself out and collapsed onto the riverbank.

"Ripple!" Arc skidded to a halt beside him. "I thought I'd lost you."

Riverstar blinked through the water streaming around his eyes.

For a moment Arc looked panicked; then calm flooded his gaze. "You stopped struggling and found peace within yourself." He looked pleased. "Well done."

"Did you see?" Riverstar sat up.

"I thought you'd forgotten everything I taught you and were going to lose the ability to think clearly. Of course, it helps that some cat taught you how to

swim!”

Riverstar shook out his pelt. “We all swim in RiverClan. But the river wouldn’t harm me.”

“Are you sure?” Arc looked at the water tumbling past, and worry moved like shadow over his gaze.

“I’m sure.” Riverstar lifted his chin. “Look where it washed me up!” The river had carried him across. He wouldn’t have to leap the rocks again.

The sun had slipped behind the horizon and the shore was dark. “Come on,” Riverstar mewed. “Let’s keep moving.” He began to lead the way upstream, and Arc padded silently after him.

As they followed a winding path along the rock shore, Riverstar’s belly growled. He was hungry. “Should we hunt? I’m sure there must be—”

A yowl of panic cut him off. Over the roar of the water, a desperate mewl rang from downstream. “Help!”

He recognized it at once. “Drizzle?” Panic gripped him. She was here and she was in trouble. He raced back, barging past Arc, haring along the shore until he saw a dark shape in the foaming water. Drizzle’s head was barely above the surface as she clung onto one of

the rocks they'd used to cross. Arc caught up to him as he stared in horror at the flailing she-cat.

She saw them, her gaze sharp with fear, and opened her mouth to yowl again. Water filled it and she lost her grip.

Arc crouched and, with a flash of alarm, Riverstar realized the black tom was going to dive into the river.

"You can't swim!" Riverstar pushed him back sharply with his muzzle. "Wait here!" He plunged into the current and let it sweep him after Drizzle, keeping his gaze fixed on her, riding the water without fighting it. She was thrashing her paws, trying to stay afloat. Her yowl rang in the cold night air, and then she disappeared beneath the surface.

"Drizzle!" Riverstar's heart seemed to burst.

She bobbed up again, eyes wild with terror, and struggled to swim toward him. But the current was too strong. He pushed out, picking up speed, gliding toward her—but the riverbed dipped and the river with it and rushed him past her so fast he barely had time to reach out.

"Drizzle." He managed to hook a claw into her pelt. With a grunt, he yanked her closer. She bumped

against him and he sank his teeth into her scruff, gripping hard as the river spun them downstream like leaves.

Arc was racing along the shore, matching their pace, then pulling ahead as the river curved around a sandbank. The current grew faster, but it was carrying them closer to the edge as it rounded the bend. Riverstar grabbed Drizzle between his forepaws and shoved her with all his strength toward the stretch of sand. The effort propelled him backward into deeper water. The river foamed around him and tugged him toward a line of rocks that broke the surface like teeth. Fear pulsed in Riverstar's blood as he saw them. He tried to fight his way to shore, but the river's grip was too strong. *StarClan, help me!* He lashed out, spinning in the water. Then something hit his head hard, and with a sickening thump and pain that blinded him, Riverstar plummeted into darkness.

“Riverstar.”

Struggling into consciousness, Riverstar heard a mew. Eyes closed, he could feel sunshine on his pelt. Was it morning? Had he passed out? Arc must have managed to drag him from the river. Grass lay beneath

him, soft and warm.

“Riverstar.”

The mew sounded again. It was familiar. But it wasn't Arc. Had some other cat followed them apart from Drizzle?

Drizzle! He tried to struggle to his paws, but exhaustion held him down. “Is she alive?”

“She's safe.” It was the mew again.

Riverstar opened his eyes. “Gray Wing?” Why was he here?

The gray tom stood in front of him, starlight sparkling in his pelt. Behind him, vast green meadows rolled away toward bright blue skies. Riverstar struggled to his paws. “Where am I? What are you doing here?”

Gray Wing gazed at him solemnly. “You've lost a life.”

Riverstar stared back. Words took a few moments to come. “I *died*?”

“Yes.” Gray Wing held his gaze. “In the river. You drowned.”

The river drowned me? But the river was his friend. He'd trusted it.

“You were brave to jump in after Drizzle,” Gray Wing mewed.

“I didn’t think the river would ever harm me.”

“A river can’t help its nature any more than a cat can help theirs.” Gray Wing was staring at him. “You need to be more careful, Riverstar,” he mewed. “The lives we gave you are precious.”

“I know, but—”

Gray Wing cut him off. “You must get back.”

The world shifted suddenly beneath Riverstar’s paws and spun around him, sweeping him into blackness once more. A moment later, he was lying in the shallows at the edge of the river. It was still night, and he blinked in the darkness, the water lapping around him, waiting for pain, finding none. He sat up and ran a paw over his head where the rock had hit it. There wasn’t even a lump.

“Arc?” He got to his paws. he called “Drizzle?” Were they nearby? He scanned the shore. Bushes crowded the water’s edge, swathed in shadow. He pricked his ears, relieved when he heard Arc’s mew.

“I’ll take you back to your island.” The black tom was talking to someone.

Drizzle answered. "What about your parkmates?" She sounded numb. "We were supposed to be helping them."

Riverstar shook the water from his fur and leaped the riverbank, racing toward the voices. He pushed beneath the bushes and saw Arc and Drizzle standing on the shore beyond.

Arc stared at him, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Drizzle's face lit up. "You're back!"

"You were dead!" Arc gasped. "I saw your body! You weren't breathing."

"I came back." Riverstar padded toward them. "I have nine lives." He tried to sound casual, even though he hardly believed it himself. "Drizzle told you back at the camp. StarClan gave them to me."

Arc narrowed his eyes. "Perhaps you just *looked like* you weren't breathing."

Riverstar wasn't going to waste time convincing him. He was more worried about Drizzle. He stared at her sternly. "What in StarClan are you doing here? You're meant to be back in camp."

"I had to come." She blinked at him.

"No, you didn't," he told her. "Your Clanmates will

be worried.”

“I told Pine Needle where I was going,” she mewed.

“And you think that will put their minds at rest?”

“They’ll know I’m with you.” She lifted her chin.

“They trust you.”

Riverstar glared at her. “This is an important mission!” he snapped. “I can’t be nursing an inexperienced she-cat through it.”

Her pelt ruffled indignantly. “I’m not inexperienced!” she mewed. “I can help.”

“Like you helped just now?” Anger sparked in his paws.

“I’m sorry,” she mewed earnestly. “It was an accident, but I’m fine. You saved me.”

“You cost me a *life*!”

She looked at her paws, ears flattening with shame, and he felt a jab of guilt. Wasn’t that what his nine lives were for? To protect his Clanmates?

“I won’t cause any more trouble, I promise,” she mewed. “Just let me come with you.” She glanced up meekly. “Please.”

He flicked his tail crossly. “Why should I? You

should be at home, where it's safe."

"I want to do more meditating," she mewed, sounding desperate now. "With Arc." She looked at the park cat with large round eyes. "It's so cool, and Arc does it so well. I want to be like him."

Riverstar swallowed back irritation. "We're going upriver to deal with Slash," he snapped. "There won't be time for meditating!"

Arc brushed past him. "There's always time for meditating," he told Drizzle gently. He glanced at Riverstar. "I taught you that once. Don't you remember?"

Riverstar's pelt rippled self-consciously. "That was moons ago! I was a kit!" He lashed his tail. "And that's not important right now. Drizzle should never have come. She'll slow us down."

"I won't! I promise!" She stared at him eagerly.

"We can't send her back," Arc pointed out. "We've come too far."

"Taking her back will probably be quicker than letting her come with us," Riverstar grunted.

"If you want to take her home, that's fine," Arc mewed. "But my parkmates are expecting me. I've

delayed long enough. Who knows what Slash has been doing while I've been gone."

Drizzle glanced hopefully at the black tom, then at Riverstar. "You can't let him go alone," she mewed.

Riverstar snorted. She was right. It would be risky for Arc to go on without him. And he couldn't send Drizzle home alone. He looked at them helplessly. "Okay," he growled. "Drizzle can come." He frowned at her. "But stay out of the river. It's stronger than you."

And me. He glanced at the frothing water, and a shiver ran along his spine. The river used to protect him, but today it had killed him. Was it angry at him for leaving the island? Guilt wormed in his belly. Should he have stayed with his Clan?

He looked upstream, at the rocks closing in on either side. "I'm not sure how much farther we can follow the river."

"We need to find another way." Arc seemed to be thinking the same. "I saw a Thunderpath on the way here. It wound back and forth beside the river," Arc went on. "It even crossed overhead when the river ran through a gorge."

Riverstar tried to remember. Had he seen the Thunderpath on his *own* journey? Perhaps he'd passed under it while he slept. "Would it be safe?" He was doubtful. "Monsters could kill us."

"So could the river." Arc glanced at him darkly.

Riverstar pressed back a shudder.

"We can walk beside it," Arc went on. He nodded across the scrub beside the river. "It must be over there somewhere."

The river thundered past them. For once, Riverstar didn't feel its tug. If it was angry with him, it might be a good idea to stay away from it for a while.

"Okay." He looked at Arc. "In the morning. Let's make camp here for the night."

Arc nodded toward the boulders piled a short way from the riverbank. "Those rocks will give us shelter."

Riverstar fluffed out his fur. "We should hunt first," he mewed. "In the morning, we'll find the Thunderpath."

Drizzle trotted beside Arc, tripping over another stone as she kept her gaze firmly on the black tom.

"Watch where you put your paws." Riverstar's ears flicked irritably.

They'd found the Thunderpath a short distance away, just as Arc had predicted. They had been tracking it all morning, keeping a safe distance between themselves and the howling, stinking monsters that stampeded one after another along it. Drizzle hadn't left Arc's side. She finally seemed to have run out of questions about his past and the park and what it was like to be so lost in meditation that it felt like you'd traveled to a new place. Now she kept glancing at him as though hoping he'd say something new and wonderful. "Did you meditate even when you were a kit?"

"Of course." Arc seemed to be enjoying the attention. "Park cats learn to meditate as soon as they open their eyes." He glanced back at Riverstar. "Ripple—I mean, Riverstar was a natural," he mewed. "It's a shame he's let it slip."

"I've had a lot on my mind," Riverstar grunted.

"It wouldn't seem like a lot if you meditated more," Arc mewed.

Riverstar flexed his claws. He knew Arc was right, but he didn't have to rub it in. When Riverstar got back to the island, he could meditate regularly and

persuade his Clanmates to follow his example. But he had fallen out of the habit, and there was no changing that.

He noticed that the stretch of stony ground was growing narrower. The valley they'd been following had deepened, and the river cut farther and farther into the stone so that now it thundered through a steep-sided gorge far below. Ahead he could see the Thunderpath twist like a snake toward the edge, spanning the long drop to the river with a dark bridge. Steep walls edged it—the monsters were skimming them as skillfully as hawks—and he could see from here that there was no path running alongside the strip of black stone. If they were going to cross here, they'd have to walk alongside the monsters and just hope that they could dodge them. "We'll have to go back," he growled.

Drizzle looked at the bridge. "We could wait until night-time," she suggested. "Then cross when the monsters are sleeping."

"Monsters never sleep," Arc mewed darkly. "Besides, we need to keep moving."

"But we can't cross here." Riverstar padded to the

edge of the gorge and peered over. It was a long drop to the water, and the cliff was too steep to scramble down. At the bottom, the river seethed as it churned through the gorge. His heart pounded. Would they have to turn back?

“Look!” Arc had crept closer to the bridge and was looking underneath. A short path led beneath it to long beams that stretched between the legs. “We could use those.”

Riverstar’s fur lifted along his spine. The river had drowned him yesterday. But today he wouldn’t drown. If he fell from a beam at this height, the drop would kill him. Even if he had lives to spare, Drizzle and Arc didn’t. “What if we fall off?”

“We won’t,” Arc told him. “Those beams are as wide as tree trunks. If we focus and stay calm, we can cross them easily.”

Riverstar wasn’t convinced. The monsters rumbling overhead and the river roaring below would make focusing hard. And a stiff breeze was funneling through the gorge. “It’s too much of a risk,” he mewed. “We should go back and find another way.”

Arc looked puzzled. “Do you doubt yourself?”

“I’m worried about Drizzle.” Riverstar didn’t want to admit he wasn’t sure of his own ability to focus and stay calm, and he was annoyed with himself, knowing that his skills would be sharper if he’d kept up his meditation practice.

Drizzle’s tail twitched nervously, but she lifted her muzzle. “I can do it,” she mewed. “I know I can.”

Arc was still gazing at Riverstar. “Just keep breathing,” he mewed firmly. “And your paws will find their way.”

Riverstar whisked his tail impatiently. Monsters were charging past, their stench rolling over the three cats. If Arc was determined they should do this, he wanted to get it over with. “Let’s just go—” Riverstar began.

Arc interrupted. “Take a deep breath before you start.”

Riverstar blinked at him.

“Now,” Arc ordered.

Beside him, Drizzle took a deep, steadying breath.

Riverstar swallowed back frustration and did the same, drawing the sharp stench of the Thunderpath into his mouth and down into his chest.

“Keep going,” Arc mewed.

Riverstar felt sick, but he kept breathing, wishing Arc would hurry up.

Monsters began honking like geese as they tore past, but Arc didn’t move, and Drizzle closed her eyes.

“Good.” Arc lifted his tail.

At last. Riverstar let go of his last deep breath with relief.

“Let’s go.” Arc led them toward the path and down onto a beam.

As he began to pad across, Drizzle followed. Riverstar hesitated, glancing toward the far side of the gorge. How could it be so far away? His heart began to pound. The beam Arc had chosen was smooth and flat. If it had been a fallen tree, Riverstar would have walked along it easily. But the drop frightened him.

Arc looked back at him. “Just look at me,” he called. “Not at the river.”

Riverstar fluffed out his fur and padded onto the beam. It burned his pads, hot from the sunshine. The breeze tugged at his pelt. He fixed his gaze on Drizzle. She was staring straight ahead, following Arc. He padded after them, trying to focus, but fear was

pressing at the back of his head, his thoughts spilling over into panic. *What if they fall? What if I fall?*

A monster rumbled overhead, and the beam trembled beneath his paws. *Breathe*, he told himself. He took a deep breath, then another, and began to feel dizzy.

“Riverstar!” He realized Drizzle was looking back at him over her shoulder. “Watch us!” She could tell he wasn’t focusing. Her gaze bored into his. “You can do this!”

She blinked at him encouragingly, then turned her gaze forward once more. She and Arc were close to the other side. A few fox-lengths ahead, the beam reached a narrow pathway that wound upward to safety. How could they be so calm? The wind was streaming around them, the beam trembling beneath their paws, and yet their pelts were smooth, their gazes fixed steadily ahead. Could they really ignore the monsters roaring above them? Or the river howling below like a pack of hungry dogs?

He looked down and saw it churning. His dizziness grew worse. He felt as though the beam were swaying beneath his paws. It shuddered as another monster

thundered across the bridge. Was that the sound of the river roaring in his ears, or was it the wind, or the Thunderpath? Perhaps it was just the blood pulsing beneath his fur as panic swelled and swamped him. He froze, his paws turning to stone.

“Riverstar!” Drizzle was calling him again, but he couldn’t drag his gaze from the river.

“Riverstar!” Arc’s mew cut through the roaring in his ears. “Focus on us!”

“Look up, Riverstar!” Drizzle called. “Look at us.”

Slowly, Riverstar forced himself to lift his gaze. He saw Drizzle, safe now on the narrow pathway.

Arc was standing at the end of the beam, his bright green eyes encouraging him forward. “You can do this, Ripple,” he mewed. “Let go of the river and the monsters. They can’t reach you. Keep your attention here. Take a breath and remember that your paws belong to you. They are all you need. Put your attention here in this moment and start walking.”

“You’re so close!” Drizzle called. “Don’t think about the monsters! Don’t think about the river! Think about us. We’re waiting for you.”

Riverstar forced himself to focus. He fixed his

gaze on Arc, imagining that a long glimmering spider's thread connected them. One paw at a time, he let the web draw him closer and closer to Arc. He felt his pelt smooth as the noise and the fear faded. The beam shivered as another monster passed, but he barely felt it and kept following the thread until, at last, he was a whisker from Arc's muzzle and the narrow path was beside his paws.

He hopped onto it, relief flooding him. Arc nosed him up it until he stopped beside Drizzle at the top of the gorge. Joy welled in his chest.

Drizzle began to purr and wind around him. "We did it!"

"That was hard." Arc shook out his pelt. "But we did it." He purred approvingly at Drizzle, who puffed out her chest proudly. "You were great!" Then he looked at Riverstar. "And you overcame your fear." He touched his muzzle to Riverstar's cheek. "That must have been difficult. I'm proud of you."

Drizzle nudged Riverstar's shoulder happily. "*I'm proud of you too,*" she mewed.

Riverstar shook them off self-consciously and puffed out his chest. "*I should be praising you,*" he

huffed.

Drizzle blinked at him, eyes shining, and he felt a twinge of guilt. He'd been irritated with her, and she'd been kind in return. Her bravery had impressed him, and suddenly he felt glad to have a Clanmate beside him to encourage him and make him feel less far from home. "Thanks, Drizzle," he mewed. "I'm glad you're here."



Chapter 22



Riverstar hesitated at the edge of the wide, stone meadow and narrowed his eyes against the glare. Sunshine was glinting off the bodies of countless monsters. Row after row slept in neat lines, and at the far end a massive Twoleg structure rose against the afternoon sky. The den was so huge it looked as though an entire Twolegplace had been walled and roofed with stone. Was it a camp? He swallowed nervously.

“Come on.” Drizzle was already squeezing between the noses of two monsters. “They’re asleep.”

“Arc said monsters never sleep,” Riverstar hissed.

“I was wrong.” Arc padded after her.

Riverstar’s paws seemed fixed to the ground as he watched Arc’s tail slip behind a big, black, round paw. He had a bad feeling about this.

They’d been tracking the Thunderpath for two days. Twoleg dens had crowded closer, knotted together by ever more Thunderpaths. Places to hunt had grown scarce. They’d seen no prey since

yesterday morning, when they'd found a rabbit trapped inside a small den in a Twoleg garden. But a Twoleg had run at them before they could dig it out and chased them away, waving its paws.

Now they were hungry, and the scent of something tasty had drawn them to the stone meadow. Drizzle and Arc were determined to find out what it was and, with no other suggestions to offer, Riverstar forced himself to follow. He ducked under a monster, wrinkling his nose at its bitter stench. As he crept out the other side, his fur brushed against its hot, shiny pelt and he darted forward, shuddering.

Drizzle seemed fearless and Arc seemed to trust her. Perhaps Riverstar should too. If the pair of them were certain that the tasty smell was worth sneaking past a meadow filled with monsters, he had to go with them, if only to protect them.

He crept beneath row after row of monsters, relieved when he finally ducked out and saw Arc and Drizzle pressing close to the wall of the vast Twoleg camp. They looked tiny against its towering walls, and his pelt prickled anxiously as he crouched beside them. Arc was peering around a corner. He'd found an

opening in the camp wall where a pawless monster sat at the end of a stone clearing, its back open to the sky. The clearing was walled, like a three-sided canyon—dangerously enclosed, but the monster was overflowing with Twoleg waste, and food scent filled the air.

Riverstar's pelt prickled. "It's a dead end," he hissed to Arc. "We could get trapped."

Drizzled peered around the corner, her nose twitching. "But the smell!"

Riverstar had to admit that it was tempting.

"I can't see any Twolegs," Arc mewed.

"Are you really planning on climbing inside that monster?" Riverstar scanned it for signs of movement.

"It can't hurt us," Arc told him. "It has no paws or eyes."

"It must be where the Twolegs dump food they don't need," Drizzle guessed.

Riverstar grunted. "Who throws food away?"

Drizzle whisked her tail. "Perhaps they caught too much."

"Who cares? I'm hungry." Arc slid into the canyon. Keeping low, he scurried across the stone and

leaped onto the edge of the monster. Wobbling, he looked back and beckoned with a flick of his tail. "Come on."

Drizzle glanced at Riverstar. "Let's go," she urged.

"Okay." Pressing back doubt, Riverstar followed Arc's path across the stone and leaped up beside him. As Drizzle landed next to him, he scanned the Twoleg clutter piled inside. The food scent was coming from the split skin of what looked like a huge black fruit that had grown ripe and burst open. Riverstar picked his way toward it, stepping gingerly over the Twoleg clutter. Arc and Drizzle followed.

Drizzle licked her lips. "It smells good. I wonder ____"

A roar sounded behind them.

Riverstar jerked around. His pelt spiked as a second monster loomed at the open end of the canyon. This one could definitely hurt them: it had paws and flashing orange eyes that spun on the top of its head.

"It must have smelled us!" Drizzle wailed.

Arc kept his fur smooth. "It's come for the food, not us."

"I don't care what it's come for!" As the monster

rolled forward, Riverstar ducked in front of Arc and Drizzle and pressed them back as it began to yowl a terrible warning and opened its massive jaws. "It's going to eat us if we don't get out of here," he hissed. But there was no escape. The monster was blocking the canyon. "Follow me!" He scrambled across the Twoleg waste and dropped down onto the stone behind, then scanned the canyon wall, his heart bursting with relief as a square suddenly opened in one corner.

Arc and Drizzle dropped down beside him. "Stay with me!" A Twoleg was coming out where the square had opened. Riverstar barged past it, ignoring its yelp of surprise, and dodged into the tunnel beyond.

Harsh, white light dazzled him. It flooded the tunnel, and he narrowed his eyes as he glanced over his shoulder, relieved to see Arc and Drizzle at his heels. He kept running. The Twoleg was chasing. It yowled after them as Riverstar led Arc and Drizzle along the tunnel, turning as another tunnel opened beside him, and skidding around the corner. Riverstar's paws skidded on the slippery green floor but he kept running.

He could feel Drizzle's breath on his tail and hear Arc's breath coming in gasps. Heavy paw steps thumped behind them. Riverstar fought back panic. An opening flashed beside him. He slowed, looked inside, saw a cave. They could hide in there and come up with a plan. He darted into it. Drizzle and Arc shot after him and nearly crashed into him as he slammed to a halt. His pelt spiked. A Twoleg was looming over him, staring with bright, glittering eyes. Terror burst in Riverstar's chest. He wheeled around, barging past Arc and Drizzle. "Run!" They chased after him. He ran back into the tunnel and froze. A Twoleg was heading toward them. Blindly, he jerked around and ran the other way.

"Which way now?" Arc yowled.

"Just keep running!" Riverstar hissed. The tunnel split, and he pulled up, looking one way, then the other. A Twoleg blocked one tunnel. Riverstar chose the other and pelted along it. Where was the way out? His thoughts whirled, but he kept running until he saw another square opening in the wall up ahead. A Twoleg had frozen in the gap and was staring at him in alarm. Riverstar raced between its hind paws into the gap,

shock pulsing behind his eyes as he raced out into a huge park crowded with Twolegs. He raced along the wall and dived into the shadows behind a ledge.

Arc and Drizzle bundled to a halt behind him. They were bristling with fear.

A massive roof stretched far above their heads. It looked as though Twolegs had built a second sky. The ground was shiny stone, and there were trees, but not like any Riverstar had seen before, and water, held in high-walled ponds where fountains spurted toward the roof. The water shimmered strangely blue, reflecting daytime stars that twinkled overhead.

Twolegs swarmed like rats, streaming in and out of bright openings in the walls. Loud, rhythmic noise thumped from the openings, while the Twolegs cawed and chattered like crows. Riverstar was breathing hard. Smells overwhelmed him, sharp, tangy, musky, meaty—so many flavors jumbled together, which confused and alarmed him.

Drizzle's tail was bushed. "How do we get out of here?"

Arc was scanning the bright openings, but Riverstar didn't trust the unnatural lights and noises

pulsing from them. They'd be dead ends, just like just like every other opening in this place. "We need to find daylight." He began looking for a flash of sunshine among the glaring Twoleg lights.

"Watch out!" Drizzle's wail made him turn.

Riverstar looked up. A Twoleg had broken from the swarm. It was heading straight for them, its face twisted, paws outstretched.

"Run!" He gave the order sharply. As Arc and Drizzle darted away, he raced after them. Arc ran for a gap at the edge of the Twoleg swarm. Drizzle hared after him, Riverstar charging after her. A burly Twoleg yelped and lunged for them. Arc cut away and plunged into the crowd. Drizzle followed, Riverstar at her heels, and together they zigzagged through the forest of Twoleg paws.

The Twolegs yelped as Arc, Drizzle, and Riverstar pushed between them. Their squealing panic spread like fire ahead of them until the crowd began to open, the Twolegs pointing and yowling. Paws reached down and grabbed at them. Riverstar felt one touch his tail. Alarm flared through him as he snatched it away before the Twoleg could take hold. Another tried to

grip Drizzle's scruff, but she ducked and ran harder as Arc leaped onto the stone edge of one of the pools. Drizzle and Riverstar leaped after him. The stone was slippery. Riverstar wobbled, his heart pounding so hard it felt as though an eagle were trapped in his chest.

"Get to the other side!" Riverstar could see a slope leading upward, away from the Twoleg swarm.

Drizzle dived into the water and began to swim. Arc stared after her, frozen in panic.

"Jump in!" Riverstar yowled. "I'll grab you!"

Arc hesitated, then hurled himself into the water. Riverstar plunged after him, grabbing Arc's scruff as he sank beneath the glimmering blue surface. He hauled him up and, keeping Arc's head above water, began to swim.

Drizzle had already climbed out by the time they reached the other side. She dragged Arc out as Riverstar pushed up from behind. "There's no way out!" she yowled.

Arc found his paws and crouched, coughing, on the edge of the pool.

"Up there!" Riverstar heaved himself from the water and nodded toward a slope of jagged steps. It

was a short jump from the pool, and Drizzle made the leap easily. Arc followed, yelping with surprise as he landed. Riverstar stiffened as he saw his friends swept upward. The steps were *moving*! He leaped after them, wobbling as he landed and ran up the steps past them. His drenched pelt clung to his body as he watched the swarm of Twolegs shrink below them.

The jagged steps lifted them higher. They were nearly at the top. His breath caught as he saw the steps flatten and disappear into a gap in the floor, sucked between teeth that looked as though they would crush them. “Watch out!” He leaped the gap, skidding over the shiny floor beyond.

Drizzle and Arc made the leap just in time.

“Where now?” Arc looked around frantically.

There were fewer Twolegs here but still enough to make it dangerous. Riverstar saw an opening to a small, square cave. Hope flared in his chest. It was empty. They could catch their breath there and decide what to do. He raced toward it. “This way!” He darted inside.

Arc and Drizzle ran after him, scrambling to a halt as he turned and peered out through the opening. Had

the Twolegs noticed? None of them were looking. Riverstar felt a glimmer of relief. Then the cave made a clunking noise. Riverstar jerked backward as the opening began to slide shut.

“It’s a trap!” Drizzle’s mew was sharp with terror.

Arc raced for the fast-closing gap, but it shut before he reached it.

“They caught us!” Drizzle wailed as Arc reached up and pawed at the smooth wall.

Suddenly the ground seemed to drop beneath them. Riverstar’s heart shot into his mouth as the cave began to fall. Terror shrilled through his pelt. They would crash into the ground at any moment. He braced himself, pressing his belly to the floor. The cave stopped falling. It fell still with a smoothness that amazed him—as though he’d been scooped from the sky by a gentle paw—and the wall opened again.

“Run!” Riverstar burst out, back into the swarm of Twolegs. His heart soared. He could see daylight beyond a clear wall. “Keep going!” He raced toward it. He had no idea how they’d get through, but surely there must be a hole, or a way to climb over. As they neared, dodging a fresh flock of Twolegs, he realized

the wall stretched to the roof. He scanned it for gaps. There were none. He kept running, desperation hollowing his belly. Perhaps they could claw their way out. There must be a way!

Suddenly, as though StarClan had decided to save them at last, a square in the clear wall slid open. Gratitude swamped Riverstar as he smelled fresh air and saw the stone meadow outside.

Riverstar pelted through the opening, out into sunshine, Arc and Drizzle at his heels. "Don't stop!" he called, haring past Twolegs loitering outside, past the rows of sleeping monsters, heading for the empty stretch of grass at the edge of the meadow. He hardly breathed until he reached it, then pulled up, his flanks heaving, and spun to check on Drizzle and Arc.

He scanned Drizzle's pelt for injuries as she skidded to a halt beside him. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she puffed.

"I'm okay." Arc dropped into a crouch.

Riverstar let his fur smooth. His paws burned from racing across the stone. Relief pulsed through him. They were free.

He sat down. "I'm never going near Twoleg waste

again. It's too—" He stiffened as he saw Drizzle's nose twitch. *What now?* "We're not going back," he growled. "No matter how good it smells."

"We don't have to go back." She was padding toward a heap of lumps lying on the grass close by. She sniffed them and looked at him. "We can eat this."

Riverstar narrowed his eyes and padded warily toward them.

Drizzle's tail was quivering excitedly. "It smells delicious," she mewed.

Arc followed and sniffed them. "She's right."

Riverstar wasn't convinced. The lumps didn't smell like fish, or land prey. He scowled. "We should hunt for real food."

Arc looked at him. "Where?"

"We should keep going until we find our way back to the river."

"But I'm hungry." Drizzle looked at him with large, round eyes. She was bedraggled, still wet from the pool. "Please."

"You ate Twoleg food when you lived in the park," Arc reminded Riverstar.

Riverstar sniffed. "That was moons ago."

“It was good enough for you then and it’s good enough for you now,” Arc whisked his tail. “This is lying right at our paws. Only a mouse-brain would walk away.”

Riverstar’s shoulders sagged. Arc was right. Besides, he was hungry too. This was better than starving. “Okay,” he grunted. “I guess we’re a long way from home. We have to do the best we can.”

Drizzle began to purr and gulped down a lump. She blinked at him. “It tastes wonderful!”

Arc was already eating.

Riverstar took a bite, surprised how tasty it was. The flavor sparked a memory that warmed him. He’d eaten lumps like this as a kit. He stopped chewing. *With Flutter.* The food suddenly seemed to turn to mud in his mouth. He was heading home, after all these moons, but Flutter wouldn’t be there. He forced himself to swallow. He must stay strong.

Taking another bite, he gazed across the rows of monsters quietly dozing in the meadow. He was going to get Arc and Drizzle safely through this journey. But how? The sun was sinking toward the horizon. It was nearly dusk, they were days away from the island, and

the park was still nowhere in sight.



Chapter 23



"We haven't seen the river in two days." Riverstar tried not to betray the anxiety that had been slowly coiling like a snake around his heart. He blinked at Arc as they paused at the top of another rise. The Thunderpath still stretched endlessly ahead, dipping and rising, hemmed in by pine forest. The river could be half a day's trek away, or half a moon. It had been like this since they'd left the monsters sleeping around the enclosed Twoleg camp. "Are you sure we're heading the right way?"

"We've been following the sunset," Arc told him. "Like the river. We'll meet it soon."

How could he be so calm? "What if we've gone too far?" Riverstar worried. "We've been traveling for days. We should be there by now. You said your new home was only a short way beyond the park."

"Once we reach the river again, I'll be able to find our camp," Arc told him.

Drizzle seemed equally unconcerned. Her faith in Arc hadn't wavered. She sniffed the roots of a bush.

“It smells like there are rabbits nearby. Let’s stop and hunt.”

Riverstar flicked his tail. It was past sunhigh, but he was too anxious to be hungry. “We ate at sunrise.”

“One stale mouse that was left over from last night,” Drizzle mewed. “And we had to share it.”

The strip of grass that had lined the Thunderpath for the past day had made for good hunting, with rabbits straying from the pines and mice and voles living among the roots of the hazel and gorse crowding the edge of the forest. It had given them cover too, and they’d been able to track the Thunderpath unnoticed by the monsters prowling along it. But, as far as Riverstar could tell, it wasn’t taking them anywhere nearer the river.

“Let’s keep going,” he mewed.

Arc narrowed his eyes. He was squinting into the distance.

Riverstar’s heart quickened. “Can you see the river?”

“No.” Arc frowned. “But it looks like there’s a cliff ahead.”

“A cliff?” Riverstar followed his gaze. In the

distance he could see a wall of rock cutting across the horizon. Had the Thunderpath led them to a dead end?

“The Thunderpath must go over it,” Arc mewed.

Irritation welled in Riverstar’s chest. “Stop guessing!” he snapped. “You’ve no idea where we’re going or whether this path even leads to the river.” His nerves felt stretched to the limit. The farther away the river seemed, the more unsettled he felt, as though his connection with it might snap entirely if he took another step.

He closed his eyes and forced his breathing to slow. Arc and Drizzle had been encouraging him to meditate each morning before they set out. But without the river’s soothing chatter, meditation also seemed to open an emptiness in his heart that frightened him. The river had been his companion and comfort for so long, he felt lost without it.

A loud rumble sounded from the Thunderpath, and he flinched as a monster pounded by. The monsters here passed less frequently, but they were bigger. The forest would shake as they roared past. Some of them seemed to graze the sky, with paws so massive they could crush a young tree without noticing. He opened

his eyes as the wind from this one blasted him, tugging his fur and making his eyes sting.

Arc was gazing at him steadily. "The river will be waiting for us," he mewed.

Drizzle whisked her tail. "It's probably just over the next rise."

"You've been saying that for two days." Riverstar blinked at her, feeling guilty again as she gazed back at him, eyes bright. He was meant to be the leader, and yet she was the one encouraging him. He lifted his tail. He was going to be more positive. "Let's keep going," he mewed, "If it's not over the next rise, it'll be the rise after that." So what if there was a cliff up ahead and forest as far as the eye could see. The river would be waiting for him, guiding him back. At least he hoped it would.

As they neared the cliff, he grew more doubtful. The Thunderpath didn't climb over it or wind around it. Instead it disappeared into a tunnel. His heart sank.

They stopped a tree-length away from the entrance, hanging back as a monster howled past and disappeared inside.

"I am not going in there," Riverstar mewed firmly.

“It could lead anywhere.”

Even Drizzle was looking daunted. “Do you think it’s the entrance to the monster’s burrow?” she asked, eyes wide. “What if it leads to a monster nest?”

Arc was looking up, past the neat square opening of the tunnel, to the cliff stretching above it. “We could climb over,” he mewed.

“How?” The rock was too steep, and Riverstar couldn’t see enough ledges to make the climb.

“We could pull each other up.” Arc padded closer and looked up at a narrow ledge a fox-length above his head. He squatted, bunching his muscles, and jumped, landing on it delicately, then pressed himself back against the stone and looked up to the next ledge. “I think we can do it,” he called down.

Riverstar’s paws pricked nervously. The cliff reached high above the tunnel. “What if there’s nothing at the top?”

“Of course there’ll be something at the top,” Arc called.

“Another cliff?” Riverstar mewed.

“If there is, we’ll keep climbing.”

The cliff stretched into forest on both sides.

Finding a way around it could take a whole day. He glanced at Drizzle. "Do you think you can climb up?"

Her eyes glittered nervously, but she lifted her chin. "Yes."

"I'll make sure you don't fall," he promised, pressing back his own fear.

He watched her jump. She didn't quite make it to Arc's ledge but reached high enough to hook her claws onto the stone. Arc grabbed her scruff between his teeth and hauled her up. As he let go, she shook out her pelt. "Thanks," she mewed.

Riverstar heard a tremble in her mew, but she blinked down at him. "If we keep helping each other, we'll be okay," she told him.

"Okay," he mewed. "But let's take it slowly." He leaped up beside her, his pelt prickling with alarm as he fought to find his footing on the narrow ledge.

Arc was already scanning the next one. It looked too far to jump, but there was a small jutting rock a short distance below it. Riverstar could see a route. He slid past Arc and jumped. Stone brushed his belly fur as he stretched up his forepaws and grabbed the jutting rock. Giving it a sharp tug, he hooked his hind claws

into the rock below and propelled himself upward, landing nimbly on the ledge above. His heart swelled with satisfaction and he leaned over the edge.

Drizzle had hooked her claws into a crack in the stone, her belly pressed against the cliff. Riverstar held his breath as she pulled herself up like a squirrel climbing a tree trunk, her claws strong and sharp enough to find hold after hold until Riverstar could grab her scruff and tug her the last muzzle-length onto the ledge.

Her eyes shone as she caught her breath. Below them, stones cracked as they fell, and Riverstar peered over the edge, his heart lurching as Arc leaped. He jerked back, making room as Arc grabbed the jutting stone and boosted himself up, landing beside them.

Riverstar looked up and scanned the next stretch of rock. There was no ledge, but a series of cracks in the stone would let them haul themselves up to the top of the tunnel, where a wide ledge bridged the opening. They could rest there and catch their breath. He looked at Drizzle. "Ready?"

She nodded.

"Ready?" he asked Arc.

“Yes.” Arc glanced up. “I’ll go first this time.” He blinked at Drizzle. “I’ll let my tail dangle,” he told her. “Grab it if you need to. Some of the cracks might be too far apart for you to reach.” He looked at Riverstar. “You climb behind Drizzle in case she needs help.”

Riverstar dipped his head. His heart was thumping. Was this too risky? If he were alone, it wouldn’t be so bad. He could lose a life, but Drizzle and Arc would only have one chance. A fall could kill them.

Arc must have seen worry cloud his gaze. “We can do this if we focus,” he mewed. He turned and reached up to the first crack, hooking his claws into it and heaving himself up. He dug his hind claws into a lower crack and pushed. Little by little, he worked his way upward.

Riverstar’s pads pricked nervously. He swallowed back fear as Drizzle began to follow Arc’s route, slowly pulling herself, one paw at a time, after him. Riverstar hooked his claws into the cracks beneath them, heaving himself from paw hold to paw hold until his claws ached with the strain. The ledge at the top of the tunnel was still half a tree-length above him. Arc was close, his tail dangling toward Drizzle, but there

was still a long stretch of rock between the black tom and safety.

“Oof!” Drizzle grunted as one her hind paws lost its grip. It shot down, scraping the stone and showering grit over Riverstar. She clung on, freezing for a moment before hooking her hind claws in again. “Sorry,” she called down.

“That’s okay.” Riverstar blinked the grit from his eyes. “Go as slowly as you need.” He paused, watching as she drew herself very slowly and carefully after Arc. Then he reached for the next clawhold and pulled himself up another half tail-length behind her.

Arc had found a long split in the rock and had curled his claws into it. His tail and hind paws dangling, he worked his way along it, sliding his claws, one paw then another, until his hind paws were close to a jagged piece of stone sticking from the rock. He began to sway back and forth, slowly building momentum until his hind paws swung high enough to reach the jagged stone. As they did, he curled his hind claws around it, then pushed up and reached for a fresh clawhold with his forepaws. Riverstar’s heart missed a beat as Arc hooked a tiny gap in the rock and clung on, frozen for a

moment, clearly catching his breath.

Riverstar looked up at Drizzle. She was smaller than they were. Could she make such a tricky move? He hauled himself up, until her hind claws were next to his muzzle, then held on while she reached for the long split.

Arc had found another series of paw holds and, pulling himself from one to the other, was closing in on the top of the tunnel. With a loud grunt, he pushed off from the last paw hold and leaped, landing heavily on the ledge.

Drizzle swung from the split, gasping as she edged her way along it.

Riverstar could do nothing but watch as she moved farther and farther out of reach. She began to swing her hindquarters as Arc had done, back and forth, building height until she caught the jagged rock with her hind claws and pushed up, grabbing the next paw hold.

Riverstar could see her flanks heaving. He had to wait for her to move on before he could follow, and his heart quickened with fear as she seemed to freeze. *She must be exhausted.* He could see her trembling,

and as she grabbed for the next crack in the stone, she missed. Her paw slipped down, and her pelt spiked as her hind paws lost their grip,

“Drizzle!” Terror arced like lightning through Riverstar’s chest.

She was dangling by a single paw.

He grabbed for the split in the rock and hauled himself along, moving fast, swinging his hind paws so that they hooked the jagged stone the moment he reached it. He clung on with three paws and reached for Drizzle, catching her hind paw and pushing her upward. She gasped and, reaching up, slammed her loose forepaw against the stone and curled her claws into a gap. Steadying herself, she dug her hind claws into cracks beneath her and clung on, her tail bushed as it hung down behind her.

Riverstar’s claws screamed with pain. He shifted position, finding firmer paw holds, and swallowed back panic. “You can do this, Drizzle.”

“Yes.” Her mew was barely a whisper, but she began to climb again, reaching for the paw holds Arc had found. Slowly, slowly, she hauled herself toward the ledge.

Arc reached out as she neared and hooked his claws into her pelt, steadying her as she pulled herself up the final stretch of rock. Relief swamped Riverstar as she climbed into the ledge and collapsed, panting, onto her belly.

Arc was staring at Riverstar now, his gaze urging him on. Riverstar focused on the next crack in the rock, reached for it, and pulled himself upward. The next paw holds were deep and easy to grab. Carefully, one paw after another, he eased himself toward the ledge, pushing up with his hind paws and scrabbling onto the smooth wide stone.

He looked up. The cliff stretched higher. Dazzled by the brightness of the sky, he could barely see the top. Had they made a mistake climbing up here? It would be just as dangerous now to climb down as it was to climb up. But, as he slitted his eyes against the glaring daylight, he saw that the cliff was not as sheer. A slight slope would make it easier to push up, and as his eyes adjusted, he could make out long clefts in the stone. They stretched all the way to the top. One opened wider than the others, as though the cliff had split open, and Riverstar could see that they would be

able to wedge themselves into it and wriggle up like worms from the earth.

“Can you see that?” He pointed toward the split with a jerk of his muzzle.

Arc and Drizzle followed his gaze, their ears pricking as they saw it.

The cleft wasn't wide enough here where it met the ledge, but if they kept climbing for another tree-length, they'd be able to squeeze inside.

He waited for them to get their breath, then nodded them up. Arc went first, pulling himself higher, paw after paw, Drizzle close enough to catch hold of his tail if she lost her grip and Riverstar right behind her, keeping three paws clinging on at a time, making sure he always had one free to grab Drizzle if she fell.

With a rush of hope, he saw Arc reach the wide part of the cleft and squeeze inside. The black tom began to push himself up, safely pressed between the rock walls. Drizzle wriggled after him and began to climb as Riverstar reached the opening and slithered in. It was cold inside, swathed in shadow, but he didn't care. He was relieved to feel hard stone against his back. Pushing up with his hind legs, he worked his way

upward as Arc climbed out above him, then Drizzle. Then, at last, as though surfacing from the river, Riverstar poked his head above the stone.

A small plateau stretched around them. Arc was already padding across it.

Drizzle hurried to Arc's side. "Look!"

Riverstar heaved himself out. The plateau sloped smoothly down to a lush hillside that swept on into a wide, green valley. A Twolegplace sprawled through it, like spilled trash, but still Riverstar's heart swelled with joy. A purr rumbled in his throat. He could see his old friend, snaking its way along the valley bottom. At last they'd found it. The river.

"The park used to be over there." Arc nodded to a group of tightly packed Twoleg dens at the edge of the Twoleg sprawl. They looked identical, webbed with Thunderpaths.

Riverstar's heart pricked ruefully. The green lawns of the park were gone, He shook out his pelt. Why was he sad? He had a new home now. "Where's your camp?" he asked Arc.

"In the forest." Arc's gaze had darkened. He nodded upstream, to where the Twolegplace ended in a

swath of woodland. "I just hope it's still there."

They trekked through the afternoon, descending into the valley, and when the sun set, they hunted in a small copse, where they then slept, their bellies full, among the roots of an oak.

The next morning, they skirted the Twolegplace and reached the woodland beyond. Ash and sycamore competed with oak, and grass sprouted thick and green wherever sunlight broke through the canopy.

Arc led the way, following a trail that rose steeply upward. He seemed to know it well. Riverstar followed with Drizzle, scanning the forest for signs of Slash.

"He's probably in camp," Arc mewed as Riverstar stopped to taste the air. "He and his rogues don't hunt. They make us bring them prey while they lie around giving orders." His pelt ruffled angrily. He ducked past a dogwood and leaped up a rise onto another track. "This will take us there."

Riverstar scrambled after him.

"What are we going to do when we get there?" Drizzle kept her voice low.

"Let's see what's left first," Arc told her. "I want

to know what's been going on before we decide what to do next."

"So we keep out of sight?" Riverstar asked.

"For now." Signaling with a flick of his tail for them to be quiet, Arc led them up an even steeper slope. They climbed higher and higher until the woodland leveled out. As the trees opened ahead of them, they ducked behind a fallen tree.

Riverstar looked out into a wide clearing bathed in sunshine. Dens were woven into the bushes at the edges. They looked tattered, their walls torn and neglected. Prey carcasses littered the clearing, and bones lay in heaps at the edge.

Is this the park cats' camp? Riverstar narrowed his eyes. At the far side of the camp, the land seemed to drop away, and a stretch of rock jutted out into thin air. "Is that the edge of a cliff?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes." Arc was scanning the camp.

"Above the river?"

"It flows under the bluff," Arc told him. "We thought it would be safer to build a camp with only one way in."

Riverstar's pelt prickled nervously. "And only one

way out.”

“We didn’t expect to be trapped here.” Arc’s mew was grim. He was staring at something.

Riverstar followed his gaze. His pelt lifted along his spine. Drizzle growled beside him.

Slash was lying in the sunshine at the edge of the clearing. The mangy rogue was fatter and had a new scar above his eye. But his eyes still gleamed with the same vicious menace.

A brown-and-white tom crossed the clearing. *Dart!* Riverstar wanted to call out to his old friend. His heart ached. Dart was scrawny now, his pelt dull, his eyes hollow. He picked a plump mouse from a heap, carried it to a broad-shouldered rogue, then dropped it warily at his paws. The rogue lashed out, nicking Dart’s ear before he could dodge clear.

Dart didn’t fight back, only winced and crept to where a matted ginger she-cat sat hunched in a shadowy corner of the clearing. *Moth?* Riverstar could hardly believe his eyes. He’d hunted beside the gentle she-cat as a kit. She’d been cheerful and sparkled with energy. Now she was crouching like frightened prey, her eyes on the rogues who were

lounging around the clearing. Then he saw Stoat—a parkmate who'd once taught him where to find the best Twoleg scraps. He was crouching beside Squirrel, the ginger she-cat Riverstar had shared a nest with as a kit. These were campmates he'd barely thought about in moons, and now they were only paw steps away, wretched and frightened as Slash gulped down their prey.

"We have to save them!" He blinked at Arc.

Arc glanced toward the rogues. "There are too many of them," he mewed hopelessly.

Drizzle flexed her claws. "*Ember's* still with them." She glared at the orange rogue. "And Bee! And Snake! And Beetle! And *Splinter*." She sounded surprised. "Why do they stay with a such a vicious cat?"

"He probably makes them feel good about themselves," Arc grunted.

Riverstar's heart was pounding. There were other rogues here besides the remnants of Slash's forest gang. More than he'd expected. They looked stronger and fiercer than any rogues he'd seen before. Back home, the Clans had outsmarted Slash and chased him

off their land. But the Clans weren't here now. Only Drizzle and Arc. He blinked at Arc, trying to hide his fear. "We need to come up with a plan."



Chapter 24



Cloud swathed the dark night sky. It must be moonhigh by now, but there was still no sign of Stoat and Squirrel. Had they managed to slip away? Riverstar looked up toward the park cats' camp. He could see clearly now the bluff jutting out at the top and the cliff, hollow beneath, where the river had worn away the rock.

He had been waiting since dusk on the grassy riverbank with Drizzle and Arc. They'd fished—or at least he and Drizzle had fished while Arc splashed in the shallows, grabbing for anything the river swept past—and eaten the trout and loaches and the solitary minnow Arc had hooked from the water.

Riverstar had relished swimming after being away from the river for so long. It ran deep here at the edge of the park cats' woodland, fast around the bend before slowing and chattering over wide stretches of pebble further downstream. He'd dived in nervously at first, wondering if the river was still angry with him for leaving his Clan. But it seemed to have forgiven him,

because it had steered him toward a channel of deep water where the fish had swum so thickly he didn't need moonlight. He could feel them gliding around him, and it had been easy to catch one and carry it to the bank. Perhaps his old friend had realized that he'd only traveled upstream to help his former campmates, and that his heart still lay back home on the island.

"Arc?"

Riverstar turned as the sedge rustled. Drizzle jerked her muzzle toward the mew as a small black she-cat padded out. Riverstar stiffened. He didn't recognize her. Had the rogues discovered their plan? He relaxed as Stoat followed her out, his black-and-white pelt glowing in the darkness. Squirrel padded after him, scanning the riverbank warily. Her eyes widened as she saw Riverstar, but Stoat hurried to greet him first.

"Ripple!" He blinked happily. "*You came!*"

"We thought you were gone for good," Squirrel mewed.

"I'm not staying," Riverstar told them. "I just came back to help. I have a new home with cats farther downstream."

“Are you happy there?” Squirrel searched his gaze.

“Yes,” he mewed. “But I’ve missed my parkmates.”

Arc nosed past him, clearly impatient. “I was worried you wouldn’t be able to slip away,” he told Squirrel.

“We told Slash we were hunting.” The black she-cat hung back, eying Riverstar suspiciously.

Squirrel rubbed her muzzle happily along Arc’s jaw. “I’m relieved to see you again. We were starting to think you were never coming home,” she mewed. “Was it a long journey? Were you okay?”

“Long enough,” Arc told her. “I’ll tell you about it another time.” He looked at her anxiously. “What did Slash say when he found out I’d left?”

The black she-cat’s green eyes flashed in the moonlight. “What do you *think* he said?”

Stoat nudged her. “Take it easy, Finch. Arc risked his life to bring help.”

Arc’s pelt was rippling. “Did Slash hurt some cat?”

“Of *course* he hurt some cat,” Finch snapped. “He told us he would if any of us ran away.”

Arc tensed. "Who was it?"

"Dart." Squirrel's eyes shimmered.

Finch lashed her tail. "He *was* going to hurt Moth, but Dart stood up to him."

"Is Dart okay?" Arc's eyes were wide with alarm.

"He is now." Stoat moved closer to Squirrel.

"He's just got a few more scars, that's all," Finch mewed sourly. "I came to the Park to get away from bullies and look where we are."

Squirrel flashed her a look. "We *knew* it might happen," she snapped. "We decided it was a risk we were willing to take."

"Where is Dart now?" Arc mewed.

"In camp," Squirrel told him. "He wanted to come, but we didn't want him to get into any more trouble."

Riverstar's belly fluttered nervously. Cats had already suffered to bring him here. He hoped he could justify the sacrifices they'd made.

"We can't stay long," Stoat told Arc. "Slash told us to be quick."

"We need to take prey back." Finch looked at Riverstar. There was a challenge in her eyes. "We're taking a big risk just coming here."

Riverstar's ears twitched. This she-cat was as feisty as a fox. "Arc told me about the trouble you've been having with Slash," he mewed.

Finch narrowed her eyes. "Apparently you *know* him." It sounded like an accusation.

"He caused trouble for the Clans back home," Riverstar explained.

"They chased him off," Arc told them. "I was hoping Ripple could show us how they did it."

Riverstar glanced at his former mentor. "I'm Riverstar now." He wasn't a park cat anymore; he was a Clan leader. He didn't mind Arc using his old name, but he wanted these cats—Finch in particular—to think of him as Riverstar.

"*Riverstar*?" Squirrel blinked at him in surprise. "Why?"

"It's my Clan name," he mewed.

"He's a leader." Drizzle puffed out her chest. "All Clan leaders have *star* in their name. To show they've been given nine lives."

The park cats exchanged glances,

Stoat looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"He can die nine times before he joins StarClan,"

Drizzle explained.

Finch sniffed. She looked unconvinced.

Arc's tail was twitching impatiently. "We're not here to talk about StarClan. All that matters now is that Riverstar has history with Slash. He can help us get rid of him."

Riverstar's shifted his paws uneasily. He wasn't sure it was true. "I can try," he mewed.

"*Try?*" Stoat looked worried.

"Arc didn't risk his life so you could *try*," Finch growled. "We want Slash gone."

"I'll do what I can," Riverstar promised.

Arc was leaning forward anxiously. "Are the elders safe?"

Squirrel nodded. "The rogues haven't found where we hid them," she mewed. "We take them food when we can, but we have to give so much of our catch to Slash and his rogues, it's hard to spare enough. Midge has been hunting when she can, but her balance isn't good so she can only catch ground prey."

"Owl's a good hunter, though," Arc mewed hopefully.

"His eyesight has been getting worse and worse,"

Squirrel mewed. “And Rust isn’t as fast on his paws as he used to be.”

Arc looked at Riverstar. “We have to get rid of Slash as soon as we can.”

“How many rogues does he have?” Riverstar asked Squirrel.

“Enough to beat us if it comes to a fight,” Squirrel told him. “And they’re used to battle, by the look of them.” She glanced at Stoat and Finch. “We’ve never had to fight before.”

Finch flexed her claws. “We’re ready to learn, though.”

“We can teach you.” Drizzle swished her tail.

“Can you teach us to *win*?” Finch looked at her eagerly.

“That might take time.” Riverstar warned. “But we can show you how to defend yourselves.”

“That’s not enough,” Stoat mewed.

Anxiety was jabbing beneath Riverstar’s pelt. There were more rogues in the park cats’ camp than he’d expected. And he’d been a park cat himself—he knew that fighting wasn’t in their nature. They were used to peace. But Arc had clearly convinced them he

could help, and he didn't want to let his former mentor down, or his parkmates. "We need to get some of the rogues on our side," he mewed.

Finch's tail twitched. "What do you expect us to do? Walk up to them and invite them to join us? They'll shred us."

"Rogues are only loyal to themselves," Riverstar mewed. "Most of the cats Slash has recruited in the past have turned on him. His campmates back in the forest left him and joined the Clans." He nodded to Drizzle.

She lifted her chin. "My parents once lived in Slash's camp," she mewed.

Finch's green eyes sharpened.

"They only joined him because they were hungry," she explained. "But they were never really loyal to him. I was a kit, but even I could see how much of a bully he was and how frightened all our campmates were of him."

"These rogues don't follow him because they're scared of him," Stoat mewed. "They enjoy being mean, and they respect him because he's prepared to do things ordinary cats won't."

“Some of them must realize that they’ve got a fox by the tail,” Riverstar reasoned. “They may have joined him because they wanted to, but they’re probably afraid to leave him because they know how cruel he is. If we offer to protect them, they might be relieved to have a chance to escape.”

Finch looked doubtful. “Do you really think they’ll believe we can protect them after they’ve spent the last two moons pushing us around?”

Riverstar fluffed out his fur. “They’ll believe it when they see I’m with you.” He had to persuade these cats they could win even if he wasn’t sure himself. Hope was their best weapon. Cats were only as strong as they believed they could be. If he could convince them they could beat Slash, they might have a chance.

He glanced at Finch. “It might work.”

Finch narrowed her eyes. “It has to,” she mewed. “Otherwise, we’re crow-food.”

In the two days that followed, Riverstar taught the park cats everything he knew about fighting. It wasn’t easy. They could only slip away in twos or threes, pretending they were hunting, and they never had long

to practice the battle moves he showed them. But he was determined they should at least learn to defend themselves. Privately, he wanted to prove to his old parkmates how far he'd come since he left the park—that there was a reason he hadn't come home.

He hadn't realized how much Drizzle had learned from Dew and was more pleased that she'd come with them. She was a good teacher, with a gentle way of showing the park cats if they were doing something wrong without embarrassing them or making them self-conscious. Arc was learning too and, with more time than his parkmates to practice, had become a formidable fighter. Finch had been the greatest surprise—not for her fighting skills; Riverstar had been sure from the moment he'd met her that she'd make a fierce fighter—but because, as she'd grown more confident around him and Drizzle, she'd lost her sharpness and shown herself to be a warm and generous campmate.

Riverstar had been delighted to reunite with Dart, Moth, and Magda. Hopper and Scooby were new to the group, but Riverstar liked them, and they were strong and capable cats. Scooby had managed to

persuade Swallow to help them. Magda had convinced Bee and Splinter to fight with the park cats when they faced down Slash.

And so, on the third morning, as Riverstar hid outside the park cats' camp with Arc and Drizzle, he felt a glimmer of confidence. They might actually be able to do this—easily—if everything went according to plan.

The sun had barely risen, but it was already warm, and the woods were fragrant with the scent of late honeysuckle.

Riverstar nodded to Drizzle. "Ready?"

She unsheathed her claws. "Ready."

He looked at Arc.

The black tom dipped his head. "Let's do this."

Riverstar stood up and headed into the park cats' camp.

A huge, scarred ginger tom and a wiry tortoiseshell were snoring loudly inside the camp entrance. They'd clearly been ordered to guard it. Riverstar padded past them, pleased to see how undisciplined the rogues were, and stopped at the edge of the clearing.

The park cats were waiting. Finch got to her paws.

Stoat and Squirrel got up too. Finch had turned out to be a natural fighter and, now that she was sure of the fight, as determined as any warrior. Around the clearing, the other park cats stood up, one by one. Moth looked at him hopefully. Magda lifted her tail. Hopper and Scooby fidgeted beside Dart. Riverstar looked around at them. *You can do this.*

Most of the rogues were nowhere to be seen. Riverstar padded back to the sleeping guards and poked the tortoiseshell with his paw.

She jerked up her head and blinked at Riverstar in surprise. "Snail! Wake up!"

The huge ginger tom opened his eyes. "Intruders!"

Around the clearing, bushes rustled. Riverstar braced himself as rogues dashed from the tattered dens and glared at him.

Ember's eyes flashed. "How did you get here?"

Beetle and Snake exchanged glances. They clearly remembered Riverstar.

He blinked at them slowly, then scanned the clearing. Where were Bee, Swallow, and Splinter, the rogues who'd promised to fight with the park cats? Doubt wormed in his belly as four more rogues padded

into the clearing. Had they fled? He felt a rush of relief as Bee ducked out from a hazel bush. Splinter and Swallow followed. The fight would be even now.

“Who are you?” Snail snarled at Riverstar.

Ember’s eyes had narrowed to slits. “He’s one of those river cats I told you about.” He glared at Riverstar. “River Dribble, wasn’t it?”

Riverstar stared back at him. “I’m Riverstar, leader of RiverClan.”

Snake snorted. “Fox-brained name for a fox-brained cat.”

“You and your friends were a bunch of fish-eating loners,” Beetle hissed.

“We’re a Clan now,” Riverstar growled.

The rogues purred with amusement.

“What’s going on!” Slash’s snarl silenced them. The mangy rogue padded out from behind a blackthorn bush, his mouth twisted into a snarl. His eyes were still clouded with sleep.

“Did we wake you?” Riverstar mewed.

“Of course you woke me,” Slash snapped. “It’s dawn! What are you doing here?”

Arc padded forward, his hackles high. “We’ve

come to clear the vermin from our camp!” He looked at Riverstar.

Riverstar unsheathed his claws.

As fast as a hawk, Arc leaped at Slash, claws flashing in the early morning light.

The battle had begun.

Finch turned on the rogue beside her, hooking his massive forepaws from under him as Riverstar had taught her. Hopper and Scooby reared and began batting Beetle and Ember back with well-aimed blows. Dart leaped for the broad-shouldered rogue he’d given prey to a few days earlier. Drizzle dived at Snake, while Squirrel flew at a wiry gray tabby.

Riverstar flattened his ears against his head and flung a blow at Snail. It ripped fur from the rogue’s cheek and sent him staggering away as the camp exploded into a seething mass of pelts and claws.

Snail’s tortoiseshell campmate lunged at Riverstar. He ducked as her paw arced over his head and grabbed her hind paws. Hooking them, he tugged, then froze as pain sliced through his tail. He glanced backward. Snail had sunk his teeth in and was glaring at him as he clamped down harder. The rogue gave a

vicious tug that yanked Riverstar onto his belly.

Growling with rage, Riverstar flipped over and kicked Snail away. But the tortoiseshell had found her paws and began battering his muzzle. Riverstar rolled away and leaped up. He turned on her and raked his claws across her ear. As she yowled and flinched away, energy pulsed in Riverstar's blood. The screech of battle sent exhilaration surging beneath his pelt. Turning, he hooked his claws into Snail's shoulders and dragged the ginger tom down onto the ground with him, then, gripping him with a snarl, began to rake his spine.

"Riverstar!" Drizzle's cry made him stop. He glanced toward her. She was on her hind paws, knocking back blow after blow from Snake and Ember, but she was looking at Slash. The vicious rogue was beating Arc back across the clearing. "Help him!"

Riverstar shoved the tortoiseshell away and scrambled to his paws. He darted past Moth, who was grappling with a gray-and-white rogue. Hopper crouched at the edge of the clearing, his pelt bloody. Scooby was backing away from the fight, his eyes wide with panic. Squirrel writhed on the ground with a tabby, fighting desperately, but there was blood on her

muzzle and the tabby was blocking every blow. Alarm sparked in Riverstar's chest. How were they losing so badly?

He reached Arc and, pushing him away, took his place in front of Slash. He dodged the blow and knocked Slash sideways with a swipe so powerful that it almost unbalanced him. As Slash reeled away, Riverstar felt claws hook his pelt. A body thumped into him and slammed him to the ground. *Snail*. Riverstar recognized the ginger pelt as the rogue landed on his back. Snail pinned him down, his claws curling like thorns into Riverstar's pelt.

As he tried to struggle free, Riverstar could see Finch still fighting, but two toms had ganged up on her and were driving her back toward the bushes with a flurry of blows. Magda crouched in the middle of the clearing, covering her muzzle with her paws as Beetle loomed over her. Squirrel lay limp on the ground at the edge of the clearing. Dread began to creep through Riverstar's pelt. The park cats were no match for the rogues.

Where were Bee, Splinter, and Swallow? With Snail still pressing him to the ground, he managed to

scan the clearing. The three rogues were hanging back, their eyes glittering with interest. *They're waiting to see who wins!* Rage pulsed in Riverstar's chest. He caught his breath, pushing up against Snail, but Snail pushed back, his claws like fire where they dug deeper into Riverstar's pelt.

He saw a flash of gray-and-white fur. Drizzle had ducked away from Snake and Ember and raced across the clearing. She grabbed Snail and hauled him hard enough away for Riverstar to squirm from beneath him. With a snarl, Riverstar turned and lashed out. His claws raked Snail's eyes, and Snail jerked away, yowling.

"We have to get to Arc!" Riverstar could see Arc dodging blows from Beetle and the tortoiseshell she-cat. "We can fight tail-to-tail."

Drizzle nodded and streaked across the clearing, ducking a swipe from a tabby tom as she barged past him. Riverstar raced after her, a black rogue at his tail and, as they reached Arc, he dived under Beetle, reared up, and shoved him away. He turned, falling in beside Arc. Drizzle pressed her spine to theirs. Together they rose up on their hind legs and began

aiming blows at the rogues coming at them.

“There are too many of them!” Drizzle slashed Ember’s muzzle as he came at her. Arc hit out at the tortoiseshell. Riverstar sent Snake staggering back with a swipe.

The park cats were huddling together now in one corner of the clearing, rogues circling them. Finch lifted her head. Her fur was matted with blood, but her eyes were still defiant.

Tiredness was beginning to drag at Riverstar’s paws. His hind legs ached at the effort of holding him up. He missed a blow, wincing as Ember’s claws caught his ear.

Snail was padding toward the park cats. He eyed them with contempt. “Did you think you were strong enough to beat us?”

Finch spat at him. “Why don’t you just *go*!”

He silenced her with a blow that brought blood welling on her cheek.

Leave her alone! Riverstar willed her campmates to defend her. But he knew it was hopeless. Bee, Splinter, and Swallow were still watching, not lifting a paw. Without them, the park cats were beaten.

“Do you really want to do this?” Slash’s snarl cut through the blood-tainted air. Riverstar jerked his muzzle toward the head of the clearing, his spine still pressing against Drizzle and Arc. Slash was holding an old tom to the ground, his claws curled against his throat.

“Owl!” Finch sat up, her eyes rounding with horror. “Leave my father alone!” she hissed at Slash.

Slash gazed back at her, looking pleased.

The rogues stopped fighting. They turned to their leader, relish glittering in their eyes.

Riverstar slowly lowered his paws. Drizzle and Arc dropped onto all fours as Slash blinked slowly at Riverstar.

“I can kill him if you like.” He jabbed his claws deeper into Owl’s throat.

Riverstar’s pelt bushed with outrage. “Leave him alone!”

Slash glanced over his shoulder. Rust and Midge were trembling behind him. Riverstar’s heart sank. The rogues had found the elders’ hiding place.

“If you don’t leave now,” Slash hissed, “I’ll kill this old fleabag and then his denmates. Slowly. One by

one.”

Riverstar’s paws pulsed with rage, but he could only stare helplessly at Slash.

Owl hissed. “I’m not scared of dying. I’ve lived long enough.”

“No!” Finch started forward, but Snail shoved her back.

Riverstar’s rage swelled like a storm rising up from his belly. It exploded, roaring in his ears, and he leaped for Slash and knocked him away from the old tom with a brutal swipe. Slash stumbled and fell. Owl scrambled to his paws and darted toward his denmates.

Then someone slammed into Riverstar from behind. He staggered forward, turned, and saw the rogues flooding toward him. Beetle raked his muzzle. Ember grabbed his shoulders and shook him. Snake bit down hard on his hind paw. Riverstar lashed out with his forepaws, trying to beat them away, but the rogues were swarming around him like rats. He saw Snail lift a paw, saw it sweep past his belly, a wide arcing blow that he thought for a moment had missed. Then felt the warmth of blood spreading through his fur. *StarClan save me.* His thoughts swam, half in horror, half in

disbelief, as he sank to his belly and felt his life draining into the warm earth beneath him. *This was all a terrible mistake.*



Chapter 25



He opened his eyes, anger sparking through his pelt as he saw once more the sun-drenched meadows of StarClan's hunting grounds. "I have to go back!" Drizzle and Arc were alone.

Gray Wing was gazing at him. "That didn't go as well as you hoped."

Riverstar scrambled to his paws, surprised when he felt no pain from the wound in his belly. He glanced down. It had disappeared. There was no blood on his fur.

Gray Wing watched him. "You won't even have a scar in your next life."

"But—"

Gray Wing cut him off. "But that doesn't mean you should be careless." His mew was stern. "We didn't give you nine lives to waste. You're too reckless. You must treat each life like it's your last."

"We had a *plan*!" Riverstar stared at the StarClan warrior.

"To recruit rogues?" Gray Wing didn't hide his

scorn. “Did you really think they’d give up an easy life to fight for cats they despise?”

“We hoped they—”

“Hope isn’t enough when lives are at stake,” Gray Wing snapped. “Besides, you *know* Slash. You’ve faced him before. He will always sink lower than his enemy. It’s how he wins so often. He’s prepared to do what other cats would not.”

Guilt brought heat to Riverstar’s pelt. “I underestimated him.”

“And you overestimated your friends.” Gray Wing leaned forward, his eyes earnest. “Being good is not enough. You have to be better.”

“How?” Riverstar pictured the park cats crouching terrified at the edge of the clearing.

Gray Wing tipped his head. “What’s your greatest strength?” he asked.

Riverstar frowned. He felt time rushing past. He had to get back. “I don’t know!”

“You’re an outsider,” Gray Wing told him. “You always were. You were an outsider when you first met us, and you’re an outsider with your parkmates. You have lived as an outsider ever since you left the park.”

Riverstar flexed his claws. How was this helping? “My Clanmates don’t see me as an outsider,” he mewed defensively.

“Your Clanmates aren’t here,” Gray Wing told him. “Drizzle is only one cat. She might know you, but to the others you’re a stranger. Even Slash barely knows you. And Arc doesn’t understand the cat you’ve become.”

“Are you saying that’s my strength? Being the odd cat out?”

“Go back,” Gray Wing mewed. “Drizzle needs you. And don’t waste any more lives.”

As Gray Wing swished his tail, darkness swept Riverstar. He felt a surge of energy burst in his chest and opened his eyes. He was back in the park cats’ camp, lying in the middle of the clearing where he’d fallen. The park cats were still huddling in the corner. Owl had retreated with Rust and Midge to the edge of the bluff. Drizzle stood beside Arc, glaring at the rogues as they advanced on them, eyes bright with malice.

“The fish-breathed *water rat* is dead.” Slash’s tail flicked ominously behind him. “Now finish the other

two off.”

“I *was* dead.” Riverstar got to his paws. “I’m not anymore.”

Slash’s gaze jerked toward him. It glittered with shock. The other rogues stared at him. Bee’s pelt bristled.

Ember flattened his ears in alarm. “You can’t be alive.”

“Snail killed you.” Beetle backed away, eyes glittering with disbelief.

The park cats stared at Riverstar, bewildered.

Only Drizzle seemed unsurprised. “What took you so long?” She flicked her tail toward the rogues. “We need to get out of here.”

“No we don’t.” Seeing the shock on the faces around him, Riverstar understood what Gray Wing had been trying to tell him. *You’re an outsider. You always were.* He looked at Slash. “It’s the rogues who need to leave.”

He bushed out his long fur, aware that he must seem huge, even to Snail. Everyone would be able to see that his wounds had disappeared. Eyes slitted, he began to pad slowly toward Slash.

The mangy tom flinched, then lifted his chin. He was going to hold his ground. “You’re outnumbered,” he growled.

“So?” Riverstar mewed.

“We’ll kill you.” Was that uncertainty creeping into Slash’s eyes?

“You already did.” Riverstar kept padding toward him. “It didn’t seem to stop me.”

Slash took a step backward. “Kill him!” he screeched to his rogues.

They didn’t move.

“*Kill him!*” Slash screeched again.

Riverstar paused and swung his gaze toward them. “Who wants to try first?” He widened his eyes, daring them.

Beetle let out a low moan. “He’s not natural.”

“He’s not a *cat*,” Splinter wailed.

“He was dead,” Beetle mewed. “He was definitely dead.”

“I was. But I’m not dead now.” Riverstar lashed his tail. He made a lunge at them, stopping short. But they scattered. Beetle hared for the camp entrance. Bee raced after him.

“Come back!” Slash hissed after them.

Ember looked at the rogue leader. “*You* fight him.” He watched as Slash didn’t move. “Are you scared?”

“Of course not!” Slash hissed. But he still didn’t attack Riverstar.

“If you’re not *scared* of him,” Ember snarled, “then you clearly don’t need us, do you?” He signaled to Splinter and Snake, and they followed him out of the camp.

“Get back here!” Slash was trembling with rage. But the rogues ignored him.

The park cats were beginning to get to their paws. Finch crossed the clearing and butted Snail with her shoulder. “Why don’t you go with them?” she snarled.

He turned on her, hissing.

Riverstar looked at him. “Leave her alone.” Snail seemed to freeze. “If I can come back from the dead, aren’t you wondering what else I can do?” Riverstar flicked his tail ominously. “You’ve never met a cat like me before. Hopefully you never will again, because I can make you suffer in ways you can’t even imagine.”

Snail’s ears were twitching nervously. He glanced at the remaining rogues. “I’m not staying here.” He

padded away, his tail stiff behind him. "It's not worth it."

The others followed him, pelts slick with fear. As they reached the entrance, they broke into a run and disappeared like mist between the trees.

Slash was alone.

Riverstar turned to face him, satisfaction warming his belly.

"This is absurd!" Slash snarled. "You're not *special*. You're just a mountain cat who's learned a few tricks."

"I'm not a mountain cat," Riverstar mewed evenly. "I never was." He padded closer. "I'm not like them. I'm not like you. I'm like nothing you've seen before." He began to smell fear-scent on Slash's pelt. "I'm a *water rat*, remember? A cat who can ride rivers." Slash shifted his paws as he went on. "I can come back to life when I'm dead. I live where and when I choose. Even the mountain cats couldn't drive me out." He stopped, his muzzle almost touching Slash's. "Who are *you*?"

Slash backed away, not taking his eyes from Riverstar. His tail-tip twitched as Drizzle and Arc fell

in beside Riverstar and the park cats spread out behind them.

Slash's gaze darted around the camp. He edged farther back, out of the clearing, onto the bluff, fumbling his way backward past Owl, Midge, and Rust, who were still huddling there.

"There's no way out," Riverstar growled.

"Are you going to *kill* me?" Slash glanced over his shoulder, toward the cliff edge only a tail-length away.

"I'm going to make sure you never hurt another cat again." *Will I kill him?* The thought sent a cold shiver down Riverstar's spine. It would be the only way to stop the rogue finding another group of cats to bully and torture, just as it had been with One Eye. *But I believe in peace and kindness.* How could he be responsible for another killing?

Slash seemed to sense his hesitation. As fast as a snake, he darted forward and grabbed Owl.

The elder's eyes widened as Slash dragged him over the rock and shoved him toward the edge. His hind paw slipped down, sending grit raining into the river below as Slash held him by the throat, his claws hooked into his pelt.

“Let me go or I’ll drop him,” Slash snarled.

Riverstar fought back panic. *Please, StarClan, don’t let him kill another cat.* Slash mustn’t see he was scared.

Finch darted forward. “Please let him go!”

Slash’s gaze gleamed. “Like this?” He shoved Owl farther over the edge. The elder writhed in his grip, his hind legs thrashing, reaching for the rock.

Drizzle hissed, her pelt spiking with rage. “If you hurt him, I’ll make sure your death is far more painful than any of the deaths you’ve caused.”

Riverstar glanced at the young she-cat, shocked by her ferociousness. *We have to reason with him.* “Just let him go.” He fought to keep his mew calm. “These cats will kill you if you hurt him, but if you release him, they’ll let you leave quietly.”

“No!” Drizzle jerked her muzzle toward him. “You can’t! After everything he’s done! You never lived in a camp with him! He’d kill his own kits if he had any.”

Slash’s eyes were shining. He seemed to be enjoying their disagreement. “How do you know I haven’t already?”

She stared at him in horror.

His whiskers twitched with amusement. “You should never underestimate—”

He didn’t get chance to finish. Finch hurled herself toward him, skimming the stone like a bird. She grabbed Owl, snatching him back onto the rock with such speed that Slash froze in surprise.

His eyes widened for a moment, then he staggered. His hind paw slid over the edge. Panic lit his gaze. Paws flailing, he threw himself forward, trying to grab on, but he was falling too fast. His hindquarters dropped, pulling him down as his forepaws raked the stone.

Riverstar tried to grab him but Slash had already slithered out of reach, like water running over rocks, and disappeared over the edge.

Heart pounding, Riverstar stared down and saw the mangy rogue falling. Twisting in the air, Slash reached his paws down as though expecting to land on solid ground. Instead, he crashed into the river and disappeared beneath the surface. Drizzle and Arc crowded around Riverstar. The park cats peered over. No one spoke as Slash surfaced, spinning like debris in the river’s grip. He lifted a desperate paw, his mouth

opening to yowl before he slipped under once more. Riverstar hardly breathed as he scanned the water, but Slash didn't appear again. *The current must have dragged him to the bottom as the river swept him away.*

Arc lifted his head. "There's no way he'll survive that," he grunted.

"Good riddance!" Squirrel whisked her tail.

Magda and Stoat padded back toward the clearing as Hopper's gaze swept the camp, taking in the tattered dens and heaps of prey scraps. "We can start getting the place straight again."

Finch hung back near the edge of the bluff, staring where Slash had fallen. "I didn't mean to kill him." She was trembling. "I just wanted to save Owl."

Riverstar turned to look at her. Her soft black fur was spiked. Her eyes glittered with guilt. He wanted to run his tail along her spine to soothe her. "Your father would be dead if you hadn't grabbed him," he mewed gently. Rust and Midge were leading the old tom toward the clearing. Riverstar stayed where he was and gazed solemnly into Finch's bright green eyes. "You did well," he told her. "You did *really* well."

“She did!” Drizzle purred beside him as Finch nudged Riverstar’s shoulder with hers.

“And you didn’t do too badly yourself.” She blinked at him. “For a *water rat*.”



Chapter 26



Dying leaves whisked across the clearing as the wind strengthened and rain battered the woods. Leaf-fall had set in with the ferocity of a badger. It had rained for days. The river was swollen. It was too dangerous to ride home. Half a moon had passed, and Riverstar and Drizzle were still in the park cats' camp.

As Riverstar dozed in the bramble den the park cats had built for them, Drizzle paced outside.

"I'm bored," she mewed.

"Come in and get dry," he called in reply. Even though it was nearly sunhigh, he'd only left his nest for a short while that morning to meditate with Arc and the other cats. The days were different here. The Twoleg food scavenged from the dens at the edge of the woodland meant less hunting, and if dens needed fixing and patrols organizing, it wasn't Riverstar's problem; it was Arc's. Riverstar was enjoying letting someone else lead for a while. He'd offered to help at first, but the park cats seemed to want him to only rest and eat.

“I don’t *want* to get dry,” Drizzle mewed crossly from outside. “I want to go hunting.”

Riverstar stretched. “Go hunting, then.”

“On my own?”

“Take Stoat or Squirrel.”

“They’ve gone to find Twoleg food.” She stopped pacing back and forth across the entrance and poked her head in. “Don’t you think we should go and check the river again?”

“It’s still raining,” he told her. “It’ll be even more swollen than it was yesterday.”

“Yes, but we might find a log that’s big enough to carry us home.” She blinked at him eagerly, her face wet with rain. “With all this wind, a tree’s bound to have fallen down somewhere.”

“There’s no log big enough to carry us safely when it’s raining like this.” Riverstar felt a jab of sympathy for the gray-and-white she-cat. He knew she was missing Dawn Mist and Moss Tail and Pine Needle. He was missing Night and Mist and the rest of the Clan. But it was pointless worrying about something they couldn’t control. “We’re just going to have to wait until the rain stops and the river calms down.”

“But that could be a moon away.” She ducked out again.

If I’m not back in two moons, go the Moonstone with Dappled Pelt and get your nine lives. He remembered his words to Night. But they still had a moon and a half to get home. Of course Night would be worried, but they’d easily get back in time. There was no rush. “Just relax,” he mewed to Drizzle. “Enjoy being on an adventure.”

“It’s not an adventure,” she snapped. “We barely leave camp.”

“But you love meditating,” he reminded her. “You could take this time to improve your practice. And the park cats are friendly.”

Outside, Drizzle snorted. “You just love that they’re in awe of you since you came back to life.”

Riverstar’s pelt prickled self-consciously. “That’s not true.” *It might be.* “They’re just naturally kind,” he mewed sulkily.

She stuck her head back inside, her whiskers dripping rainwater onto his tail. “Do you even *want* to go home?”

“Of course I do!” He blinked at her as she stared

at him thoughtfully for a moment.

Then she ducked back out again. "I'm missing training while I'm here," she grumbled. "Dew was going to teach me how to hunt hares, and Pine Needle must know loads more battle moves than me by now."

Riverstar realized he was going to have to take her hunting if he was going to get any peace. He got wearily to his paws and padded out of the den. At least the rain was easing, and sunshine was pushing between the thick gray clouds.

Sparrow and Grub, two of Slash's rogues who'd come creeping nervously back to the park cats' camp after the others had fled and begged to be taken in, were arguing over a Twoleg scrap they'd found. The park cats hadn't been eager to let them join, but Arc had insisted. *No cat is irredeemable*, he'd said. The rogues seemed easygoing, if a little surly. But they still refused to join in with the daily meditations led by Arc, preferring to prowl through the forest or explore the edges of the Twolegplace. They always returned reeking of some new foul smell, as though they were learning about their new home stench by stench.

Owl and Midge were gazing from the elders' den.

Rust must be still sleeping in his nest. The three old cats were happy to be back in camp, and Owl had quickly recovered from his narrow brush with death at the paws of Slash.

“Riverstar!” Finch padded into the camp, her crow-black pelt spiked with rain. “You promised to teach me how to fish.”

Drizzle scowled at him. “But you don’t want to go hunting with *me*.”

“I was going to—” Riverstar began.

“Come with us.” Finch blinked at Drizzle.

Arc padded over from the bluff, where he’d been gazing out at the river. “Do you want to see that rabbit warren I told you about?” he asked Drizzle.

She pricked her ears excitedly. “On the other side of the river?” Her grumpiness seemed to evaporate. “Isn’t it too dangerous to cross?”

“There’s a tree down a little way upstream,” Arc told her. “We can use it to cross.”

“Be careful.” Riverstar’s belly tightened. “If you fall in—”

“We won’t,” Arc promised him. “All this meditation has made Drizzle’s concentration even

better than mine. She won't put a paw wrong. Besides, the tree is wide and the crossing is narrow."

Riverstar trusted his mentor. And he'd noticed too that Drizzle's skills had sharpened since they'd joined the park cats' meditations. He dipped his head. "Don't stay out too long. I'll be worried if you're not back by dusk."

Drizzle shot him a look. "Like *Night's* worrying right now?"

She turned away before he could respond, and headed for the camp entrance.

Arc glanced at Riverstar. "She's homesick," he suggested.

"Yes." Riverstar watched his Clanmate march out of camp. "But we can't risk the water journey when the river's so high, and the Thunderpath's too dangerous." He wasn't prepared to return the way they'd come. They'd never make it down the cliff, and he refused to risk the tunnel. What would he say to Dawn Mist and Moss Tail if he didn't get her home safely?

Finch was gazing after Drizzle too. "She's young," she explained. "I'm not surprised she's restless.

Perhaps she could teach us more battle moves. It'll give her something to do."

Riverstar blinked at Finch gratefully. "That's a good idea."

"It'll be good for her and for us," Finch mewed.

"I'd better catch up with her," Arc said. "You two can get on with your fishing." The black tom turned and followed Drizzle out of camp. "Make sure you find some calm water," he called over his shoulder. "And be careful!"

Riverstar blinked at Finch. "He still thinks I'm his apprentice," he muttered.

"Aren't you?" she replied, her eyes flashing.

"I guess I always will be." He led her across the clearing, and together they padded down the wooded slope to the riverbank. The river was swollen, even at the bend where they'd waited for Stoat and Squirrel a few days earlier. But where it overflowed the bank, it had created a shallow pool. They stopped beside it, and Riverstar could see that a few loaches and small trout had been trapped there. It would a perfect place for Finch to catch her first fish.

He padded into the pool, beckoning her with a nod

to join him. She screwed up her face as she waded in and splashed through the water until she was next to him. She shuddered. “You actually *swim*?”

“Sure,” he mewed. “It’s fun when you get the hang of it.”

The rain had stopped. Sunshine was spilling now through gaps in the clouds. A shaft lit Finch’s face. She looked pretty, her green eyes glowing, her neat black ears pricked.

Riverstar jerked his gaze away. What was he thinking? He loved Flutter, and Finch was so different from Flutter. She wasn’t placid and sweet, because she’d already done a lot of living and knew who she was and what she wanted. She’d had a mate and kits she’d raised happily. Her mate had died, and the kits had gone to live as kittypets. That experience had given her a self-assurance that impressed Riverstar. And her sharpness and determination reminded him of the mountain cats. It made him nervous when he was with her, but, as with the mountain cats, he still found himself drawn to it.

Would she make a good RiverClan cat?

“Come on,” she mewed now. “Show me how to

fish. The sooner I get out of this water the better.”

Perhaps not.

He nodded to the loach sitting in the water a few tail-lengths away. It seemed confused. Perhaps it was wondering why the river wasn't trying to tug it downstream. “Normally, you'd have to catch them when they swim past,” Riverstar mewed.

“Normally, I'd leave them in the water and catch something tasty instead,” Finch mewed dryly.

Riverstar pressed on. “But here we can just hook them out.”

“*You* can,” she mewed.

“It's easy,” he told her. “Watch.”

Slowly, he waded toward the loach, coming up behind it and stopping a tail-length away. Keeping his eyes on it, he steadied his breath, then lunged. Without a current to disguise his movement, the loach must have felt him coming. It darted away, and he swiped his paw through empty water. It was swimming toward Finch. “Quick, grab it!” he yowled.

She flung herself at it, disappearing for a moment beneath the surface before exploding into the air once more. The loach was racing away from her, and she

turned and splashed after it. Riverstar chased after her. He was aware how foolish they must look, floundering around, trying to catch a single fish. They were sending the other trapped fish darting away in panic. He was glad there were no other cats to see them. And yet it was fun.

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it!” Finch had driven the loach to the far end of the pool. It hesitated there for a moment, as though wondering how to escape, and she leaped for it, sending up spray as she plunged her paws into the water. The loach darted past her, dodging her attack.

Riverstar was ready. As it swam toward him, he grabbed it between his forepaws and, flicking it up, tossed it out of the water onto the wet grass beside the pool.

He blinked at Finch. She stared back, her eyes shining, water dripping from her pelt. Then she glanced in alarm toward the loach. “Quick! It’s escaping.”

The fish thrashed desperately on the shore, flapping closer to the water. Riverstar splashed across the pool and climbed out, grabbing the loach’s spine between his teeth and giving it a killing bite.

Finch hopped out after him and looked down at their catch. "It's not the most dignified way to hunt," she observed.

He looked at her and purred. He wished the current weren't so wild. He wanted her to see him surfacing from the depths of the water, a long silver salmon between his jaws. "River fishing looks much more impressive," he mewed.

"I'll take your word for it." She glanced at the fish. "Are we taking it back to camp?"

"Do you want to taste it first?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Do I have to?"

"Every cat should taste fish once," Riverstar mewed encouragingly.

Stiffly, she leaned down and ripped a lump from the fish's flank. Her face twisted into a grimace as she chewed it and swallowed. "That's horrible!" She shook her head as though trying to shake the taste away. "It's all slippery and soft!"

"You don't like it?" Riverstar stared at her. "Arc thinks fish tastes great."

"Arc thinks everything tastes great," Finch mewed.

“You’ve been eating too much Twoleg food,” Riverstar teased.

She lifted her chin. “There’s nothing wrong with Twoleg food,” she mewed. “Besides, you were a park cat once. You must have eaten Twoleg food.”

“I guess,” he conceded. “But fish tastes better.”

She looked unconvinced. “We can’t just take *this* back to my parkmates,” she sniffed, nodded toward the loach. “They’ll be disappointed. Let’s catch some real prey to take back as well.”

They caught three mice and took them back to camp along with the loach. Drizzle and Arc returned later, grateful when the park cats left it on the prey pile in favor of the haul of nuggets Sparrow and Grub had dragged back from the Twolegplace.

As dusk settled in, the two rogues washed while the rest of the group gathered on the bluff to meditate. It hadn’t rained all afternoon, and Riverstar wondered how many days it would be before the river was safe enough to ride. He felt a pang as he thought of the journey, realizing he would miss Finch when he left.

As Arc sat at the head of the bluff, his parkmates gathered around him, Drizzle gazed over the edge. She

was watching the river swirl below and Riverstar guessed she was wondering—probably more eagerly than he was—how soon they could leave.

“Let’s close our eyes.” Arc’s shoulders loosened, and his pelt smoothed as, around him, the park cats began to settle into their nightly meditation.

Riverstar closed his eyes.

“Feel the wind brushing your ears. Hear the river swishing below. . . .” Arc was speaking softly, and Riverstar’s thoughts drifted away. As he settled into the meditation, clouds seemed to roll down and enfold him, and he sank into their softness, his mind clearing as they carried him down to the river. He felt himself flow with the water and let it whisk his thoughts downstream until he was back at the island, his campmates sleeping in their dens. Unseen, unheard, he padded across the dark clearing and stopped outside a large den woven at the edge of the camp. Was it new? His Clanmates’ warmth seeped from it, and he slid inside, relishing the familiar scents. After picking his way between the nests, he stopped beside Night’s. The river had carried him here to give her a message. He touched his muzzle to her head as she slept.

I'm alive. She twitched. Were his words reaching into her dream? *So is Drizzle. We'll come home soon.* Surely she'd understand that the weather was holding them back? *I promise.*

A soft pelt brushed his, bringing him gently back to the bluff. The fresh leaf-fall wind ruffled his pelt, carrying the scents of the forest, and he opened his eyes. Dusk had given way to night. The park cats had finished their meditation and were heading through the darkness to the clearing to share tongues before they slept. Drizzle slid into her den as Arc sniffed the remains of the prey pile.

Finch was heading out of camp. Riverstar narrowed his eyes. Was she going to hunt? He followed her. It might be dangerous to hunt alone.

He caught up to her on the steep wooded slope, and she turned, surprised to see him. "Is everything okay?"

"I wondered where you were going."

"I wanted to be alone."

He paused. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No." She glanced at him, then kept walking, following a path that led uphill.

He fell in beside her. "How was your meditation?"

"Good," she mewed. "But sometimes it stirs up memories. What about you?"

"I need to go home," he mewed, feeling a prick of guilt as he remembered Night.

"It'll be a while before the river goes down." She glanced up through the branches, where clouds still hid the stars.

Riverstar could taste rain. More storms were on their way. "If the weather carries on like this, we could be stuck here for another moon."

She glanced at him. "Would that be a bad thing?"

"My Clanmates are expecting me."

They walked in silence. He wondered whether to tell her that part of him was happy to stay.

She led him along a trail that broke from the woods at the top of a rise. His breath caught as he saw the river valley spread out beneath them. The Twolegplace sparkled with light as though reflecting a starry sky. "It's beautiful," he breathed.

"Yes."

He felt her pelt brush his. The warmth of it made his heart quicken. He pressed against her, his purr

mingling with hers. This wasn't home, but sitting here, the river flowing away into darkness below them, Riverstar felt as though he was meant to be here. With Finch.



Chapter 27



Riverstar woke late. Rain was dripping through the den roof. He opened his eyes, shivering. Finch was gone, but the nest was still warm where she'd been lying. He snuggled deeper, enjoying her soft scent for a few moments, then got to his paws and stretched. A raindrop splashed his muzzle, and he shook it off and nosed his way from the den.

Outside, a thin rain washed the clearing. Stoat was helping Rust and Owl push leaves into the gaps in the roof of their den. Magda and Dart were on the bluff with Grub and Sparrow. The two park cats sat with their eyes closed while Grub and Sparrow watched them intently. The rogues' curiosity about meditating had steadily grown until Finch had suggested that, if Arc assigned them mentors to teach them how to focus and let go of their thoughts instead of chasing them, they might be more willing to join in. She'd been right and, since Magda and Dart had been working with them, Sparrow and Grub had begun to take part in the park cats' daily meditation.

Drizzle was sharing a damp pigeon with Hopper and Moth. “You’re awake!” she called across the clearing. “Should we go and check the river?”

Moth looked at her, disappointed. “But you were going to teach us a new attack crouch.”

Hopper flicked rain from his ears. “We can practice the back-kick she taught us yesterday until she gets back,” he told Moth.

Riverstar blinked at Drizzle. “The river won’t have dropped yet,” he told her.

But she was already crossing the clearing. “Let’s check it anyway,” she mewed. Despite keeping herself busy training the park cats to fight, Drizzle was still impatient to leave. She hadn’t commented on his relationship with Finch, but Riverstar could see by the way she eyed them when they ate together or shared tongues that their closeness bothered her.

“Finch and I are mates,” Riverstar had told her half a moon ago, when he’d moved into Finch’s den. “But that doesn’t mean we won’t leave as soon as the river is low enough.” She’d only stared back at him, then padded away, her pelt ruffled.

“Okay.” He crossed the muddy clearing now.

“Let’s check it.” As Drizzle hurried toward the entrance, he scanned the clearing. “Where’s Finch?”

“She went with Arc to patrol the border,” Drizzle told him as they padded out of camp.

Marking a border around the bottom of the woodland slope had been Finch’s idea. While it wouldn’t keep rogues out, it would let them know that this land belonged to the park cats.

Riverstar’s pelt twitched. “Does she have to patrol *every* morning?”

“Are you worried she cares more about the border than she does about you?” Drizzle wasn’t teasing. She was testing to see how attached he was to his new mate.

“Of course not.” He avoided his Clanmate’s gaze. “I just think her campmates could take her place once in a while.”

“Squirrel offered this morning,” Drizzle told him. “But Finch told her to hunt with Scooby instead.”

Riverstar’s tail twitched uneasily.

“Aren’t you pleased the park cats are becoming more like a Clan?” Drizzle mewed. “Even the rogues are joining in. They went hunting with Moth and

Hopper yesterday. And all the cats are better at fighting since we've trained them. They'll be able to stand up to rogues like Slash"—she looked at him pointedly—"even after we've left."

"I guess." He picked up the pace. He didn't want to think about leaving yet.

The river was still running high, swirling angrily, the water muddy.

"What if the water doesn't drop until newleaf?" Drizzle blinked at Riverstar anxiously. "You told Night to go to the Moonstone if we weren't back in two moons."

"We'll be back in time," he promised.

"But we've been gone for over a moon already," Drizzle fretted. "Aren't you worried about the Clan?"

"Night will be taking care of everything," he told her. But doubt tugged beneath his pelt. He often wondered how Spider Paw was doing. Was Night handling his training? Did she realize the young tom needed special care because he was so far from his own kin? And what about Snow Tail? Was he finally starting to grow more confident? And what about the other Clans? Had they started bickering again? Were

they respecting RiverClan's borders while he was gone?

"When we *do* leave . . ." Drizzle didn't look at him. "What about Finch?"

"She'll come with us." Riverstar spoke without thinking. He didn't *want* to think about it. He wanted to believe everything would work out.

"Has she actually *told* you that?" Drizzle mewed.

"Not yet." The truth was, he hadn't dared ask. What if she said no?

"She doesn't seem like a cat getting ready to leave. She spends so much time helping Arc."

Riverstar stared straight ahead. Drizzle was right. Finch was more and more involved in the running of her group. Would she consider leaving? He'd told her about the Clans, and she'd seemed really impressed when he'd explained about StarClan and the Gatherings and how they weren't loners or rogues but warriors with a code that they swore to follow. "She'll come," he mewed. *She has to. We're mates. If she doesn't . . .* He pushed the thought away.

"What if she doesn't?" Drizzle held his gaze. "Will you stay here? With her?"

How could he stay? He'd made a promise to Night. His Clan needed him. "Of course not."

"Have you told Finch you'll be leaving?"

"She knows how much the Clan means to me." He flicked his tail irritably. Why was Drizzle trying to pin him down? "Besides, why worry about it now?" The water was too high to travel home yet. He watched it rolling past. Perhaps the river *wanted* him to stay here for now. "When the river wants us to leave, we'll leave."

He turned away and began to head back to camp. Drizzle followed quietly.

"Hey!" Finch padded from beneath the trees as they neared the woodland slope. Her black pelt was slick with rain. "I was going to go scavenging." She blinked brightly at them. "Do you want to come?"

Drizzle shook the rain from her pelt. "Not me," she mewed. "I promised Moth and Hopper I'd teach them a new battle move."

Finch's gaze flitted to Riverstar. "What about you?"

"Sure." He lifted his tail eagerly. He was relieved to have a distraction. Talk of leaving could wait. It

would be ages before Night headed for the Moonstone.

Finch led the way across the field. It was edged by Twoleg dens a little like the one he'd lived in his first leaf-bare away from the park. Being in a Twolegplace again made him nervous. Anxiety sparked in his tail as he followed her to the edge of a Thunderpath and flinched as a monster hurtled past.

"You'll get used to it," she mewed.

I don't want to get used to it.

"And it'll be worth it when we get there."

"Where are we going?" He'd been foraging with her a few times since he'd been at the park cats' camp, but she'd never brought him this deep into the Twolegplace.

She stopped. "Can you smell that?" Her nose was twitching excitedly.

He tasted the air and recognized the scent of the Twoleg lumps he'd shared with Drizzle and Arc outside the huge Twoleg camp. He scanned the ugly structures, scared in case Finch was leading him back inside another crowded Twoleg cave filled with moving steps and strange-looking pools. But the scent was

drifting from a single low den with clear walls and a flat roof built on a sea of stone. Monsters were crawling toward it, stopping one by one beside an opening in one of the walls before racing away.

“It’s too dangerous—” he began, but Finch was already hurrying across the stone toward the den. He chased after her. “Be careful.”

A monster pulled out of the slow-moving line and rolled toward her.

“Watch out!” Riverstar dashed in front of it, pushing her out of its path. He scrambled after her, his heart pounding as heat from the monster swept over him and one of its paws grazed his tail. “Are you crazy?” He bundled her forward and stopped beside her as they reached the wall of the Twoleg den. “You could have been killed!”

“No, I wouldn’t.” She shook out her pelt. “I saw it coming. I’d have moved in time.” She blinked at him. “I’ve lived near Twolegplaces my whole life. I’m used to monsters. Thunderpaths to me are like rivers are to you.”

He stared at her, forcing his pelt to smooth. He knew he’d once foraged among Twolegs, but it was so

long ago, he could scarcely remember it. And now it was hard to accept that it was normal for her. He kept forgetting that she'd had a whole life before she'd met him. Remembering didn't reassure him. "Please don't take so many risks." *Not now that I've found you.* He suddenly realized how devastated he'd be if anything happened to her.

She blinked back at him. "You worry too much." She darted away again and disappeared faster than a mouse through a gap in the den wall. He hurried after her and ducked through the opening. His heart seemed to stop. She'd led him inside the Twoleg den. They were in a large, white cave full of Twolegs. One of them was already shrieking. It pointed a paw at Finch.

"Wrong entrance!" Finch ducked beneath a shiny ledge, her tail bushing.

Riverstar froze as a Twoleg grabbed a stick and began to poke it into the gap while the other Twolegs bent down and yowled into the shadows. "Finch!" Blood roared in his ears as the Twoleg jabbed and jabbed again. It was going to hurt her! He raced toward the ledge and barged his way between the Twoleg's hind paws. Hooking his claws into its baggy

pelt, he tugged. The Twoleg yelped and fell down. Its stick clattered onto the shiny floor. As another Twoleg grabbed for him, Riverstar raked its paw. It recoiled, and he scanned the shadows beneath the ledge and saw Finch's eyes glittering with panic in the darkness. "Quick!" he hissed. "Follow me!"

She raced toward him, bursting from the shadows. A Twoleg lunged for her. Riverstar clawed its huge pink paw. She pelted past him and fled for the opening. He turned and chased after her as the Twolegs yowled behind. Outside, a monster rumbled past, blocking their escape.

"This way!" Riverstar swerved and ran along the edge of the den, skidding around a corner, gasping as he saw it was a dead end—a canyon like the one outside the Twoleg camp.

Finch hurtled past him, pulling up as she saw the blank wall at the end. "Go back!" she shrieked.

Together, they turned and faced a line of red-faced Twolegs advancing toward them.

Panic shrilled through Riverstar's pelt. This was how Flutter, Dart, and Shine had been caught. He backed away, nudging Finch along with him. He could

hardly breathe. This couldn't happen. Drizzle was waiting for him. He had to get her home. He had to get back to his Clan. He pictured Spider Paw gazing upriver, expecting any moment to see him return, and Night keeping a lonely vigil at the edge of the island. *I promised her.* Guilt swept him like an icy wave. "I can't become a kittypet again," he breathed.

Finch looked at him. "I'm sorry." Her eyes glittered with remorse. "I thought we could just steal a few scraps. I never—"

"It's not your fault," Riverstar mewed. "I followed you. This was my choice." He swung his gaze back toward the Twolegs. One of them was advancing cautiously while the others hung back, spanning the canyon entrance. He pressed closed to Finch. "I'll attack," he hissed. "You just run. Get back to camp. Tell Drizzle what happened."

"No." She looked at him. "We run right at them—together."

"But—" He stared back at her. She really was crazy.

"They won't expect it," she mewed. "Twolegs are used to us running away." Her chin was high. She

looked sure of herself as she glared at the Twoleg, her ears flat. "Believe me," she hissed. "I've been around Twolegs a lot."

"Okay." He would trust her. He narrowed his eyes, giving the Twoleg an angry growl.

It hesitated.

"Now!" Finch hared forward. Riverstar pelted after her. Side by side, flanks touching, they barged past the first Twoleg. It leaped aside as though a monster were hurtling at it. The Twolegs behind screeched like birds, their eyes flashing with panic. They jumped out of the way, clinging to each other as Riverstar and Finch shouldered their way between them and raced across the stone. They dodged a monster, then another as they darted across the Thunderpath, and then they kept running, following the route back past the Twoleg dens and into the field beyond.

Riverstar pulled up first, panting as they left the Twolegplace behind. Finch scrambled to a halt beside him. "Promise me you'll never go into a Twoleg den again," he mewed, locking eyes with her.

"I'll never go into *that* Twoleg den again," she

puffed.

“*Any* Twoleg den!”

“I can’t promise you that.” Finch stiffened. “You know that park cats depend on scavenged food. You did it once, too!”

Riverstar knew that, but it seemed terribly risky now. *I already lost Flutter to Twolegs.* “Hunt instead,” he told her.

She looked puzzled. “But we live next to a Twolegplace.”

“Then *don’t* live next to a Twolegplace,” he mewed. “Come home with me.” His breath caught. He hadn’t meant to blurt it out.

“To the island?”

His heart quickened. “Yes.” He searched her gaze.

She seemed stunned. “With you.”

“I have to get back to my Clan,” he pressed. “I’m their leader. They need me. I’ve made promises.”

“Then go.” She flicked her tail and began to stalk away.

He hurried after her. “I want you to come with me.” He darted in front of her, blocking her path. “I

don't want to be without you."

"Then stay here." She didn't move.

He looked at her. "You know I can't do that."

"And I can't leave." Her eyes were glistening.

"Owl is here, and my parkmates." She looked back toward the Twolegplace. "My kits have found homes here. They might be kittypets, but I can find them if I have to. And they can find me."

A hole seemed to open in Riverstar's chest, and pain washed in. He realized he'd known all along that she wouldn't come with him. He'd been lying to himself. It wasn't enough that they were mates. He had responsibilities in RiverClan. Finch had responsibilities here. For a while he'd been able to pretend he could finally have a happy future with a cat he loved. But it wasn't true. He was destined to spend his life longing for a love he'd left behind.

The river swept past the edge of the field, stormy and swollen. *I have to go back.* He gazed toward it, his heart aching. *But not yet. Not until the river drops.* For now, the river wanted him here.



Chapter 28



Riverstar slipped into a dream. The Moonstone dazzled him, and he screwed up his eyes, straining to see through the shimmering light. A dark figure was padding toward it. Night? He couldn't be sure. Wait! He cry made no sound. I am coming! Around the Moonstone, Dappled Pelt watched as the figure crouched. Their fur rippled uneasily, and they leaned forward, hope showing in their eyes as the figure stretched touched its nose to the Moonstone. The glittering light blinked out like a star dying, and shadow swept the cave.

He woke up with a jerk and saw morning light filtering through the roof of his den. What did the dream mean? Was StarClan calling him home? *Not yet. Please.* There was still a quarter moon to go before Night went to the Moonstone. The rain had stopped days ago, and the river had already dropped. Drizzle was restless, watching him like a hawk, preparing for him to tell Finch it was time to go. But he wasn't ready to leave.

Finch moved beside him. He was surprised to find her there. Hadn't she gone on morning patrol?

She lifted her head. "Are you okay?" She blinked at him sleepily. "You looked worried."

"Just a bad dream." Guilt jabbed his belly. He wasn't ready to tell her he had to leave soon. "I thought you were going on morning patrol with Arc?" This was the third time she'd missed it in a quarter moon. Hope flickered in his chest. Was she beginning to let go of her life here? Was she preparing to go with him? Perhaps, if he delayed a little longer, she'd agree to come back to the island.

She pushed herself wearily to her paws. "I'm too tired today," she mewed.

"Still?" She'd been tired yesterday when they were hunting, and the day before she'd fallen asleep during meditation. "Are you sick?"

"No." She gave his ear a gentle lick. "I'm fine."

Riverstar glanced distractedly through the den entrance. "If you're sure."

Drizzle was probably waiting for him. She'd been pushing him to check the water level earlier each day, and for the past few days she'd insisted the current

was calm enough for them to ride home.

“I’m sure.” Finch gently nudged Riverstar out of the nest. “Go and find Drizzle. She’ll be waiting for you.”

He blinked at her affectionately and pushed his way out of the den. The sun shone, crisp and clear. A heavy dew sparkled on the bushes around the camp, and mist hung between the trees. Grub was helping Moth and Squirrel weave ferns to form a camp wall.

Hopper was stretching outside his den. “Are you looking for Drizzle?” he called as Riverstar padded into the clearing.

“Yes.” Riverstar was surprised that Drizzle wasn’t pacing the camp impatiently.

“She’s already gone down to the river,” Hopper told him.

“Thanks.” Riverstar dipped his head to the yellow tom and padded out of camp. Perhaps he should tell Drizzle about his dream. But she would be more insistent they leave at once, and Finch might only need another day before she changed her mind and agreed to come with them.

He padded through the woodland, orange leaves

drifting around him, and hurried from the trees at the bottom of the slope. He could smell Drizzle's scent now and see her tracks in the dewy grass leading toward the riverbank. He followed them, surprised when he didn't find her on the shore. He stopped at the water's edge and looked upstream.

"Help!"

Drizzle's yowl made him stiffen. He scanned the river. *Where is she?* The river was running low, but it was swift. The muddy banks on either side were still scattered with branches and rocks washed downstream by the recent rain. A log was bobbing over the choppy water, speeding downriver.

"Help!" Drizzle's yowl sounded again.

Riverstar's heart began to pound. He couldn't see her, but her cry was sharp with panic.

"Help me!"

It seemed to be coming from the log. Riverstar raced to the water's edge, straining to see her. A white scrap of fur was caught in the crook of a branch jutting from the log. *A paw!* The log turned in the water, and the paw disappeared underneath. *Drizzle!* She must have gotten herself caught.

Riverstar plunged into the river. The log was already shooting downstream. He pushed out with his hind legs, riding the current, picking up speed as he swam after the log. Water splashed in his eyes, but he kept his gaze fixed on the log as it turned again. He saw Drizzle's paw once more and then her head as it burst through the surface. Her eyes were wild with panic. She twisted, grimacing, water streaming from her ears as she tried to free her paw. Then the log turned again and she disappeared.

Riverstar pushed harder. He was gaining on the log, but sharp rocks lay ahead. He had to reach the log before it dragged Drizzle through them.

Water shot up his nose, but he kept swimming until the log was a muzzle-length away. He reached for it and gripped on with his claws, pulling back, kicking against the current with his hind paws until the log began to slow. He tried to turn it over, to bring Drizzle back to the surface, but it was too heavy. Instead he hauled himself along it, pulling one paw over another, digging his claws deep into the sodden bark, terrified of losing his grip.

He stiffened as he felt Drizzle's soft body thump

against his hind legs and carefully eased himself underneath. Still clinging to the log, he could see Drizzle through the foaming water and the crook holding her paw. The water stung his eyes and filled his ears. His chest began to ache as he held his breath. Letting go of the log with one paw, he reached for hers, stretching until he felt it, a soft warm bump on the cold wet bark. Carefully, he began to ease it free.

Drizzle was limp now, and panic flared through him. Was he too late? He gave her paw a jerk, relief swamping him as he felt it unhook. Keeping hold of her, he pushed Drizzle down and let the log sweep over them and away downstream. Then he thrust her up through the water and they burst into the air together.

He gasped for breath, swallowing back a cough, and, still holding Drizzle, began to swim for the shore.

She jerked in his paws, her eyes opening, and stared at him in alarm.

“I’ve got you,” he spluttered. “You’re okay.”

She struggled for a moment; then, realizing she was safe, she relaxed and let him drag her to the shore. As he felt pebbles beneath his paws, he grabbed her scruff between his jaws and hauled her out of the

water. She collapsed on the riverbank, her flanks heaving.

“What in StarClan were you doing?” Anger surged in place of fear now as Riverstar glared at her.

Drizzle caught her breath and blinked at him defiantly. “I was going home, since you don’t *want* to!”

Guilt froze him and he stared at her.

She got to her paws. She was still trembling, but she was angry. “*You* might want to stay here with Finch, but my kin are in RiverClan and I miss them!”

He closed his eyes, forcing his fur to smooth. Water dripped from his pelt. She was right. “I’m sorry.” He let out a slow breath. “I was hoping I could persuade Finch to come with us.”

“If she loved you, she wouldn’t need persuading,” Drizzle snapped.

Her words stung him.

Drizzle seemed to see the pain in his eyes and dropped her gaze guiltily. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “She does love you. It’s obvious. But RiverClan needs you more than she does. You can’t stay here.”

“I know.”

As Riverstar spoke, he saw Arc crossing the grass to meet them.

“Are you okay?” Arc looked from Riverstar to Drizzle. They were both drenched.

“I was trying to get home,” Drizzle told him.

Riverstar shot her a look. “It was dangerous.”

She glared back at him. “*You* rode the river.” Her gaze flicked to Arc. “So did you. Why shouldn’t I?”

Arc blinked at them calmly. “You should ride the river together,” he mewed. “It will be safer.”

“Riverstar doesn’t want to,” Drizzle snapped. “He’s waiting for *Finch*.”

Arc sat down and curled his tail over his paws. “Riverstar didn’t want to leave the park, but he did,” he mewed. “He didn’t want to come back here, but he did.” He turned his dark green gaze on Riverstar. “He doesn’t want to go home,” he mewed. “But he will.”

Riverstar shifted his paws. “You make it sound like I never want to do anything,” he mewed defiantly.

“You’re so busy letting the river decide your fate,” Arc mewed, “you’ve forgotten that you can decide for yourself.”

“That’s not true.” Riverstar’s pelt began to grow

hot.

Arc held his gaze. "StarClan gave you nine lives," he mewed. "Night changed her whole way of life because of you. Cats turned their backs on their own Clans to choose yours. They have faith in you. Why don't you have faith in yourself?"

"I do." Riverstar blinked at him. "I know I can lead these cats. I can show them a better way to live because of everything you taught me. But I can't abandon Finch."

"Finch will make her own decision," Arc mewed. "You must make yours."

Riverstar's heart seemed to twist in his chest. He was going to have to abandon a cat he loved for his Clan. He knew it was right, but *knowing* didn't make it less painful. "You're right," he mewed heavily.

"So?" Drizzle looked at him. "Are we going home?"

"Yes."

She lifted her chin. "When?"

"Tomorrow." A stone seemed to be sitting in Riverstar's chest. "I'll go and tell Finch." He glanced at Arc.

The black tom dipped his head. “We’ll miss you,” he mewed. “But you’ve done enough for us. Your Clanmates are the ones who need you now.”

Riverstar padded past him and headed toward the woods. Glancing back, he saw Arc examining Drizzle’s paw. Then they began to scout along the shore, as though looking for something. Drizzle stopped beside a broken branch. Arc began to drag another one toward it. What were they doing?

He turned away and headed between the trees. The trek back to camp seemed to take forever, and yet he still reached the camp too soon. Finch was lying in the sunshine outside their den. She lifted her head as he padded into the clearing and began to get to her paws.

She looked happy, her eyes shining as she saw him. She hurried to meet him. “I’ve got something to tell you!”

He stopped, his tail twitching nervously. “*I’ve* got something to tell you—” he began.

“Me first!” She gazed at him joyfully. “We’re having kits!”

“Kits?” Riverstar’s breath caught.

She purred loudly, and he found himself purring with her. He was having kits! After dreaming for so long about having a family with Flutter, and then losing hope after he'd learned Flutter had died, he was being given another chance. He remembered Storm's words. *With this life, I give a wise, nurturing heart so that you may support and encourage your Clan and, one day, your kits.*

He rubbed his muzzle along Finch's jaw, breathing in her scent. "That's wonderful." Then he stiffened. He was leaving. He drew back and stared at her. "Come home with me. You can have our kits there. We can raise them as warriors." The thought made his heart soar. He could picture his kits charging around the island. He'd watched Kite Wing's kits and Dawn Mist's. This time they would be his own.

Finch was staring at him. "I can't." She looked around the camp. Owl was washing outside the elders' den. Rust and Stoat were sharing a piece of Twoleg food. Sparrow had joined Squirrel and Grub as they wove the camp wall. "This is my home," she mewed. "These are my campmates. I want my kits to grow up here."

Grief bit into Riverstar's heart with teeth as sharp as an adder's. He swallowed against the pain. He couldn't force her to come; he didn't *want* to. He wanted her to choose what made her happy. *I wish you'd choose me.* He dipped his head. "I understand," he mewed. "I wish I could stay with you, but my Clan needs me. I promised to protect them for the rest of my lives. I can't let them down."

"I know." She blinked at him, her eyes warm. "You wouldn't be the cat I fell in love with if you could abandon them."

"Then won't you come with me?" Desperation made him blurt the words out. He looked away. "I'm sorry," he mewed quickly. "It's not fair to ask. You've made your choice."

She looked apologetic. "I thought I *could* leave." Her voice broke and she took a breath before going on. "I've thought of nothing else. But this life is all I've known. And now that I'm carrying kits, I don't know if I could even make the journey to your island."

"Will you be okay here?" His paw pricked with worry as imagined her raising kits without him. "You'll be alone."

“No I won’t.” She glanced fondly around at her parkmates. “Besides, I’ve raised kits before. I can do it again. And I promise to tell them all about you.”

“Will you name one for me?” He blinked at her hopefully. Was he asking too much?

“Of course.” Her eyes shone with love.

“I’ll come back and visit.” As he spoke, doubt tugged in his belly.

“Of course you will.” Finch purred, but he could see in her eyes that she doubted it too. How could he make the long journey back upstream alone? It had been dangerous even with friends. And would it be fair to leave his Clan a second time? Finch’s eyes glistened. “When are you leaving?”

“In the morning.” He rested his chin softly on her head. “We still have today.”

As the sun lifted in the sky the following day, the park cats padded after them to the shore. Sunshine sparkled on the river. The sky was blue and the wind had dropped. The start of the journey would be easy at least—once they’d said their goodbyes.

Drizzle trotted to the shore and stood eagerly beside the wide bundle of branches she and Arc had

lashed together with strips of bark. There was space on the raft for two, with a little room to spare, and when Drizzle and Arc tested it in the shallows, it had been stable and looked as though it would hold together even in choppy water.

Riverstar felt numb with misery, aware of the pain deep in his heart like the wail of a lost kit buried at the bottom of the river. He padded onto the shore and stared at the raft. It would carry him away from his mate and the first love he'd known in moons. Now that they were expecting kits, it had deepened into a love more real than all his dreams of Flutter. He shook out his pelt. He wasn't going to feel sorry for himself. He was doing this for his Clan. He turned back to Finch, standing with her parkmates on the riverbank. She was staring at him bravely. Moth and Squirrel watched beside her. Stoat's eyes were clouded with sadness, while Magda and Hopper gazed nervously at the raft.

"Are you sure you can swim?" Hopper blinked at Drizzle.

She flicked her tail. "Of course."

"You looked half-drowned when we saw you on the shore yesterday," Magda mewed.

“You can’t swim without getting wet,” Drizzle told her cheerfully.

Arc wound around Riverstar. “Thanks for coming back.” He stopped and looked earnestly into Riverstar’s eyes. “We won’t see each other again.”

“How do you know?” Riverstar pricked his ears anxiously.

“I just know.” Arc held his gaze. “But we will always be connected in our meditation.”

Riverstar suddenly wanted to stay. He remembered, with a stab of grief that made his breath catch in his throat, watching Arc disappear all those moons ago. He couldn’t do it again. Not now. And yet he must. He had to return to his Clan.

He looked at Finch, her black pelt glossy in the morning sunshine, and padded to touch his nose to hers. “You’ll take care, won’t you?” he mewed softly.

“Of course.” She walked with him to the raft. “I’ll make sure our kits grow up healthy and happy. Thanks to you, they’ll be part of a strong group that can defend itself and take care of its young.” She glanced back at Owl, who stood among his parkmates. “And old.”

“I’ll miss you.” Riverstar’s throat tightened.

“But you’ll come back if you can?” She looked at him hopefully.

“If I can.” He knew he never could. *We won’t see each other again.* His numbness lifted, and claws seemed to pierce his heart.

Drizzle shifted beside him. “We should go,” she mewed softly.

“Okay.” Riverstar nodded her onto the raft, and as she jumped on board, he began to push it into the water. As it lifted and started to float, he hopped on after her and turned back to see Finch.

Her eyes were brimming with sadness as the current tugged the raft and drew it into deeper water. She flicked her tail, reaching for his gaze. “Goodbye!” Her voice cracked. “I love you!”

“I love you!” Sorrow threatened to overwhelm him as he realized that, once again, the river was carrying him away from the cat he’d thought he’d spend his life with.



Chapter 29



“Riverstar!” Drizzle’s panicked yowl made him turn away from the fast-receding park cats. She was reaching over the side of the raft, pulling desperately at the water. “We have to steer it away from—”

The raft bumped and jerked as it snagged on a rock piercing the surface of the fast-flowing water. It swayed perilously, the branches creaking as it hung there, the river dragging at it.

Drizzle grabbed hold of the rock and began to push it, trying to free the raft.

“Finch!” Squirrel’s cry from the shore made Riverstar turn back. His heart leaped into his throat as he saw Finch wading into the river. She bounded through the shallows, then plunged in. What was she doing?

She fought to stay above the surface as the current lifted and swirled her toward him. Then she disappeared.

“Finch!” Riverstar leaned forward, teetering at the edge of the raft. Every hair on his pelt seemed to

scream at him to leap in and help her. But what if the raft came loose while he was in the water? What if the river whisked Drizzle downstream on her own? Drizzle would face the river alone.

Relief swamped him as Finch's head broke the surface. He could see her forepaws churning, her back legs kicking out, as the river spun her toward the raft. Her green eyes flashed with fear, but she kept fighting.

I'll jump in if she sinks again. Riverstar strained at the edge of the raft, forcing himself not to leap into the river. *Drizzle needs me.* He felt the raft shift beneath him and turned his head. Drizzle was still pushing at the rock. "Stop!" His yowl made her turn and stare at him.

"Why?" Then her gaze flitted toward Finch struggling through the water, and she let go of the rock. "We have to help her." She darted to Riverstar's side as Finch slid into faster water. She was rushing downstream, out of control, her paws useless as the river spun her around. Arc had been pushing through the shallows to help Finch, but now he stopped, up to his whiskers in the water but unable to get closer without being swept away, and watched helplessly.

Owl stared from the bank. His gaze seemed to be willing his daughter on, filled with hope as well as fear. Had she told him she was going to do this?

“We have to grab her before she gets swept past,” Riverstar told Drizzle.

But Drizzle was already leaning over the edge beside Riverstar, reaching out toward Finch as she sped closer. With a lurch, the raft dipped, the outer branches sliding underwater. It would overturn if they both tried to grab Finch.

“Grab the rock,” he told Drizzle. “Hold on to it until I’ve caught her.”

Drizzle obeyed, darting to the rock and throwing both her forepaws around it while she gripped the raft with her hind claws.

Riverstar curled his own hind claws into the wet wood and stretched out his forepaws just in time to hook Finch’s pelt as she sped past. With a grunt he heaved her toward the raft and, grabbing her scruff between his teeth, dragged her from the water.

She collapsed, panting.

Drizzle let out a low groan. “I can’t hold on any longer.” The river was stretching her across a

widening gap between the raft and rock.

“Let go!” Riverstar yowled. “Finch is safe!”

“I’ll fall in!” She glanced at him in panic, her belly suspended over the water as she clung on. Riverstar darted past Finch and grabbed Drizzle’s scruff, jerking her backward. She let go and fell against him, and they collapsed next to Finch as the raft rocked beneath them, bumping over the water.

Riverstar got to his paws, wobbling. “We need to spread our weight,” he mewed.

Drizzle pushed carefully up into a crouch and edged away. Finch shifted gingerly to one side. Riverstar backed slowly to the other end. The raft seemed to settle under them, gliding more smoothly over the water.

Riverstar blinked at Finch, his heart swelling with sudden joy. “You changed your mind.”

“I realized I didn’t want our kits to grow up without knowing you,” she mewed. Her eyes glistened. “And I didn’t want to live without you.”

Drizzle looked away, her pelt twitching self-consciously as Riverstar blinked back at Finch. In the distance he could see Arc still standing in the river and,

beyond him, the park cats fading into the distance.

Finch looked back at them.

“You’ll miss them,” Riverstar mewed, remembering his own homesickness.

“Yes.” Finch turned back and looked at him solemnly. “But I would have missed you more.”

Drizzle rolled her eyes. “I hope you two aren’t going to be like this all the way home,” she grumbled.

Finch purred at her. “We’ll try not to be too soppy.”

Drizzle shook off the water that had caught on her whiskers. “I’d appreciate it,” she mewed. “This raft is *very* small.”

Riverstar suddenly felt happier than he’d felt in his life. They were going home, and Finch was with him. And she was carrying his kits. “Just one nuzzle first.” He leaned across the raft and touched his nose to Finch’s wet cheek, breathing in her scent before giving her a lick.

Drizzle flicked her gaze toward the shore, huffing.

“I’m glad you came,” Riverstar told Finch, pulling away and purring at her. “Although I wish you’d decided *before* we set off.” He looked at her sternly.

“That was dangerous.”

She butted her head gently against his cheek. “Starting a new life with a bunch of cats who call themselves warriors feels *more* dangerous,” she mewed.

“Warriors are honorable,” Drizzle put in. “Not dangerous. We follow a code.”

“You’ll have to learn it,” Riverstar told her. “And how to swim. But I’ll teach you everything you need to know,” he promised. “You’ll enjoy being a RiverClan cat.”

Finch wrinkled her nose. “Even the fish?”

“Eventually,” he mewed. “Until then, I’ll catch as many mice and birds as you can eat.” He glanced at her belly. “I’m going to make sure our kits grow up as brave and strong as their mother.”

As the morning passed into afternoon, Riverstar began to get used to the pitch and sway of the raft. He was glad Arc and Drizzle had made such good work of lashing the branches together. And as long as they spaced themselves evenly on it, their shifting gave the raft more flexibility than the log he’d ridden on his first journey downstream. It flowed smoothly over the

river's peaks and troughs rather than thumping up and down. That was fortunate, since the river was still a little swollen from the rain and moving more swiftly than when he'd last ridden it.

As the day passed, Drizzle told Finch about life beside the river and began to teach her the warrior code. Riverstar listened, pleased that Finch seemed interested and that Drizzle had found a way to pass the time. Finch asked questions, and it was clear that she was anxious about having competing Clans beyond the borders. She was skeptical about StarClan, and he realized that she wouldn't believe the spirit-cats spoke to the living cats until she'd seen them for herself. She still suspected that Riverstar had tricked Slash and his rogues by pretending to die.

The riverbank swept by, and Riverstar barely had the chance to recognize the trees and rocks he'd passed the first time he'd come this way. But he knew he must listen for the sound of the waterfall. They could abandon the raft before they reached it.

As the afternoon wore on and dusk darkened the sky, his belly began to growl.

"Are you hungry?" he asked Finch.

She'd been resting, crouched on her belly and watching the river slide beneath them for a while. She looked at him. "Starving."

"Me too." Drizzle looked down into the water.

The river had widened and become smoother, and Riverstar could see fish moving around the raft. He crouched at the edge and grabbed for a loach as it glided near. But his sudden movement made the raft tip, and his heart lurched as he leaned back just in time to stop it capsizing.

Drizzle and Finch stared at him with wide eyes.

"Fishing is a bit risky," he mewed quickly.

"I can trail my paw through the water and see if one swims into it," Drizzle offered.

"It's worth a try," Riverstar mewed. "But I doubt even fish are that foolish."

Drizzle's paw grew cold quickly and she gave up. They'd have to wait until they reached shore to eat.

"It's okay," Finch assured him. "I ate this morning, and these kits can miss a meal."

But it worried him. Her struggle to reach the raft must have exhausted her, and it must be a strain to know that only a few branches lay between her and

the water rushing beneath her. Riverstar gazed downriver, wondering how long before he heard the roar of the waterfall. One day? Two? Would she and their kits be okay to go that long without food?

As dusk gave way to evening, the air grew chilly. A cold wind streamed over them, and the three cats edged closer to the middle of the raft, huddling together for warmth. As night fell, he felt Finch grow heavy against him. She was dozing. Drizzle's eyes were closed too, and he could hear her gentle snoring. His own eyes were growing heavy and he fought against sleep, but his head kept nodding, and he jerked himself awake, heart pounding, more than once. He mustn't give in. Someone had to listen for the waterfall. But weariness dragged at him and the cold pierced his pelt.

He must have drifted off again, because he was woken by a roar. He sat up sharply, alarm shrilling through his pelt. The waterfall? Already? How long had he been asleep? But the river wasn't wide enough here. It had narrowed, and the water had grown rough. The raft was rocking beneath his paws.

Drizzle woke up with a jerk. "What's happening? She stood up.

Finch got to her paws and looked around the raft, its branches straining against the bark strips that bound them. The river tossed it as though it were weightless, and Riverstar could see the water in the moonlight frothing white around them.

“Rapids!” He saw dark rocks poking above the water ahead, the river crashing around them. He didn’t remember this! But the river was swollen this time. Last time, he might have drifted past these rocks on smooth water, hardly noticing. “Hang on!” He curled his paws into the raft and wrapped his tail around Finch, pulling her near. “Stay close,” he told Drizzle, and she pressed against him, trembling, as the raft pitched suddenly down into a trough, then lifted up, cresting a wave. Water sprayed over them and the raft began to spin.

“The rocks!” Drizzle was staring in horror at the river ahead. The raft was out of control. There was no way it would find a path between the jagged stones jutting ahead of them.

Riverstar fought back terror as his paw slid through a gap between the branches. The raft was tearing apart. Finch lurched sideways with a yowl of

horror as a bark strip snapped and the raft broke in two. Drizzle stared at him with wide frightened eyes and slithered into the water.

“We’ll have to swim!” Riverstar grabbed Finch’s scruff in his teeth as they plunged into the seething water. The current grabbed him and dragged him downstream. He held Finch tight between his jaws as water bubbled around them. He could see nothing but Finch’s fur clouding in front of his face. But he knew the rocks were close.

He kicked out, fighting his way upstream, but the current was too strong. It swept him sideways and he felt something hard thump his flank. The shock of it stunned him for a moment and he felt Finch jerk from between his jaws. *No!* He crashed against another rock and lashed out, fighting his way to the surface. Finch was gone. He broke into the air with a gasp. “Finch!” He couldn’t see her. He shook the water from his eyes and glimpsed Drizzle racing away downstream. Her eyes flashed in the darkness as the water spun her between the rocks.

Riverstar could see the shore. He made for it, kicking out with his hind legs, but the river sent him

crashing against another rock. Pain arced through him as though lightning had struck him, but he kept fighting the current, his thoughts spinning. *Finch!* He'd let her go! How could she survive the rapids? Another rock grazed his shoulder as he swept past it. He saw more rocks ahead and fought his way into the fast-flowing channel that swept between them. It carried him past, and suddenly he found himself in smooth water, the rapids left behind. "Finch!" he wailed as he swam for the shore. "Drizzle!" Pain throbbed in his shoulder, and his head hurt where he'd knocked it against a stone. "Drizzle!" He scanned the river as he staggered out. It stretched empty in front of him. There was no sign of either cat. "Finch!" His yowl echoed in the darkness. "Drizzle!"

They mustn't be dead. They were so close to home! He'd promised himself he'd bring Drizzle safely back to her kin. Finch hadn't even *wanted* to come. She'd only done it for him. If she was dead . . . If the kits were dead . . . His mind reeled as dread tore at the edge of his thoughts.

"Riverstar!"

A muffled cry!

He jerked his gaze downstream. A shadow was moving in the water a tree-length away. It was Finch! She was struggling toward the shore, dragging something between her jaws.

Riverstar felt sick as he saw Drizzle's battered body floating behind Finch. He raced along the riverbank and dived into the water, pushing Finch toward the bank with his muzzle. As she reached it, she let go of Drizzle and hauled herself out, struggling for breath. Riverstar grabbed Drizzle's scruff and pulled her onto the shore after him. He laid her gently onto the mud and dropped down beside her. Blood was oozing from a gash behind her ear. His heart seemed to stop as he pressed his ear against her chest. She wasn't breathing.

Finch nosed him away. She put her paws to Drizzle's chest and pushed, jabbing hard into the gray-and-white she-cat's pelt.

Drizzle didn't respond.

Riverstar could hardly breathe as Finch kept working, jabbing and jabbing at Drizzle's chest. *Don't die!* Riverstar's thoughts reeled. Had the river killed her?

Suddenly Drizzle jerked, then convulsed; then, twisting onto her side, she coughed up water.

Riverstar felt weak with relief. He looked at Finch. "You saved her."

Finch's eyes were dull with exhaustion, her pelt plastered to her body. She dropped onto her belly.

"Are you hurt?" Riverstar ducked closer.

"I'll be okay," she panted. "I just need to get my breath."

Drizzle groaned, closed her eyes, and fell limp once more. But she was breathing.

Riverstar felt a rush of gratitude. Somehow Finch had found the strength to pull Drizzle from the water, even though she could barely swim. He pressed close to her, every muscle aching and a chill reaching to his bones, then pulled Drizzle nearer to warm her. Above him, the stars glittered in a cold, black sky. He didn't know where they were or how far they were from the island. But at least they were alive.



Chapter 30



Riverstar woke to leaf-fall sunshine, relieved to feel its gentle warmth spreading deep into his pelt. He lifted his head. “Finch?” She was still beside him, sleeping, but she opened her eyes when she heard his voice.

“Is Drizzle okay?” She pushed herself stiffly to her paws.

Drizzle lay between them, blood crusted behind her ear.

Riverstar nudged her. “Drizzle?” His belly tightened when she didn’t move.

“Drizzle.” Finch touched her nose to the gray-and-white she-cat’s head.

Drizzle groaned. “My head aches.” She opened her eyes, wincing against the sunshine.

Finch inspected her wound. “It’s stopped bleeding.”

Riverstar’s body ached. He could feel bruising along his legs and on his shoulders. He got slowly to his paws. “Are you okay, Finch?” Had the rocks battered her too? Were the kits okay? He hardly dared

ask.

She blinked at him reassuringly. "I'm fine," she mewed. "Just a little stiff." She must have seen him looking at her flanks. "The kits are fine," she told him. "I can feel them moving."

Riverstar's shoulders loosened. "You must be hungry," he mewed. "I'll go hunting."

"I'll come with you." Finch got to her paws.

"You should rest." He looked at her anxiously.

"It'll be quicker with two."

Drizzle was struggling weakly to her paws. "I'll come."

"No." Riverstar flicked his tail. There was a clump of bushes farther up the riverbank that he hadn't noticed last night. He nodded toward it. "Go rest in there." It would be sheltered. She would be safer there. "We won't be long."

He and Finch helped Drizzle to her paws and guided her into the small clearing among the bushes. The grass was long here and soft, and they trampled a nest between the thick branches of a bush.

As Drizzle settled gratefully into it, they padded down to the water's edge. Branches from the raft

were washed up along the shore, still bound here and there by bark strips.

Finch stopped beside him. "Can we fix it?"

He shook his head. "It's too badly damaged." Some of the branches had snapped. "And there's a waterfall downstream. It's safer if we walk from here."

"It'll be slower." Finch's eyes rounded with worry. "I thought we needed to be back before Night went to see StarryClan."

"*StarClan*," he corrected her gently. "We still have a few days, and we traveled a long way yesterday," he mewed. "We must be close." He hoped it was true.

"If we're going to walk, we should rest today." Finch glanced back at the bushes where Drizzle was hopefully already asleep. "Until we've recovered."

"Are you feeling ill?" Riverstar felt a jab of worry. "You said you were fine."

"I was thinking of Drizzle." She gazed at him tenderly. "And you look like you took a battering." Her gaze flitted along his flank, where fur was clumped and swelling showed beneath his pelt.

"I'm okay." He touched his nose to her cheek.

She rested against him for a moment, then pulled away. "Let's catch something. It'll make Drizzle feel better, and these kits are hungry." She headed up the riverbank and pushed her way into the long grass beyond.

Riverstar brushed after her. A wide flower meadow opened beyond it and, at the far side, forest shimmered orange in the leaf-fall sunshine. He hardly saw it. Last night's ride through the rapids still haunted him. "How did you manage to grab Drizzle?" he asked Finch.

"She bumped against me," Finch told him. "So I grabbed her and just tried to keep both our heads above water."

She sounded so calm. Riverstar blinked at her. "It was brave," he mewed. "You're going to make a great warrior."

"*Warrior*." Finch shivered. "The word still scares me. I don't like the idea of you fighting, and our kits —"

He didn't let her finish. "They'll be fine," he promised. "I'll make sure they're safe."

"But you said the Clans have battles." She looked

at him anxiously.

“Sometimes,” he mewed. “But there’s more to being a warrior than fighting. Our kits will be safer than loners or rogues. They’ll be part of a group. They’ll have Clanmates as well as us.” He began to cross the field. “I’m going to build them a strong den. And when they’re old enough, I’ll choose the best warriors to train them.”

“*Train* them?” Finch padded at his side.

“They’ll learn hunting skills and fighting skills so they can defend themselves and they’ll never go hungry.”

“Won’t *we* teach them those things?”

“It’s better if they each have their own mentor,” Riverstar told her. “It’ll help them feel like they belong to the Clan.”

Finch was quiet for a few moments. “I don’t want them to belong to the Clan,” she mewed. “I want them to belong to us.”

“They will,” he promised. “I won’t give them a mentor until they’re ready.”

Finch still looked worried. “What if they’re never ready?”

Riverstar's whiskers twitched with amusement. "They're our kits," he mewed. "Of course they'll be ready."

They were nearing the forest. Finch slowed. "Will I have a mentor?" she asked. "After all, I don't know how to be a warrior."

"You have plenty of skills," he told her. "And I told you, I'll teach you how to swim and fish—"

She padded away, her tail flicking. "*Fish!*"

He hurried after her as she marched between the trees. "You'll learn to like it, I promise."

"I hope so." Her nose twitched. She stopped and nodded toward a pile of newly drifted leaves. It was twitching.

Riverstar tasted the air, licking his lips as he smelled rabbit scent. "You circle around that way and I'll come at it straight."

She nodded and began to trace an arc around the leaf pile, treading softly so that her paw steps barely made a sound on the forest floor.

Riverstar dropped into a crouch and crept closer. Finch stopped and nodded. She was ready. He leaped and thumped down into the leaf pile. It exploded

around him. He felt a warm lump beneath his paws and curled in his claws as leaves showered him. His mouth watered as he leaned down to give the rabbit a killing bite. But it struggled, surprising him. It was stronger than any fish, and as he fought to get a better grip, it wriggled free and darted away, Finch lunged for it, grabbed it between her forepaws, and, faster than a hawk, bit cleanly through its spine.

She jerked her head up and gazed at him triumphantly as its limp body dangled from her jaws.

“Nice catch.” Riverstar was impressed. He’d thought she could only scavenge. Movement above him caught his eye. A squirrel was scurrying along a branch. “Let’s bury it under the leaves and keep hunting.”

They caught the squirrel without having to climb. It had come down to the forest floor to search for beechnuts and was easy prey.

Riverstar was pleased with their haul. A good meal would make them all feel stronger, and if they hunted again this evening and got a good night’s sleep, they’d be ready to start for the island in the morning.

As he padded beside Finch, along the shore, he

wondered how his Clan would greet Finch and the news that she was his mate *and* they were expecting kits. They'd be happy for him, surely? He knew he'd been away for longer than he had promised, but he'd made the right choice, going back to help Arc and his parkmates, and he hoped that his Clanmates would welcome him home even though he'd been away so long.

A growl rumbled in Finch's throat. Riverstar glanced at her anxiously, stopping as she laid down the squirrel. "I smell fox," she whispered.

Riverstar dropped the rabbit and scanned the shore. He could smell it too now—a strong musky odor that made his hackles rise. Alarm sparked in his fur as he saw the white tip of a bushy tail poking out between the bushes where they'd left Drizzle.

Finch darted forward.

"Wait!" he hissed at her.

She jerked around and stared at him. "But she's in trouble!"

"I don't want you to get hurt." *Or the kits.* "Wait here." He stalked cautiously forward and heard a long, low yowl from among the bushes. Drizzle was warning

the fox to back off.

It seemed to be working. The fox's tail appeared, then its hindquarters, as it backed out of the bushes. Riverstar didn't move as Drizzle appeared a moment later, her fur bushed. She looked as big as an owl, her ears flat against her head and her teeth bared.

The fox was keeping its distance, but its beady black gaze was fixed hungrily on Drizzle.

"It's going to attack!" Riverstar felt Finch's flank brush his. "We have to do something," she hissed.

"I don't want to fight it," he warned her. "We've taken enough of a beating."

"We could *scare* it away." Finch bushed out her pelt. Narrowing her eyes to slits, she began to creep toward the fox.

Riverstar watched her, his heart lurching as the fox's gaze snapped toward Finch. It seemed to hesitate. Finch's plan might work. Even if they couldn't frighten the fox away, he wasn't going to let her face it alone. He spiked out his fur and padded to her side.

The fox narrowed its eyes as Drizzle began edging toward them, and it watched uncertainly as they lined up, side by side, and began hissing.

Its gaze slowly lost its hunger. It seemed to realize that these three cats could be dangerous. It watched them for a moment longer; then, with a frustrated whimper, it turned and slunk away.

Finch's fur flattened.

Drizzle dropped into a crouch, her tail drooping with relief. "I'm glad you came back."

Riverstar kept his claws unsheathed as he watched the fox disappear over the top of the riverbank. "Are you okay?" He blinked at Drizzle.

"Yes." Her mew was trembling. "It crept up on me when I was sleeping."

Riverstar suddenly longed to be back home, where the river would protect them from intruders. "Let's find somewhere else to rest."

He headed back for the rabbit, then turned and walked along the shore. Finch picked up the squirrel and she and Drizzle followed until the riverbank steepened. There were boulders here, crowding the edge of the river, mossy where the river lapped around them. Riverstar could see an opening where they sat in the shallows. He padded into the water and peered in, pleased to find a snug cave. The narrow entrance

would be easy to guard, and with a flick of his tail he waved Finch and Drizzle to follow him inside.

They ate, then dozed. Drizzle and Finch were still sleeping when Riverstar woke at dusk. He waded out of the cave and tasted the air. The fox hadn't followed them.

A large round moon sat in the darkening sky and Riverstar swished deeper into the water. He could see fat fish gleaming beneath the surface and pushed out into the river.

It had been a while since he'd fished alone, and he relished the sensation of water streaming through his fur as he dived beneath the surface. The river seemed to embrace him, drawing him down toward the pale, sandy riverbed. A trout slid by, then another and another. Joy spread under Riverstar's pelt as he let the current carry him. He surfaced among the trailing branches of a willow and, turning in the water, saw a large silver carp a moment before it seemed to swim into his paws. Surprised, he grabbed it, his heart quickening with delight. The river had brought a gift. Had it forgiven him for traveling away from his Clan? Was this its way of telling him it was pleased he was

going home?

He killed the carp with a single bite and swam to the riverbank, holding it between his jaws. As he waded from the water, he saw Finch standing in the shallows at the entrance to the cave. She followed him as he carried the carp to the flat rocks a little way downstream.

Drizzle padded out of the cave, licking her lips as she saw the carp. "It's huge," she mewed hurrying to join them.

"The river dropped it in my paws," Riverstar told her.

Finch was staring at it uncertainly. As Drizzle took a bite, her nose wrinkled.

Drizzle looked at her, chewing. "Have some." She pushed the carp closer to Finch.

Finch shuddered, then sniffed it stiffly. "I suppose if I'm going to be a RiverClan cat, I'll need to get used to it."

Riverstar felt a surge of affection for her as Finch settled down beside the carp and began to eat.



Chapter 31



It rained during the night, and the next morning the rain worsened. The shore grew too rocky to follow, and Riverstar led Finch and Drizzle away from it, heading uphill, climbing higher and higher above the river.

At the top he looked down and saw it flowing swiftly far below, hemmed in by cliffs. “We’ve reached the gorge.”

“We’ll be home tomorrow.” Drizzle’s eyes lit up.

In the distance he could see the bridge they’d crossed on their way. It spanned the gorge, barely visible through the rain, and he was relieved that they wouldn’t have to cross it again. If they stayed on this side of the river, the path would bring them out at the edge of the moor. Once they reached WindClan land, the island would be a short trek away. He wanted to push the pace and get there more quickly, but Finch was struggling.

A sharp wind was driving the rain into their eyes. Riverstar stayed in front, trying to shelter Finch the

best he could. With her fur slicked against her frame by the rain, he could see her bulging flanks. She looked close to kitting, and yet, despite the rain, she pushed on, shoulders hunched, head down.

“Do you need to rest?” Riverstar asked her again.

“No.” She sounded breathless, but her green eyes were determined. “I just want to get to the island.” She glanced at the barren grassland around them. “I don’t want to kit here.”

Drizzle pressed her shoulder to Finch’s, and Finch leaned against her, clearly grateful for the help.

Has Night gone to the Moonstone? The thought tugged at the back of his mind. He suddenly wondered, if StarClan gave her nine lives, would he lose his? Anxiety prickled through his fur. He’d already used two. Would they let him keep the one he had now?

He fell back, helping Drizzle support Finch. The light was beginning to fade, and he could see the eyes of monsters as they swept across the bridge. He steered Finch and Drizzle away from them, tracing the curve of the slope, heading downhill, relieved when he saw the river bend to meet them.

Trees sheltered them as night set in.

“We should make camp,” he mewed, stopping as they reached a stretch of beech trees close to the river. Ferns clustered between. “Make nests.” He nodded toward the ferns. “I’ll go and fish.”

“I can fish too,” Drizzle offered.

“Stay with Finch.” Riverstar didn’t want to leave her by herself. There might be foxes around.

The rain had eased and the clouds cleared, and from the water’s edge he could see Highstones lit by moonlight and the moortop rising against the star-specked sky. If they stayed on this path as far as the WindClan border, they’d reach the track that would take them around the waterfall.

He dived into the river. It was running fast after the rain, but he caught two loaches and a trout and carried them back to Finch and Drizzle.

They ate them gratefully. Finch didn’t even wrinkle her nose as she bit into the soft, wet flesh.

“I’ll take first watch,” he told Drizzle when they were ready to sleep. “I’ll wake you at moonhigh.”

She nodded and curled down beside Finch in the nest they’d hollowed among the ferns.

Riverstar gazed into the darkness while the two

she-cats snored softly behind him. They would be home by moonhigh tomorrow. He was excited to see RiverClan again. Moss Tail and Dawn Mist would be relieved to see Drizzle. And he imagined his Clanmates' purrs of delight as he introduced Finch—Mist congratulating him, Croak and Hollow admiring her, and Night happily welcoming him home.

At moonhigh he switched watches with Drizzle and bedded down for the night. She woke him at dawn.

"I'll find food," she mewed, and slipped away between the ferns.

Finch lifted her head, blinking sleepily at Riverstar.

"We'll be home soon," he told her.

She looked nervous. "I hope your Clanmates like me."

"Of course they will."

They followed Drizzle to the river and found her leaning over the edge, snatching at minnows. A small pile sat beside her. She nodded to them. "Help yourself."

Finch shook her head. "I'm still full from last night."

Drizzle gulped down three minnows.

Riverstar ate the rest. "I'll catch you some land prey on the way," he promised Finch.

She blinked at him gratefully.

Riverstar found it hard to keep his pace slow now that he was sure of the way. They were so close now. By sunhigh he could smell the scent of heather rolling from the moor. By midafternoon they'd reached the WindClan border.

"Stay close," he told them as they crossed it.

Finch glanced at him anxiously. "Why?"

"There might be WindClan patrols," he mewed.

Her eyes widened. "*Patrols?*"

"It's okay," he reassured her. "If we meet any warriors, I'll tell them we're not here to hunt. We're just passing through."

"What do you mean, *passing through?*" A growl sounded from the heather. "WindClan land isn't a shortcut."

Riverstar moved closer to Finch as Dust Muzzle and Spotted Fur padded onto the path in front of them.

Finch backed away with a hiss.

Dust Muzzle glared at her. The gray tabby's tail

was flicking dangerously.

Spotted Fur's hackles were twitching. "The moor belongs to WindClan."

Riverstar lifted his muzzle. "We're not here to cause trouble."

"You shouldn't be here at all," Spotted Fur snapped.

Drizzle whisked her tail irritably. "It's the only way back to the river."

"You could go *around*," Spotted Fur growled.

"Finch is expecting kits soon," Drizzle told him. "You can't ask her to walk farther than she has to."

"*Finch?*" Dust Muzzle was still staring at her. His ears flattened. "You're not a Clan cat."

Riverstar stepped in front of Finch. "Yes, she is. She's my mate." He glared at Dust Muzzle. "She needs to rest."

"She's not resting *here*," Spotted Fur mewed.

"I'm not asking if she can." Riverstar swallowed back frustration. The fur along Finch's spine was twitching nervously. He wished her first encounter with Clan cats had been friendlier. "Why are you being so defensive?"

“We’re protecting our land.” Spotted Fur lashed his tail.

“We’re no threat,” Riverstar told him.

“Not yet,” Spotted Fur growled. “But once Skystar —”

Riverstar pricked his ears.

“Quiet!” Dust Muzzle nudged his Clanmate.

Finch blinked at Riverstar. “Wasn’t Skystar the cat who hurt Arc?”

“Skystar’s a bully,” Riverstar told her. “The rest of us aren’t like him.” He looked pointedly at Dust Muzzle. “Are we?”

Dust Muzzle didn’t answer. Instead he mewed, “You should be at home guarding your borders. Not wandering around like a loner.”

“I’ve been helping old friends,” Riverstar told him. *Why* did he need to be guarding his borders? Had Skystar been causing trouble?

“You’re a *leader*,” Spotted Fur mewed sharply. “You’re supposed to take care of your Clan.”

“I will if you let us pass,” Riverstar growled.

Spotted Fur stood aside. “We’ll be reporting this to Windstar.”

“Of course.” Riverstar forced his fur to smooth. “Send her my regards. And tell her she’ll see me at the next Gathering.”

“No hunting!” Dust Muzzle yowled after them.

“Why would we? Unless you have fish swimming through the heather,” Riverstar called back.

He led Finch away. Drizzle threw an accusing look over her shoulder at the WindClan warriors.

“I thought you said Clan cats were friendly.” Finch’s pelt was ruffled.

“They tend to get defensive about territory.”

“Like Slash?” Finch’s ears were flicking uneasily.

“Warriors are nothing like Slash,” Riverstar promised.

“Don’t worry,” Drizzle chimed. “They were just patrolling. It’s their duty to challenge intruders.”

“Even when we were just passing through?” Finch mewed.

Riverstar brushed against her reassuringly. “They let it go without a fight.”

“Am I supposed to be grateful they didn’t hurt us?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Will our kits have to patrol one day and threaten cats who’ve never

harmed them?”

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Riverstar promised her. “Patrolling borders helps keep the peace.” He realized he sounded like a mountain cat. Finch was staring at him the same way he must have once stared at Gray Wing and Clear Sky. “The Clans *help* each other too,” he mewed quickly. “That’s how we drove Slash away.”

Finch looked ahead and carried on walking in silence. Was she having second thoughts about coming?

Drizzle hurried ahead as they crossed the moortop. As they followed the slope toward the river, Riverstar could see her bounding through the heather. She looked happy to be home and waited for them, tail swishing, where the moor opened onto the grassy meadow that marked the border between WindClan and RiverClan.

As they reached her, Riverstar was pleased to find that the RiverClan border had been freshly marked. He smelled Mist’s scent and Spider Paw’s. The trees lining the river had turned orange. Curlews swooped above the water. The river sparkled in the afternoon sunshine. A purr rose in his throat as the familiar

scents of home bathed his tongue. “Look!” He turned to Finch. “Isn’t it beautiful—” He broke off.

Finch had dropped to her belly. She hunched as a spasm seemed to grip her and a low groan rolled in her throat.

Alarm sparked in Riverstar’s chest. “Are the kits coming?”

“It’s too soon.” Finch grunted.

He jerked his muzzle toward Drizzle. “Fetch Dappled Pelt.”

But she was already haring away across the field. “I’ll bring her back,” she called as she disappeared into the bushes at the far side.

Riverstar crouched beside Finch. “Is there anything I can do?” He felt helpless as Finch groaned again and curled in on herself as though trying to protect her belly. “Dappled Pelt won’t be long. She’ll know what to do.”

Moments became moons as he waited beside Finch, wanting to press against her, to reassure her, but frightened he’d cause her more pain. At last he heard paw steps and saw Dappled Pelt bounding toward them, a bunch of herbs in her jaws.

“You’re back.” Dappled Pelt sounded relieved, but she barely looked at Riverstar as she dropped down beside Finch. “Are the kits coming?”

Finch looked at her, eyes bright with fear. “I’ve had kits before. This doesn’t feel like it. Something’s wrong.”

Dappled Pelt ran a paw over Finch’s bulging flank. “She’s very thin,” she told Riverstar.

“We’ve traveled a long way.” Guilt surged through him. He’d promised to catch prey for her.

Dappled Pelt pushed thyme in front of Finch. “Eat this. It will calm you.” Once Finch had lapped up the leaves, she rested a paw on Finch’s flank. “Breathe with me.” Dappled Pelt drew in a long deep breath, and Finch followed. She breathed out, encouraging Finch to do the same with a nod.

Riverstar found himself breathing in time with them, and he felt his body relax, even though his mind was still racing and he couldn’t drag his gaze from Finch.

“Keep breathing slowly,” Dappled Pelt told Finch as Finch’s muscles seemed to loosen. Her convulsions eased.

“Will she be okay?” Riverstar looked nervously at Dappled Pelt.

“She’s tired and hungry from the journey,” Dappled Pelt told him. “She needs rest and plenty of food. This was just her body telling her to take it easy.”

Riverstar sank down beside Finch and rested his muzzle softly on her shoulder.

“When she’s calm enough, we’ll get her to my den, where I can keep an eye on her,” Dappled Pelt mewed.

It wasn’t long before Finch was struggling to her paws. Between them, Dappled Pelt and Riverstar guided her along the path to the camp entrance.

Finch shuddered against Riverstar and barely looked at her new home as he steered her into camp and across the clearing to Dappled Pelt’s den.

“Wait outside while I get her settled,” Dappled Pelt told him.

As Finch disappeared inside, Riverstar looked around the camp. He felt a prickle of surprise. A new den had been woven at one end, and the den Croak, Mist, and Dew had shared was larger and decorated with new shells.

“Night made a few changes.” Croak was padding toward him.

Mist and Shattered Ice trotted after her, their eyes shining.

“You’re back!” Mist swished his tail.

Shattered Ice purred. “We were beginning to think you were gone for good.”

“I promised I’d come back.” Riverstar looked around the camp. “Where is everyone?”

“Hunting,” Mist told him. “Training. Patrolling. We’re still a Clan, even without you.”

Riverstar heard reproach in Mist’s mew and felt a pang of guilt. He should apologize for having been gone so long. But Croak was padding toward the largest den, her eyes shining proudly. “We built this for the warriors,” she told him. Riverstar blinked. He’d already seen this den, in his meditation when he’d pictured visiting Night in her nest. Did that mean his words had reached her?

“This is the apprentices’ den.” Shattered Ice padded toward the smaller den, coated with moss. “Spider Paw, Snow Tail, Trout Fur, and Willow Stream sleep here.”

“What about Pine Needle?” Drizzle was already exploring the new dens, ducking in and out of them and sniffing the edges. “I bet he thinks he’s a warrior now.” She flicked her tail irritably. “I’ve got so much training to catch up on.”

Shattered Ice glanced at her. “He—”

The reeds at the entrance rustled, and Night padded into camp with Spider Paw. Dew and Hollow followed, pausing at the edge of the clearing as they saw Riverstar.

Spider Paw raced toward him. “You’re back!”

Hollow was frowning. “You took your time,” the black warrior grunted.

“Night was going to get her nine lives tonight.” Dew’s eyes glittered accusingly. “We thought you must be dead.”

“Of course he’s not dead!” Spider Paw wound around him. “I knew you’d make it home in time. You promised.”

Riverstar trailed his tail over Spider Paw’s back. “How’s training going?”

“There’s nothing left to learn,” he told Riverstar. “I’ve been begging Night to let me move to the

warriors' den, but she said we had to wait for you to decide."

Night had stopped in the middle of the clearing and was staring at Riverstar, her eyes dark. "We need to talk."

Alarm pulsed in Riverstar's paws. Was she angry he'd taken so long to return, or had something happened while he'd been gone? She nodded him toward a new den, woven among the roots of the willow tree at one end of the camp. He followed as she ducked inside. "Is this your new den?" There was a reed nest at one edge and the floor was smooth and sandy.

"It's yours, now that you're back," she mewed curtly. "I've been using it. I thought I was going to have to stay here for good." She stared at him. "What took you so long?"

He dipped his head. "I'm sorry."

"You said half a moon." Anger flashed in her eyes.

"The river was too high to ride on," he explained.

"The rain stopped nearly a moon ago," she snapped. "The river started to fall almost at once. Why didn't you come back then?"

Riverstar glanced toward the den entrance. “I found a mate,” he admitted. “I had to persuade her to come with me. She’s expecting my kits.”

Night didn’t move for a moment. Then she flicked her tail. “I thought you’d *died!*” Her eyes glistened suddenly, and her voice tightened. “How could you have left me wondering like that?”

“I know.” Riverstar didn’t want to make excuses. “It must have been hard. But I didn’t want to leave Finch behind, and she didn’t want to come—”

“You left her behind?”

“No,” Riverstar mewed quickly. “She’s in the medicine den.”

“Is she okay?” Night looked worried. “Are the kits okay?”

“Yes.” He felt relieved. Finch was in good paws, and Night’s anger seemed to be ebbing. “Dappled Pelt said she’s just hungry and tired from the journey.”

Night looked away. “It’s been hard without you,” she mewed. “Croak, Hollow, and all of Kite Wing’s kits have had whitecough, and Skystar’s been causing trouble again.”

Riverstar pricked his ears. “Spotted Fur said

something about Skystar when we met him on the moor. What's he been doing?"

"A tree came down in the storms," Night told him. "It's created a bridge across the river, and Skystar's warriors have been using it to cross into our territory to hunt."

"Didn't you challenge him?" Riverstar blinked at her.

"Of course I did!" she snapped. "But you know what he's like. He said RiverClan isn't a real Clan without a leader."

"I made *you* leader while I was away."

"Skystar said a leader has nine lives." She sat down wearily. "I didn't want to fight him. I couldn't risk a war while you were away."

"Riverstar!" Drizzle's mew sounded outside. She burst into the den, her eyes glittering with panic. "Dawn Mist's left with Moss Tail and Pine Needle."

Riverstar blinked at her. "Where have they gone?"

"Twolegplace!" Drizzle looked distraught. "Hollow said they left a quarter moon ago!"

He swung his muzzle toward Night. "What made them leave?" he asked her.

“They were scared that Skystar would take RiverClan over,” Night told him. “After Slash, they couldn’t face being pushed around by another bully.”

Drizzle looked dismayed. “They should have stayed to fight,” she mewed. “They had Clanmates this time.”

Riverstar felt a rush of sympathy for Dawn Mist and Moss Tail. “I’m not going to let Skystar take over RiverClan.” He turned to Drizzle. “I’ll bring your kin back and make sure Skystar doesn’t trespass on our land again.” He blinked affectionately at Night. “The camp looks great,” he mewed. “And Mist said you’ve been keeping up the patrols.” He padded to the den entrance and gazed out. “You’ve done well while I’ve been away. But I’m home now.” The sun was beginning to set, throwing golden light across the river. “And I’m going to make sure no cat bullies RiverClan.”



Chapter 32



The morning brought a heavy dew, and mist hung over the river. Leaves drifted around the edges of the camp, and the air was fragrant with the musty scent of the reeds as they began to die back after the long, warm days of greenleaf.

Riverstar padded happily from his den. He was back where he belonged. Kite Wing was stretching in the weak sunshine. Mist nodded to him cheerfully, and Shattered Ice lifted his tail in greeting. But Hollow was still glowering at him, and Dew ignored him as she crossed the clearing to pick a stale chub from the prey pile. He didn't blame them. He'd stayed away too long, but he was going to earn their forgiveness and their trust once more.

He padded to the medicine den and ducked inside.

Finch was awake and looked up as he entered. "Hi, Riverstar."

Dappled Pelt was pulling watermint from her herb store. "She needs more rest," she warned him.

"I'm okay now, honestly," Finch mewed.

“A morning’s rest will be good for your kits,” Dappled Pelt told her firmly.

“But the Clan might think I’m being rude hiding in here.” Finch blinked at her.

“If they do, I’ll set them straight,” Dappled Pelt mewed.

“I’ll introduce you to everyone this afternoon,” Riverstar promised. “And show you around the camp.”

“We should build a nursery,” Dappled Pelt mewed. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while. The warriors’ den is no place for queens or kits, and the medicine den is for sick cats, not healthy ones.”

“I’ll see to it,” Riverstar mewed.

“Make it strong.” Dappled Pelt began to sort through the watermint, checking for rotten leaves.

“I’ll send Kite Wing and Mist to collect willow stems,” he mewed. “It’ll be the strongest den in the camp.”

Finch shifted in her nest. “I’m hungry.”

“I’ll bring you some prey,” Riverstar told her.

“I’ll fetch her some,” Dappled Pelt mewed. “It’s your first day back. You should organize the morning patrols.”

Riverstar had forgotten the rhythm of Clan life. His Clanmates were probably already waiting for orders. “Take care.” He touched his nose to Finch’s head. “I’ll see you later.” Ducking out of the den, he scanned the clearing.

Dew, Croak, Mist, and the other warriors were milling around Night. They must be used to taking orders from her. Snow Tail hung back with Trout Fur and Willow Stream, while Spider Paw charged across the clearing to meet Riverstar.

“Are we training today?” The young tom whisked his tail. “Did you learn any new battle moves while you were away?”

“No,” Riverstar mewed. “But we could invent some.”

“Yeah!” Spider Paw’s eyes shone.

Drizzle padded toward them. “Shouldn’t we mark the borders first? We need to let Skystar know you’re back.”

“Good idea.” Riverstar called to the warriors. “Hollow, Dew!” They looked at him, narrowing their eyes. “I want you to come on border patrol with me. Kite Wing and Mist. I need you to collect willow stems

to weave the frame for a nursery.” Mist nodded. Kite Wing dipped her head. “Night, take the rest of the Clan fishing. I want the prey pile full by sunhigh.”

“What about me?” Spider Paw blinked eagerly at Riverstar.

“You’re coming with me, Hollow, and Dew.”

Spider Paw looked pleased. He hurried to the entrance and paced impatiently as Riverstar waited for Hollow and Dew to join him.

The two warriors exchanged glances as though reluctant to take orders from him, but Riverstar waited quietly until they turned and headed for the entrance.

He followed and let Spider Paw lead them along the path to the shore. Then he took the lead, brushing past Hollow and slipping in front of Dew. They marked the border, taking turns as they traced it around the water meadow before returning back to the river.

As they reached the shore, Hollow nodded upstream. “That’s the bridge.” He was looking at a fallen oak. It spanned the river, its branches splayed over SkyClan’s shore, its torn roots poking out on the other side. “That’s where Skystar’s been crossing.”

“Let’s make sure he knows it’s RiverClan land

from now on.” Riverstar padded between the exposed roots, marking them too.

Hollow hung back. “I don’t really blame Skystar for hunting here.”

“It must have looked like an open invitation,” Dew grunted, “when you stayed away so long.”

Riverstar looked at them. “I’m back now,” he growled. “We’re marking a border along the shore. Skystar’s not hunting here again.” He began to mark farther along the shore. Spider Paw hurried after him and joined in.

Dew and Hollow didn’t move.

“Well?” Riverstar looked back at them. “Are you going to help, or do you *want* Skystar to think he can hunt here?”

They were still hesitating.

Riverstar’s pelt pricked with irritation. He faced them. “I know I left you,” he mewed. “But I’m not going to leave you again. We’re a Clan. You proved that by staying even after I’d left. You proved it by building new dens and following Night’s orders. You proved it by staying true to the warrior code.” He looked from one to the other. “Prove it now. Make

sure Skystar doesn't set paw on our land."

As he spoke, warriors slid from the trees on the far shore. *SkyClan*. Skystar led Acorn Fur, Thorn, and Alder across the mud. They picked their way around the branches of the fallen oak and hopped onto the trunk. Skystar began to lead them across the river.

Hollow growled. "Can't they *see* us?"

Dew arched her back. "I'll shred them."

"Wait." Riverstar padded toward the SkyClan patrol.

Skystar stopped and looked down at him from the oak, his blue gaze glittering. "You came back." He sniffed. "I thought you'd decided to become a loner again."

"I was never a loner," Riverstar growled.

"Then a park cat or *whatever* you were." There was scorn in Skystar's mew.

"I'm a warrior." Riverstar glared at him. "And this is my territory."

Skystar's whiskers twitched with amusement. "I thought you didn't believe in territory."

"I believe in protecting my Clan," Riverstar growled.

Skystar took another step forward but halted as Hollow and Dew lined up behind Riverstar with Spider Paw.

“This tree fell and made a river crossing for us,” Skystar mewed. “It was a sign from StarClan that we can hunt here.”

“It was a sign that a tree with rotten roots can’t survive a storm.” Riverstar met Skystar’s gaze. “Before you start challenging RiverClan, make sure your roots are deep and strong, Skystar, because we won’t give in easily.” He flexed his claws. “We won’t give in at all.”

“What happened to you while you were away?” Skystar narrowed his eyes. “You’re beginning to sound like a warrior.” He turned away, swishing his tail. “But who knows how long you’ll stay this time? You might be gone again in another moon, and the rest of your Clan will run away to the Twolegplace like those strays you took in.”

“Dawn Mist and Moss Tail aren’t strays,” Riverstar snapped. “And they’ll be back. My Clanmates are loyal, and I’d trust them with my life.”

Skystar glanced over his shoulder. “Do they think

the same about you?" He held Riverstar's gaze. "This tree-bridge is StarClan's gift to SkyClan. It's their way of saying they want us to take your land. And SkyClan always obeys StarClan." He leaped down from the oak and led his patrol back into the forest.

Riverstar curled his claws into the mud. "No cat takes RiverClan land," he growled. "Not as long as I'm here. And I'm here to stay."

They finished marking the shore and the meadow and the edge of the reed beds before returning to camp. Kite Wing and Mist had already gathered a stack of willow stems by the time they got back, and the prey pile was full. Night looked up as Riverstar led his patrol into camp. She was sharing a trout with Mist and looked relaxed, as though relieved to be a warrior again instead of a leader.

Finch was out of the medicine den, resting in a patch of grass while Drizzle pressed soft moss around her to make her comfortable. Finch seemed at home already, chatting with Kite Wing while Snow Tail, Trout Fur, and Willow Stream shared tongues beside them.

"You seem to be getting to know everyone." Riverstar padded to Finch's side and touched his nose

to her ear. "Are you feeling better?"

"Much better." Finch blinked at him fondly.

"Drizzle's been telling us how Finch saved her from the rapids even though she can barely swim," Kite Wing mewed.

"I'm a fast learner," Finch mewed.

"You'll soon be swimming like a fish," Kite Wing mewed.

Riverstar sat down, pleased to see Finch settling in.

Dew and Hollow crossed to the prey pile and took prey. Spider Paw hurried over to Kite Wing's kits with a chub he'd caught and began sharing it with them.

"We met Skystar," Dew mewed darkly as she settled down with a loach.

Hollow sat beside her. "He was crossing the tree-bridge."

Night tensed. "Did you stop him?"

"Of course." Riverstar swished his tail.

"He's planning on coming back," Hollow told her. "He says the tree-bridge is StarClan's way of saying our land belongs to him."

Mist had been dozing, but he opened his eyes. "It could be their way of saying Skystar's land belongs to

us.” His whiskers twitched with amusement.

Drizzle pretended to shudder. “We’d have to hunt *land* prey.”

“We shouldn’t joke,” Hollow mewed. “SkyClan is half rogue. They’ll be vicious fighters. Do you think we can hold them off forever?”

Riverstar shifted uneasily. Hollow had a point. It would be a hard battle if they stood up to Skystar. He’d spent his life beside the river trying to avoid battles and keep the peace. But that was when he’d been alone, before he had a Clan to protect. Or a mate. Soon he’d have kits to protect too.

Perhaps peace felt more achievable when you had only yourself to protect, when your own life was the only thing you could lose. When he looked back at his life as Ripple and then as River Ripple, he couldn’t imagine taking on a bully like Skystar. He’d have left the river rather than battle over prey or land. But he also hadn’t built anything worth defending yet: a partnership, a family, or a Clan.

They were all worth defending. RiverClan was so much bigger than him . . . and it had to survive.

Now he looked around the clearing at his

Clanmates. He didn't care how hard the battle would be. He only knew that he was responsible for them and that if Skystar was determined to push him into a war, he would face the arrogant mountain cat. If necessary, he would fight him. And he would win.



Chapter 33



Riverstar blinked at Night in surprise. “How long have you known where Cleo lives?” They’d left their former campmate in her garden a few moments earlier and were creeping quietly with Drizzle through the shadows past her Twoleg den.

“I met her last moon when I led a search patrol here,” Night told him.

“Search patrol?” Riverstar looked at her. “Who were you searching for?”

“You, of course.” Night rolled her eyes. “Croak recognized her scent while we were sniffing around the Twoleg dens.”

Cleo had told them that three new cats had moved in with the strays that lived on the Carrionplace farther along the Thunderpath. She’d been delighted to see Riverstar again and eager to help find Dawn Mist, Moss Tail, and Pine Needle. Hunter and Scout still lived with her, Casper too, and she seemed happy to be back in her Twoleg home.

Drizzle’s pelt was fluffed with excitement. “Do

you think Cleo's right?" she mewed. "Do you think it's really my kin who've moved into the waste ground?"

"I hope so." After yesterday's run-in with Skystar, Riverstar knew he needed all his warriors if he was going to stand up to SkyClan. It would mean persuading Dawn Mist and Moss Tail to return with Pine Needle. He needed to do it quickly. The Fourtrees Gathering was tomorrow. He wanted Skystar to see that Riverstar was at full strength again.

They tracked the Thunderpath Cleo had pointed to, ducking away from the occasional monster sweeping past, and followed it to a stretch of patchy woodland which opened onto a scrubby meadow. The meadow was enclosed by a mesh fence. An entrance gaped at one end, and Riverstar led Night and Drizzle through it, his ears pricked warily. Stark Twoleg lights glared from the top of the fence, illuminating piles of monsters, old and broken and worn down to the bone.

Drizzle moved closer to Riverstar. "Are they dead?" she asked nervously.

"They're not breathing." Riverstar's pelt pricked at the eerie silence.

"Why don't the Twolegs bury them?"

Night's gaze flashed toward a large rat scuttling among the monster bones. "It seems cruel to leave them for scavengers to pick clean."

A skinny tom darted from the shadows and lunged toward the rat. The rat shot away and the tom chased after it, lashing his tail with frustration as it disappeared into a hole. The tom turned his head and looked at Riverstar and his Clanmates. He frowned, then slunk away behind the pile of bones.

Drizzle was scanning the waste ground in dismay. It smelled rank, like carrion rotting on a Thunderpath. "Why would Dawn Mist and Moss Tail want to live *here*?"

"Who knows?" Night grunted. "I'd rather take my chances with Skystar."

"No one's taking chances *anywhere*," Riverstar swished his tail. He was going to unite his Clan and protect them.

Riverstar shuddered. The place smelled of carrion along with a sour Twoleg stench he'd never smelled beside the river.

Drizzle padded into the glare to the Twoleg lights. "Dawn Mist?" she called softly. "Moss Tail? Pine

Needle?"

A shadow moved beneath a monster carcass. "Drizzle?"

Drizzle hurried toward it. "Dawn Mist?"

"Be careful." Riverstar padded after her, his hackles twitching. He didn't trust this place.

Dawn Mist crept out into the light. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you!" Drizzle raced to meet her and rubbed her muzzle along her mother's jaw.

Pine Needle scabbled down from a pile of bones. "Drizzle! You're back!" He landed beside his littermate and whisked his tail happily.

Dawn Mist was looking at Riverstar. Wariness gleamed in her eyes. "Why are you here?"

"We've come to ask you to come home." He blinked at her hopefully.

"Is it safe?" Moss Tail's mew sounded behind him and Riverstar turned to see the dark brown tabby watching him nervously.

"It's safer than here." Riverstar glanced at one of the towering piles of monster bones. It looked as though it could tip over at any moment.

“Have you driven Skystar off our land?” Moss Tail asked.

“I plan to.” Riverstar met his gaze steadily. “But I’ll need my *whole* Clan to help me.”

Moss Tail narrowed his eyes. “You want us to come back to *fight*?”

“I’m hoping that, with you and Dawn Mist and Pine Needle beside me, it won’t come to a fight.”

Pine Needle flexed his claws. “*I’ll* fight Skystar,” he growled.

Dawn Mist’s eyes flashed in alarm. “I don’t want my kin to get hurt.” She looked at Drizzle. “It was hard enough losing you.”

“You didn’t lose me,” Drizzle told her.

“You left,” Dawn Mist mewed. “And we didn’t know if you were dead or alive.”

“I was with Riverstar,” Drizzle told her mother. “Of course I’d be alive.”

Dawn Mist’s gaze flicked to Riverstar. “Did you get rid of Slash?”

“He’s dead.”

Moss Tail padded closer. “Are you sure?”

“He fell into the river,” Drizzle mewed cheerfully.

“We watched him drown.”

Pine Needle growled to himself. “Good riddance.”

Night padded to Riverstar’s side. “There’s nothing to fear anymore,” she mewed.

“Except Skystar,” Moss Tail muttered.

“Skystar may be arrogant,” Riverstar mewed, “but he’s a warrior. He’s not like Slash.”

“He wants to steal our land,” Dawn Mist mewed. “That’s kind of like Slash.”

“He wants to take over the Clan,” Moss Tail added. “That’s *exactly* like Slash.”

“I won’t let him.” Riverstar gazed at the three cats. “But I need you to come home. You’re warriors now.” He looked around the waste ground. Loners were beginning to creep out from beneath the monsters. They watched, their eyes bright with curiosity. “Warriors don’t walk away from a challenge.”

“*I’ll* come back.” Pine Needle’s fur was fluffed with excitement.

Riverstar flicked his gaze back to Moss Tail. “And *you*? Will *you* come?”

Moss Tail glanced at Dawn Mist. They looked at

each other for a moment and then seemed to decide.

“We’ll come,” Dawn Mist mewed.

A knot loosened in Riverstar’s heart. “Good.”

Some of the loners trailed them a little of the way back to camp, clearly still curious about the strangers who’d come to their home. Riverstar wondered whether to return to the waste ground another time to see if any of them would make decent warriors. But for now he needed cats around him he knew and could trust.

The moon was high in the sky by the time they reached the island, but the Clan was awake, waiting to see if his mission had been a success.

Croak hurried across the clearing to greet Dawn Mist as they arrived. Dappled Pelt lifted her tail in greeting. Hollow eyed Moss Tail as warily as he’d eyed Riverstar on his return. Snow Tail and Willow Stream wound happily around Pine Needle. They’d clearly missed their denmate. Spider Paw and Trout Fur hung back, but their eyes shone happily as the Clan greeted their returning Clanmates.

Riverstar padded to the head of the clearing. “We are one Clan once more.” His Clanmates turned to

listen as he spoke. "I will never leave you again, and I hope that from now on, you have enough faith in me and in RiverClan to stay and uphold the values we've come to believe in." He met the gazes of Night, then Mist, then Hollow. "Loyalty, honor, courage, and faith in StarClan. These are the values of a warrior." One by one, he looked around at his Clanmates. "Peace, community, and kinship. These are the values of *RiverClan*."

They looked at each other, and he saw pride begin to glisten in their eyes.

"RiverClan!" Croak's mew rose into the night sky.

"RiverClan!" Dew called out beside her.

"RiverClan!" As Shattered Ice and Dappled Pelt yowled, their Clanmates lifted their voices to join them.

Riverstar's heart swelled as he heard his warriors' chant. But he hadn't finished. "Drizzle." The Clan fell silent as he beckoned her into the middle of the clearing with a flick of his tail. He padded to meet her. "From this night onward, you will sleep in the warriors' den," he mewed. "You are courageous, smart, and loyal. You have earned a place as a full warrior of *RiverClan*."

She blinked at him, her eyes reflecting the moonlight. "Thank you!"

"Pine Needle." Riverstar beckoned her littermate forward. "While I was gone, you protected your parents and stayed by their side. You are loyal and brave, and from this night on, you will sleep in the warriors' den. You too have earned a place as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Pine Needle's tail fluffed happily. "Thank you!"

Around the clearing, the cats murmured their approval.

"There's a spare nest next to mine," Mist told Pine Needle.

"We can make you a new nest tonight," Dew told Drizzle eagerly.

Riverstar turned his gaze to Kite Wing's kits. They were standing with their mother, their eyes sparking as he blinked at them. "Come forward, Kite Wing's kits."

Snow Tail's fur rippled along his spine. "Have we done something wrong?"

Riverstar purred. "You must learn to worry less." He beckoned Trout Fur and Willow Stream closer. "You three kits were the first to be born into

RiverClan. We are stronger for having you, and I hope that one day you will have kits in your turn and make RiverClan stronger still.” He dipped his head respectfully to Kite Wing before flicking his gaze back to her kits. They shifted nervously in front of him. “You’ve been sleeping in the apprentices’ den for a while, and Croak, Dawn Mist, and Moss Tail have been training you. But it’s time we acknowledge it formally. From tonight, Croak will be Snow Tail’s mentor, Dawn Mist will be Trout Fur’s, and Moss Tail will be Willow Stream’s. I hope that, very soon, you will become warriors too.”

Spider Paw took a step forward, looking at Riverstar. “What about me?” he mewed. “Can I sleep in the warriors’ den with Drizzle and Pine Needle?”

Riverstar swished his tail. “Not yet. But you will have a mentor.” He turned toward Drizzle. “She is one of our newest warriors, but she has traveled far and shown great courage. Drizzle?” For the second time that night, he beckoned her forward. “From tonight onward, you will be Spider Paw’s mentor.”

Drizzle’s eyes lit up. She puffed out her chest as she padded toward Spider Paw. “I’ll do my best to

teach you everything I know,” she mewed.

Spider Paw looked delighted. “Will you teach me the fighting moves you used on Slash’s rogues?”

“Sure.” She purred. “But they’re quite complex.”

Pine Needle sniffed. “I bet they’re the same ones you used to use on me when we were play fighting in our den.”

Drizzle shot her brother a look. “I beat you then and I could beat you now.”

Hollow’s eyes shone teasingly. “Why don’t you show us?”

“Yes! Show us!” called Croak.

Around the clearing, the Clan began to purr. Riverstar sat down. They were united. They were strong and loyal. Still, darkness tugged at the edge of his thoughts. Would that be enough to keep Skystar from taking over their territory?

The mist that had lingered all day cleared with the clouds as the afternoon wore on, and now the sky was bright with moonlight as the Clans shifted beneath the four great oaks. The air was cold and a sharp breeze carried the scent of the moors down into the hollow as Riverstar left his Clanmates and wove his way

between warriors and apprentices, making his way to the Great Rock. Before he jumped up to take his place beside the other leaders, he glanced back, over the heads of the other Clans, to his own Clanmates.

Drizzle held her head up proudly and nudged Spider Paw, who was fidgeting beside her. Spider Paw instantly stood still and lifted his chin. Snow Tail and Trout Fur stared across the crowded clearing with wide, dark eyes. This was their first Gathering and the two toms looked anxious. But Willow Stream had left her brothers and nosed her way to a knot of ThunderClan and WindClan apprentices. She was chatting with them eagerly and demonstrating a new move Moss Tail had taught her.

Riverstar had brought nearly the whole Clan with him. He wanted Skystar to see that RiverClan was strong. But he was nervous about leaving the camp so vulnerable. Finch was back there, too close to kitting to make the journey to the Fourtrees hollow. His belly tightened. Surely, Skystar wouldn't take this opportunity to attack the camp? He might be arrogant and greedy, but he wasn't a rogue. Still, Riverstar had left Shattered Ice and Mist to guard the camp just in

case.

He leaped onto the Great Rock and padded across the cold stone to take his place beside Thunderstar.

“I heard you were back!” Thunderstar’s eyes shone as he saw Riverstar. “What kept you so long?”

“I was dealing with Slash, once and for all,” Riverstar told him.

“Slash?” Windstar swung her gaze toward him. “I thought we’d seen the last of him.”

Riverstar gazed across the sea of warriors. “He was bullying some cats I used to know.”

“*Used* to know?” Shadowstar glanced at him. “Does that mean you won’t be going back again, or are you still wondering where your loyalties lie?”

“I’m here now.” He met her gaze calmly, refusing to be riled.

Skystar leaped onto the Great Rock, and Riverstar felt the SkyClan leader’s gaze flash over him like fire.

Riverstar acknowledged him with a curt nod. “I hope you remember that these Gatherings are supposed to be peaceful.”

Skystar ignored him and took his place beside Shadowstar. The other leaders glanced at each other

curiously.

“Has something happened?” Thunderstar asked. “The air up here seems to have suddenly turned chilly.”

Skystar sniffed. “It’s nothing StarClan doesn’t approve of.”

“We’ll see about that.” Riverstar swept his tail over his paws.

Windstar padded forward and waited until the murmuring below quieted. “Leaf-fall has fattened prey for us,” she mewed. “We thank StarClan for the good hunting before the long moons of leaf-bare.”

“Forest prey has been rich too,” Lightning Tail called from below.

“There are more squirrels in the pines than we ever dreamed of,” Jagged Peak mewed. His Clanmates nodded, exchanging glances, looking pleased with themselves.

Windstar went on. “We had an outbreak of greencough,” she mewed. “Black Ear and Silver Stripe were sick, but they’re recovering thanks to Moth Flight’s care.” She gazed down at her daughter, who was sitting at the side of the clearing with Dappled

Pelt, Cloud Spots, Pebble Heart, and Acorn Fur. Then she went on. "A patrol smelled a fox at the edge of the moor." She looked at Riverstar. "You should organize bigger patrols for a while. We'll drive it off if we can, but it might head your way. I'll send a warrior with a message if it does."

Riverstar dipped his head gratefully. His heart was pounding. How much more ordinary Clan business would they need to discuss before he could speak? His paws pricked eagerly as Windstar stepped back, and he took her place quickly.

"I'm back." Riverstar swept his gaze across the Clans as the warriors murmured among themselves. He swished his tail slowly. He wanted every warrior here to be sure that RiverClan had a leader now, and one who would protect them. "I killed Slash while I was away, so the Clans don't need to fear him any longer."

"We stopped fearing that rogue moons ago," Star Flower growled from among the SkyClan cats.

Riverstar stared at her. "There was a time when you were grateful for our help against Slash," he mewed.

She glared at him defiantly. "That doesn't mean you can dangle it over us like prey every time you want to show off."

Riverstar swallowed back irritation. Was arrogance contagious? Had all of SkyClan caught it from Skystar? He changed the subject. "My mate, Finch, has returned with me, and she's expecting my kits. And RiverClan has four new apprentices." He paused and looked at Moth Flight. "Spider Paw is among them." Her eyes glowed proudly as he went on. "Drizzle is his mentor. She will train him well. In another moon he will be a fine RiverClan warrior." He lifted his chin. "We also have two new warriors." He paused again. SkyClan should know that RiverClan wouldn't be easy to push around. "I was dismayed to learn on my return that SkyClan has been hunting on our land. This breaks the agreement between all the Clans to respect one another's borders." He turned to look at Windstar, Thunderstar, and Shadowstar. "I ask my fellow leaders to stand with RiverClan against SkyClan's aggression."

Windstar and Shadowstar looked uncomfortable, but Thunderstar's gaze flashed toward his father.

“Why can’t you be satisfied with your own territory?”

Skystar padded forward and glared at Riverstar. “I thought you didn’t believe in borders,” he growled. “How was I supposed to know you’d mind us crossing the river? Besides, without a leader, was RiverClan even a *Clan*? Did they have a right to mark a border?”

“I’m back now,” Riverstar snapped.

“It’s a bit late.” Skystar’s pelt was as smooth as his mew. “StarClan has already made its decision.”

Thunderstar glared at him. “What are you talking about? StarClan hasn’t spoken.”

“They felled the tree that allows us to cross the river,” Skystar mewed.

“Nonsense.” Thunderstar’s pelt was twitching angrily. “You’re just using StarClan to justify your greed.”

Riverstar hadn’t taken his eyes from Skystar. His pelt pricked with irritation, but he wouldn’t be goaded into fighting. He was not, and never would be, a mountain cat. He was Riverstar, and he would speak for his Clan. “I won’t let you take prey from the mouths of RiverClan cats,” he meowed. “I’m a peaceful cat. I abhor violence for violence’s sake. But

I warn you, don't try to test me. RiverClan has boundaries and they must be respected. All my cats are trained for battle, and any SkyClan cat caught on my land will regret it."

"We'll shred you!" Kite Wing yowled from below.

"We'll rip your pelts off!" Hollow snarled.

Skystar narrowed his eyes. "Do you really think RiverClan can beat SkyClan?" he mewed.

"If we have to." Riverstar looked at the other leaders. "You'll back me up, right?"

"Of course we will!" Thunderstar lashed his tail.

But Windstar was avoiding Riverstar's gaze, and Shadowstar shifted her paws uneasily.

Skystar glanced from them to Riverstar, his eyes glinting with pleasure.

Riverstar felt a rush of anger. "SkyClan has broken the warrior code!"

Shadowstar looked at him. "Of course Clans must respect borders," she mewed. "But we won't fight your battles for you. If RiverClan is trained for battle and won't be pushed—well, it's time to push back."

RiverClan stared at her, hardly able to believe his ears. Was she siding with Skystar?

WindClan cleared her throat. "Until now, you've questioned the need for borders, Riverstar." She glanced at him before turning her gaze back to the warriors below. "Before we fight to protect them for you, we need to see that you're willing to protect them for yourselves."

Riverstar saw Thunderstar bristle, but the ThunderClan leader didn't speak. Was he intimidated by the other leaders? "Surely, you'll back me up?" Riverstar blinked at him.

"If you fight, then we'll support you." Thunderstar met his gaze solemnly. "But Windstar has a point. We need to see that RiverClan is prepared to fight its own battles before we risk our warriors and our peace to protect you."

Riverstar curled his claws against the stone in frustration. He knew he wasn't a mountain cat. But even now, after being leaders together for so many moons, were they so different?

Yes, he realized, fluffing out his pelt. *I am different.* He was different from the park cats who'd raised him, and different from the Clan cats he'd willingly joined. He was not a loner, not a rogue, not a

killer like One Eye or Slash. He was no longer Ripple, nor River Ripple. *I am Riverstar*, he thought proudly, remembering what Gray Wing had told him before the battle that had killed Slash. *I am an outsider, and perhaps I always will be. But if they won't help me—I will settle this as only I can.*

“Fine,” he growled. “We’ll show you that RiverClan is willing to use claws if words can’t help.” Narrowing his eyes to slits, he leaped from the Great Rock and shouldered his way through the startled warriors below, beckoning his Clanmates to follow him as he pushed his way into the ferns and headed home.

Determination was still pulsing beneath his pelt as he reached the island. Night hadn’t spoken, nor had his other Clanmates, but he could see by the determination in their eyes that they agreed with him. They would fight if that was what it took to drive Skystar from their land.

“Riverstar!” Mist’s anxious mew took him by surprise. The black-and-white tom was pacing the clearing. His eyes glittered with worry as Riverstar led the patrol into camp.

“What’s wrong?” Alarm sparked through

Riverstar's fur. Had Skystar sent a patrol why he'd been away? A wail sounded from Dappled Pelt's den. He jerked his muzzle around. *Finch!*

"Croak's with her," Mist told him.

Dappled Pelt was already hurrying toward the sedge,

"Is she hurt?" Riverstar blinked in panic at Mist.

His eyes rounded. "Of course not, you mouse-brain. She's having your kits!"



Chapter 34



“Finch.” Riverstar skidded into the medicine den. Moonlight was filtering through the roof, just enough to light Croak, who was standing to one side, her fur ruffled, as Dappled Pelt crouched over the reed nest where Finch lay.

Finch’s eyes were bright with pain. She lifted her head as she saw Riverstar. “It’s okay,” she panted. “I’ve done this before.”

“I haven’t.” Heart fluttering with fear, Riverstar slid past Dappled Pelt and began lapping Finch’s head urgently. “Does it hurt?”

“Of course it hurts!” Finch nudged him away.

“What can I do?” He blinked at her helplessly. He remembered Kite Wing’s kitting. That had been frightening enough, but this was his mate. And his kits. This time Riverstar couldn’t search for sticks. He didn’t want to.

“I can find a stick for Finch to bite on.” Croak hurried out of the den, as though grateful to have an excuse to leave.

“Find one that won’t splinter when she bites down on it!” he called after Croak.

Dappled Pelt was resting a paw gently on Finch’s belly as Finch stiffened and convulsed.

“Are the kits coming?” Riverstar gasped.

“Yes.” Dappled Pelt’s mew was calm. “And Finch is going to need you, so don’t pass out from panic. Use some of that meditation breathing you taught us, and when you’ve slowed down, get Finch to join in.”

“Okay.” Riverstar took a breath, forcing himself to draw it in and let it slowly out. Finch groaned a long, low groan, and Riverstar tensed but made himself keep breathing slowly in and out. He began to calm. “Breathe with me,” he told Finch, gazing into her round green eyes.

She looked at him gratefully and began to match her breathing to his. Another convulsion gripped her, and she closed her eyes, shuddering.

“Here comes the first kit.” Dappled Pelt leaned forward, and a moment later lifted her head and swung a tiny silver she-kit toward them. She laid it beside Finch’s cheek, and Finch turned to lick it.

Riverstar stared down at the wet scrap of fur. *My*

daughter. His heart swelled. He touched his nose to her, purring louder as Finch paused to lap his cheek before turning back to the kit.

Then she stiffened. With another long groan she curled into a ball. Riverstar moved the kit to the side of the nest as Finch jerked, her groan deepening.

“Is that another one coming?” Riverstar blinked eagerly at Dappled Pelt.

“Soon.” Dappled Pelt didn’t take her eyes off Finch.

Riverstar waited. His heart quickened. Would the next one be another she-kit? Or a tom-kit? Excitement swirled in his chest.

Finch was breathing fast now, low yowls rolling in her throat.

“Get her to slow her breathing.” Dappled Pelt’s mew was taut.

Riverstar tensed. “Is something wrong?”

“Just get her to *breathe*!” Dappled Pelt snapped.

Dappled Pelt was worried. Riverstar pressed back panic. He tried to catch Finch’s eye but she seemed lost in pain. “Breathe in,” he mewed. “Slowly.” She didn’t seem to hear him. He touched his paw to her

head. She flicked it away.

“Finch.” Dappled Pelt looked at her sternly. “I want you to listen.”

She sounded so serious that Riverstar’s heart began to pound.

“This kit is stuck,” she mewed. “I need you to try to relax while I move it. Focus on Riverstar. Listen to what he tells you.”

Finch looked at Dappled Pelt from beneath a furrowed brow and nodded.

Riverstar kept his paw to Finch’s cheek as she laid back in her nest, as though forcing herself to be still.

“Breathe in,” he mewed. “Like me.” He took a long, deep breath, filling his lungs until Finch copied him. He held his breath for a few moments, then let it out slowly. “Breathe out,” he mewed. Finch was looking into his eyes now, holding his gaze with a desperation that made his heart ache. “Breathe in,” he mewed. Slowly, they breathed together, in and out, while Dappled Pelt stroked Finch’s belly. A convulsion gripped Finch, but she seemed to fight it, pressing into her nest. Convulsion after convulsion, Finch struggled to stay calm, until finally Dappled Pelt looked at her.

“You can push now.”

Letting out a long, relieved breath, Finch bore down, and a moment later Dappled Pelt lifted a kit between her jaws and placed it beside Riverstar.

The sedge rustled as Croak pushed her way in. She dropped a short, stout stick proudly beside the nest. “Will this help?” She stiffened as she saw Riverstar’s ruffled pelt. “What’s wrong?”

“Take the she-kit to the other side of the den and keep it warm,” Dappled Pelt told her. As Croak grabbed the tiny silver kit from Finch’s nest and carried it away, Dappled Pelt looked at Riverstar. Her eyes were dark. “Lick it.” She nodded to the small bundle she’d dropped at his paws a moment earlier.

He hesitated.

“Do it!” Dappled Pelt sounded scared. “Fast, firm licks.”

Riverstar realized with a burst of panic that the kit wasn’t moving.

“*Now!*” Dappled Pelt snapped. “*Quickly!*”

Riverstar began to lap the kit. It felt so small and soft beneath his tongue that he was frightened of hurting it.

“Harder,” Dappled Pelt had turned back to Finch. “You have to get it breathing.”

“It’s not breathing?” Finch tried to struggle toward it, but Dappled Pelt pushed her back.

“Riverstar will take care of it. You focus on *this* kit.”

As a new convulsion grasped Finch, Riverstar began lapping the kit harder. His heart fluttered frantically in his chest. *Breathe!* His thoughts whirled. *Please!*

“Keep going!” Dappled Pelt told him.

He kept licking, willing the kit to breathe, desperation driving him even though he wanted to freeze as panic gripped him.

Suddenly he felt the kit twitch beneath his tongue. It let out a tiny wail.

“Well done.” Dappled Pelt was still leaning over Finch. “Keep going. Gently now.”

Riverstar felt weak with gratitude as he kept licking the tiny kit. It was squirming now. It was alive. And it was a tom-kit, its pelt black like its mother’s. He wanted to see how Finch was doing but he didn’t dare stop working on the kit.

Finally he felt a muzzle touch his shoulder.

“You can stop now.”

He looked up. Dappled Pelt was gazing at him. “Is everything okay?” he asked.

“You have another tom-kit.” She nodded toward a small gray kit wriggling beside Finch’s muzzle.

Dappled Pelt leaned down and inspected the kit Riverstar had saved, then picked it up between her teeth and swung it into the nest beside its tiny gray brother. She nodded to Croak. “You can bring the she-kit to join them now,” she mewed softly.

Riverstar blinked at Finch, his heart so full of love he could barely speak. As Croak laid the she-kit beside the others and padded away, he touched his nose to Finch’s muzzle. “You were so brave,” he mewed.

“So were you.” She blinked at him.

“I’ll leave you in peace.” Dappled Pelt dipped her head and nosed her way out of the den.

Alone now, Riverstar sat beside the nest. “They’re so beautiful,” he mewed, looking at the kits squirming at Finch’s belly, burrowing into her soft fur. “*You’re* beautiful.” She gazed at Finch. “I’m so happy you came home with me. I can’t imagine my life without

you. And now the kits.” He felt lost for words, overwhelmed by a love stronger than anything he’d felt before.

“I’m glad I came too,” Finch mewed.

“Are you?” He looked at her hopefully. “Do you think you’ll be happy here?”

“As long as I’m with you,” Finch purred. “And the kits.” She glanced down at them. “They’re going to grow into strong cats.”

“Strong *warriors*,” Riverstar murmured.

She looked at him. “*Warriors*.”

Could he still hear doubt in her mew? “I’ll protect them with my life,” Riverstar told her quickly. “Even when they’re grown. I won’t let any harm come to them.”

“I believe you.” Her eyes sparkled affectionately. “But they won’t need protecting. They’re going to be as brave and loyal and smart as you.” Her gaze grew serious. “I will too,” she promised. “I’m going to become a *real* warrior. I want to learn to hunt and fight and patrol. I want to protect my kits, and you. I want to be part of this Clan.”

Pride rose in Riverstar’s chest. “You’ll make a

great warrior.”

“I want a warrior name,” Finch told him.

“When you’ve finished nursing these kits, I’ll give you a real warrior name,” he promised.

She purred and looked down at the kits once more. “Let’s name these little warriors first.” She touched her nose to the silver she-kit. “What about Ripple Shine?”

Riverstar swished his tail. “Perfect. And Dusk Smoke.” He nodded toward the gray tom-kit.

“Yes.” She curled her tail around them. “Should we name the other one for Arc?”

Riverstar purred. He thought for a moment. “Arc Pelt?”

“Arc Shadow,” she mewed.

“Yes.” He purred louder. “Arc Shadow.”

Night poked her head through the entrance. “The Clan is dying to meet their new Clanmates,” she mewed. “Can they come in?”

“One at a time,” Riverstar told her, delighted that the Clan had stayed awake after the Gathering to welcome his kits.

“One at a time,” Night called out of the den.

“I’m going first.” Dawn Mist’s mew sounded outside.

“*I’m* first,” Dew told her indignantly. “I’ve been in RiverClan longer.”

“In that case, I’m going first,” Mist mewed. “I’ve been here from the start.”

Riverstar winked at Finch. “Our kits are popular already,” he mewed.

“Of course they are.” Night padded into the den. “And *I’m* going to be the first to greet them.”

At dawn, Riverstar padded sleepily downstream. After his Clanmates had each welcomed his kits to the Clan, he’d sat through the night, watching them sleeping beside Finch. He’d left them as soft gray dawn light began to filter into the medicine den, and now he stopped at the water’s edge, fluffed out his fur against the chill, and sat down.

The river slid slowly past, mist rolling over the surface.

“Thank you,” Riverstar whispered. “You’ve given me everything I’ve ever needed,” he told the river. “You brought me to the place I belong.” He closed his eyes, slowed his breath, and let his thoughts drift along

with the current, slipping into a deep meditation. The anger he'd felt when the river had carried him away from the park and from everyone he loved had once burned like fire. He'd resented the river for bringing him here. But it didn't burn anymore. He knew now that the river had brought him here for a reason—not just to help the mountain cats, but because this was where he was meant to be, where he could be most useful, and where he could become the best version of himself—a leader, a warrior, a mate, and now a father. His pelt felt warm with a love that reached deep into his heart. He had a family and a Clan, and he would defend them with all the lives he had left.



Chapter 35



Rain had been pounding the camp for days. Every den, every nest, every pelt was soaked. But RiverClan was bristling with energy. Dawn Mist was practicing battle moves in the clearing with Snow Tail. Shattered Ice was weaving willow into the camp wall to reinforce it, while Kite Wing helped Hollow finish strengthening the newly built nursery where Finch was huddling with her kits. Drizzle had taken Spider Paw hunting even though the prey pile was full; if Skystar's warriors trapped them in the camp, they'd need a good supply of food. As the river rose around the island, Riverstar could sense his Clan growing stronger and tighter around him. They were ready for battle.

He still hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"I'm going to talk to Skystar again," he told Night. They were in his den, rain running down the willow roots and dripping through the reeds.

"You heard him at the Gathering." Night flexed her claws. "He's not going to back off. He's even established a permanent base on our land."

While Riverstar had been distracted caring for his newborn kits, SkyClan warriors had set up camp on RiverClan's side of the river and were guarding the tree-bridge from sunhigh to moonhigh.

Riverstar refused to let go of hope. "There are only two warriors there at a time," he pointed out.

"A single claw can hook a mouse," Night growled.

"RiverClan isn't a mouse."

Night wasn't satisfied. "If we don't push back now, Skystar will add another base and another until our land becomes SkyClan's and all we have left is the island. How long do you think we could hold out?"

"It won't come to that," Riverstar told her.

"Really?" Night looked unconvinced. "We need to *attack*, and attack fast. We need to chase his warriors off our land."

"If we do, he'll just send more," Riverstar argued. "We'll be outnumbered." The stark fact had haunted him for days. "If we fight a battle and lose, RiverClan will be swallowed up by SkyClan."

"We *won't* lose if we move fast," Night insisted.

"Let me talk to him first." As Riverstar got to his paws, Finch padded into the den. He looked at her

anxiously. "Are the kits okay?"

"Of course," she mewed affectionately. "I asked Willow Stream to watch them. I wanted to help with battle preparations."

"There might not be a battle," Riverstar reminded her.

"I hope you're right," Finch mewed. "In the meantime, Dappled Pelt told me to tell you we have plenty of cobweb, oak leaf, and marigold. Enough to treat as many wounds as we need to."

Riverstar's ears twitched. "I'm not going to let my warriors fight unless there's no other choice."

"I know," Finch mewed. "And I love you for it. But if there's a battle, I want to help. I'm not going to let any harm come to RiverClan. This is my Clan too now, and I'm ready to fight for it if I have to."

"You're not fighting," Riverstar growled. "You've had almost no training, and the kits are only four days old."

"He's right," Night mewed. "Your kits need you more than your Clan right now."

Finch looked at them. "Okay," she mewed. "But I want to start training as soon as this battle is over."

She turned and padded from the den.

Night watched her go. "I'm almost glad you left to help your parkmates," she mewed to Riverstar. "Finch is going to make a great warrior."

Riverstar blinked at Blossom, fighting to keep his pelt smooth. The SkyClan she-cat glared back at him, her ears flat. Her Clanmate, Red Claw, had left her at the SkyClan base beside the tree-bridge while he ran to fetch Skystar. Rain poured onto the riverbank. Riverstar could feel it streaming from his pelt. The river roared past, running high, churning around the fallen oak.

"What makes you think he'll come?" Blossom's hackles were high.

"He'll come," Riverstar mewed. "Skystar never misses an opportunity to show off." He sat down. He wasn't here to fight.

The sky was growing dark. As evening pushed in, Red Claw appeared on the opposite bank. Skystar padded after him and jumped onto the tree-bridge. His eyes flashed in the darkness as he crossed the river and landed in front of Riverstar. "What do you want?"

Riverstar got to his paws. "I want to avoid war."

Skystar snorted scornfully. "It won't take a *war* to clear RiverClan off my land. One skirmish will be enough."

Riverstar fought back anger. "This isn't your land and you know it," he mewed. "StarClan made it clear there should be five Clans in the forest, like the petals of the Blazing Star."

"That was moons ago," Skystar grunted. "StarClan put this bridge here while you were away as a sign that RiverClan needed leadership."

"I'm back now," Riverstar growled.

"For how long?" Skystar stared at him. "You seem to have one paw here and another with your old campmates. Who's to say you won't go rushing off to help them again, leaving your Clan unprotected?"

"The Clan wasn't unprotected!" Riverstar snapped. Skystar had gotten under his pelt. "Night was in charge."

Skystar looked pointedly at the tree-bridge. "StarClan clearly thought otherwise."

"That tree has nothing to do with StarClan," Riverstar mewed through gritted teeth. Why did Skystar have to exploit every situation to his own

advantage?

“Prove it.” Skystar held his gaze, a challenge gleaming in his eyes.

Riverstar took a breath. “Do you really want your Clanmates to get hurt over this?”

Skystar narrowed his eyes. “As far as I can see, it’s *your* Clanmates who will get hurt.”

Riverstar let his breath out slowly. “Get off RiverClan land by dawn or face the consequences.”

“Ask Shattered Ice’s patrol to spread out a little more.” Riverstar whispered in Night’s ears.

She nodded and crept away, heading through the sedge where their Clanmates were crouching along the riverbank around the tree-bridge.

Skystar is expecting a dawn attack, he’d told her. He’ll make a move before that. We need to move first.

The rain was still pouring. The river, swollen and muddy, churned past. It would make their plan easier. Riverstar peeked through a gap in the sedge to where Dew’s eyes glinted in the darkness. Her patrol was crouching this side of the river, beside the tree-bridge. Hollow’s patrol was just beyond it. They were waiting

for his signal.

Night slid quietly back through the sedge and stopped beside Riverstar. "They've got the bank covered right down to the bend," she whispered.

"Good." Riverstar was watching the forest on the other side of the river. He stiffened as he saw movement in the shadows among the trees.

Night flicked her gaze toward it. "Can you see them?"

"Yes." Energy pulsed behind Riverstar's ears. His paws itched to start. If he had to fight, he was going to do whatever it took to win.

It was hard to see through the rain, and the moon was hidden behind clouds. But still he could make out shapes moving from the trees, down the bank, toward the tree-bridge. More followed. Then more. He nodded to Dew. She tapped the log with her paw to signal to Hollow on the other side, then slid into the water. Kite Wing, Drizzle, and Moss Tail slid in behind her.

"Ready?" Riverstar looked at Night.

She met his gaze, her yellow eyes dark with determination. "Ready."

A cat had leaped silently onto the tree-bridge. Riverstar recognized Skystar's broad shoulders. The SkyClan leader was crossing the river, his warriors crowding behind him.

"Now!" With a yowl, Riverstar crashed from the sedge. Along the riverbank, Croak, Mist, and Spider Paw leaped out too. They rushed toward the tree-bridge.

Skystar saw them and surged forward, racing along the fallen oak, but Dew burst from the river and grabbed him before he could reach the end. She hauled him into the foaming water. Kite Wing and Drizzle grabbed the warriors behind him, and from the other side Hollow's patrol began tugging the rest of the SkyClan warriors into the river.

As yowls of panic sounded above the pounding of the rain, Croak, Mist, and Spider Paw leaped onto the log and began battering back the warriors left there. Night raced to join them, but Riverstar pulled up as he reached the roots of the fallen oak. Skystar had wriggled free of Dew's grip and was pushing through water, fighting the current. The SkyClan leader was making for the RiverClan shore.

Riverstar plunged in and dived beneath the surface. He hooked Skystar's leg and tugged him down. Underwater, he grabbed him. They wrestled, their fur swirling around them like mist. Riverstar felt claws rake his flank. He bit into Skystar's shoulder and shook him. Skystar kicked out, catching Riverstar's belly with his hind claws. The pain sliced through Riverstar and, gasping, he let go. The current spun him into an eddy, whirled him around then lifted him up. He broke the surface, took a gulp of air, and jerked his head up, looking for Skystar. The SkyClan leader was already wading from the water. He pushed into the sedge on RiverClan's side of the river and disappeared into the shadows. Riverstar struck out after him, swimming toward the shore.

"Help!" The choking cry of a SkyClan warrior sounded nearby.

Riverstar looked around. Red Claw was fighting to stay above the surface. He clung to the side of the tree-bridge, his eyes wide with panic. But the current tore him loose and dragged him downstream.

No! Riverstar swam after him as Red Claw disappeared, choking, beneath the surface. He's staged

the battle in the river knowing that RiverClan would have an advantage, but he didn't want any cat to suffer unnecessarily. He dived after him, pushing harder to catch up, feeling Red Claw's pelt through the frothing water, grabbing it, hauling the terrified warrior up. They broke the surface together and Riverstar shoved Red Claw toward the shore and watched to make sure the warrior reached it. As Red Claw grabbed onto the reeds and pulled himself through them, Riverstar turned back. He began to swim upriver, driving against the current.

More SkyClan warriors were hauling themselves from the water, washed back onto their own shore by the river. They were coughing, choking on the water they'd swallowed, and barely able to stay on their paws as Kite Wing, Hollow, and Dew waded after them, pushing them back toward the forest. Croak slashed Blossom's cheek. The blow sent the SkyClan she-cat reeling, and Dew leaped onto her as she staggered backward, while Hollow batted back a gray tom with his paws.

Only a pawful of SkyClan warriors remained on the tree-bridge. Mist faced them, snarling. They

glanced down at the water where their Clanmates had disappeared, and Mist slashed at them with wide, powerful sweeps of his paws. They lurched backward, eyes glittering in panic, their rain-soaked pelts spiked like hedgehogs, almost tripping over each other as they leaped for the safety of their riverbank.

Riverstar felt a surge of triumph. How had Skystar believed he could take the river from them with cats who were too scared to swim? *The river is our friend, and our friend is your enemy.*

Riverstar hauled himself up onto the tree-bridge. He felt the river tug his hind paws as he heaved himself out. The current was even stronger than it had been a few moments ago. The river was rising fast. He watched his warriors driving the last few bedraggled SkyClan cats back into the forest. Was the battle over? Where was Skystar? He scanned the other bank.

Shattered Ice was grappling with a ginger she-cat. He drove her toward the water as she flung desperate blows at him. Her pelt was spiked with fear as he shoved her into the rushing water. Panicked, she jerked away, ducked passed Shattered Ice, and raced for the

tree-bridge. As she leaped onto it, Riverstar stepped out of the way and she barged past him toward her own side of the river.

Night was dodging brutal blows from a brown tom. He reared and she ducked, butting him in the belly. His hind paws slithered on the mud, and she reached out and hooked them from beneath him. As he fell, she shoved him into the river. The current grabbed him and swept him toward the tree-bridge.

Riverstar felt it shudder as the warrior slammed against it. He looked down and saw the tom pinned against the bark by the rushing water. He reached down, hooked his claws into the tom's scruff, and hauled him up. The tom clung to the bridge as Riverstar dropped him. He coughed up water and, after getting shakily to his paws, crept after his Clanmates as they disappeared into the forest.

As Riverstar watched his warriors prowl among the trees, making sure none of the SkyClan warriors dared return, he heard a screech beyond the reeds on the RiverClan shore. A yowl drowned it. Then another. His heart lurched. His warriors were still fighting. He leaped from the tree-bridge and skidded over the mud,

barging his way through the reeds. Through the rain battering his face he could see Skystar pinning Drizzle to the ground. Sparrow Fur, the SkyClan deputy, was swiping at Pine Needle, while Night grappled with Nettle, a huge gray tom. The SkyClan warriors were fighting as though lives depended on it. *Do they want this land so much?* It was more than land, it was pride, but Riverstar had pride too. As Skystar lifted a paw to rake Drizzle's cheek, he flung himself at the vicious Clan leader.

He slammed into Skystar's flank, butting him away, and rolled over as he lost his footing. He struggled to his paws and felt claws hook his shoulders and tug him backward. Scrabbling with his hind paws, Riverstar tried to get a grip, but his claws slithered over mud, and Skystar threw him to the ground with a hiss and dived onto him. Teeth snapped beside his ears, and Riverstar jerked his head just in time. But pain stabbed his hind leg as Skystar raked his claws along it. Riverstar struggled to escape, but Skystar was as strong as a badger.

"Get off him!" Drizzle's yowl pierced the rain like forked lightning, and Riverstar saw a flash of gray-

and-white fur as she flung herself onto Skystar's back. She must have dug her claws in hard, because Skystar screeched and let go.

Riverstar scrambled to his paws. Skystar was already turning on Drizzle. As the SkyClan leader batted Drizzle away with a blow that sent her reeling, Riverstar grabbed his shoulder and hauled him around. He raked Skystar's cheek, then his other cheek, fury rising in him like a storm. Blow after blow, he drove Skystar backward. Drizzle reared beside him and began weaving swipes between his until Skystar's eyes flared with frustration and he ducked his head and barged between them.

Riverstar turned to see him haring away. Sparrow Fur and Nettle were already gone. Night and Pine Needle stood, panting, their heads hanging down as they caught their breath.

Riverstar raced after Skystar. He was going to make sure the tom didn't return. He reached the tree-bridge just as Skystar landed on the far shore. Skystar turned back, his eyes flashing with anger, then raced away into the forest.

Riverstar dug his claws into the muddy earth. The

river churned past. It was washing over the tree-bridge now, sweeping broken branches and mud on its way. Night padded to his side. Shattered Ice slid from the reeds as Kite Wing waded from the stormy river. Croak, Mist, and the others appeared from the forest on the far shore and crossed the tree-bridge to join their Clanmates.

The rain began to ease.

Riverstar looked around them. He could smell blood. “Is any cat badly hurt?”

“Just scratches,” Hollow mewed.

“Sparrow Fur nicked my ear,” Pine Needle growled.

Night shook out her pelt as the rain finally stopped. “We should get back to camp so that Dappled Pelt can treat our wounds.”

But Riverstar was staring at the tree-bridge. As long as it spanned the river, Skystar would claim that StarClan wanted him to take over RiverClan. “We have to move the oak.” He padded toward it and reached up among the dripping roots. Hooking in his claw, he tried to haul it sideways.

His Clanmates joined him, digging their claws into

the wet wood and heaving at it. But the bridge wouldn't shift.

"Let's dig underneath it," Drizzle suggested.

It was a good idea. Riverstar began to paw at the mud beneath the roots. It was soft and easy to scoop out. Drizzle joined him with Shattered Ice and Moss Tail. Hollow and Kite Wing hurried around the other side and began to dig pawfuls from underneath. Before long they'd hollowed a gap around the roots, but the bridge still held firm. "Keep digging," Riverstar told his Clanmates. "Hollow, Mist, Shattered Ice." He chose the strongest warriors. "Help me push." Pressing his forepaws against the heavy trunk, he began to heave with all his might. If they could just shift it a little further into the river, the current might catch it and drag it away. Hollow reared up beside him and helped push. Shattered Ice and Mist pressed in beside them while their Clanmates kept scooping out mud.

The river was flowing faster and faster, washing over the bridge and spilling onto the bank. It began to lap around Riverstar's hind paws. Pine Needle and Spider Paw had to move farther up the shore.

Then Riverstar heard a roaring he'd never heard

before. He turned and saw a surge of water rushing downstream toward them. It carried a tangle of branches, lifting them up as it swept over the banks, rushing toward them, a wall of water and debris that sent fear spiraling in Riverstar's belly. "Get clear!" he yowled.

His Clanmates turned to see the river racing at them like a great bird, its wings outstretched. They scrambled away, leaving the mud and the bridge behind as they bounded up the shore.

Riverstar raced after them and leaped clear a moment before the surge thundered past. With a crack that tore the air, it lifted the tree-bridge, twisted it like a spindly twig, and carried it away.

Riverstar's heart soared. Joy flooded through him. He might be an outsider, he might not ever fully understand the other leaders, but the river was his ally, and he felt connected to it deep in his soul. Here it was, protecting him again. His Clan would be safe. He would raise his kits by its shore to be strong, proud, thoughtful RiverClan warriors. And one day, long after Riverstar was gone, his Clanmates would keep RiverClan alive . . . this strange and different Clan that

ate fish, preferred peace, and braved the water.

He could never thank the river enough for all that it had given him.

He looked around his Clanmates as they watched the tree-bridge careen away.

Night glanced at him. "StarClan is with us."

"Yes." He blinked at her warmly. Night had been at his side since the river had carried him here. She'd watched him grow, and she had changed herself to help him realize his dream of a Clan on the island. If the river had birthed RiverClan, then Night had helped him raise it as carefully and watchfully as a queen tended her kits. He could never have asked for better support. She was his dearest friend, a cat he would trust with his life.

His Clanmates shifted around him, their pelts slicked down, their blood mingling with river and rainwater as it dripped from their fur. But their eyes shone with triumph.

Riverstar's heart ached with happiness. He lifted his tail, his gaze sweeping the far shore as dawn broke over the forest. A flash of sunlight sliced through the clouds and glittered on the surface of the river. Back at

camp, his kits would be waiting for him with Finch.

“Come on,” he mewed. “It’s time to go home.”

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.

Discover great authors, exclusive offers, and more at hc.com.

Books by Erin Hunter

WARRIORS

SUPER EDITIONS

Firestar's Quest

Bluestar's Prophecy

SkyClan's Destiny

Crookedstar's Promise

Yellowfang's Secret

Tallstar's Revenge

Bramblestar's Storm

Moth Flight's Vision

Hawkwing's Journey
Tigerheart's Shadow
Crowfeather's Trial
Squirrelflight's Hope
Graystripe's Vow
Leopardstar's Honor
Onestar's Confession

Back Ads

ENTER THE WORLD OF WARRIORS

Check out WarriorCats.com to

- Explore amazing fan art, stories, and videos
- Have your say with polls and Warriors reactions
- Ask questions at the Moonpool
- Explore the full family tree
- Read exclusives from Erin Hunter
- Shop for exclusive merchandise
- And more!

Check Out the New Warrior Cats Hub App!



Download on the
App Store



GET IT ON
Google Play



HARPER

An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

warriorcats.com • shelfstuff.com

**ARE YOU A TRUE ERIN HUNTER FAN?
READ THEM ALL!**

WARRIORS

THE PROPHECIES BEGIN

- Into the Wild
- Fire and Ice
- Forest of Secrets
- Rising Storm
- A Dangerous Path
- The Darkest Hour

THE NEW PROPHECY

- Midnight
- Moonrise
- Dawn
- Starlight
- Twilight
- Sunset

POWER OF THREE

- The Sight
- Dark River
- Outcast
- Eclipse
- Long Shadows
- Sunrise

OMEN OF THE STARS

- The Fourth Apprentice
- Fading Echoes
- Night Whispers
- Sign of the Moon
- The Forgotten Warrior
- The Last Hope

DAWN OF THE CLANS

- The Sun Trail
- Thunder Rising
- The First Battle
- The Blazing Star
- A Forest Divided
- Path of Stars

A VISION OF SHADOWS

- The Apprentice's Quest
- Thunder and Shadow
- Shattered Sky
- Darkest Night
- River of Fire
- The Raging Storm

ARE YOU A TRUE ERIN HUNTER FAN? READ THEM ALL!

WARRIORS

THE BROKEN CODE

- Lost Stars
- The Silent Thaw
- Veil of Shadows
- Darkness Within
- The Place of No Stars
- A Light in the Mist

A STARLESS CLAN

- River
- Sky
- Shadow

GRAPHIC NOVELS

- Graystripe's Adventure
- Ravenpaw's Path
- SkyClan and the Stranger
- A Shadow in RiverClan
- Winds of Change
- Exile from ShadowClan

GUIDES

- Secrets of the Clans
- Cats of the Clans
- Code of the Clans
- Battles of the Clans
- Enter the Clans
- The Ultimate Guide

NOVELLAS

- The Untold Stories
- Tales from the Clans
- Shadows of the Clans
- Legends of the Clans
- Path of a Warrior
- A Warrior's Spirit
- A Warrior's Choice

SUPER EDITIONS

- Firestar's Quest
- Bluestar's Prophecy
- SkyClan's Destiny
- Crookedstar's Promise
- Yellowfang's Secret
- Tallstar's Revenge
- Bramblestar's Storm
- Moth Flight's Vision
- Hawkwing's Journey
- Tigerheart's Shadow
- Crowfeather's Trial
- Squirrelflight's Hope
- Graystripe's Vow
- Leopardstar's Honor
- Onestar's Confession

**ARE YOU A TRUE ERIN HUNTER FAN?
READ THEM ALL!**

SURVIVORS

SURVIVORS

- The Empty City
- A Hidden Enemy
- Darkness Falls
- The Broken Path
- The Endless Lake
- Storm of Dogs

SURVIVORS: THE

GATHERING DARKNESS

- A Pack Divided
- Dead of Night
- Into the Shadows
- Red Moon Rising
- The Exile's Journey
- The Final Battle

SEEKERS

SEEKERS

- The Quest Begins
- Great Bear Lake
- Smoke Mountain
- The Last Wilderness
- Fire in the Sky
- Spirits in the Stars

SEEKERS: RETURN

TO THE WILD

- Island of Shadows
- The Melting Sea
- River of Lost Bears
- Forest of Wolves
- The Burning Horizon
- The Longest Day

Copyright

WARRIORS SUPER EDITION: RIVERSTAR'S HOME.

Copyright © 2023 by Working Partners Ltd. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

www.harpercollinschildrens.com

Cover art © 2023 by Owen Richardson

Series cover design by Ellice M. Lee

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023000096

Digital Edition SEPTEMBER 2023 ISBN: 978-0-06-305055-6

Print ISBN: 978-0-06-305051-8

FIRST EDITION

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
www.harpercollins.com.au

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West, 41st Floor
Toronto, Ontario, M5H 4E3
www.harpercollins.ca

India

HarperCollins India
A 75, Sector 57
Noida

Uttar Pradesh 201 301
www.harpercollins.co.in

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers New Zealand
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive
Rosedale 0632
Auckland, New Zealand
www.harpercollins.co.nz

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF, UK
www.harpercollins.co.uk

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
195 Broadway
New York, NY 10007
www.harpercollins.com