

Chapter 1 – Prologue

"Tell me a story!" said a young kit.

The little white cat had been playing near his mother, batting an old stick around and leaping after it as the doting parent watched. He could never get tired of playing with his twig.

"What do you want to hear about?" asked the queen. She picked up the stick in her jaws and placed it beside her.

"Something I haven't heard before," responded the kit, ending his antics and snuggling by his mother's side. The queen pondered this for a moment, then lifted her head towards the trees that laid near them.

With the air of a storyteller, she paused slightly before beginning, causing the kit to lift his head in anticipation.

"Once, long ago... there were cats that lived in the forest."

"This forest, mother?" interrupted the kit. "This forest here?"

"Yes," said the mother. "This very forest; but back then, it was much, much bigger. So big you could walk in it for hours and not get anywhere. The cats that lived there, though, knew every tree and bush. It's said that when they wanted to, they could have walked through the forest with their eyes closed! They were divided into 4 clans, ThunderClan, RiverClan, WindClan, and ShadowClan, and they were called warriors: they were fierce fighters, and deadly hunters, and-"

"Hunters, mother? What did they hunt?"

"They hunted for food, of course. In the forest, you don't have food given to you; some days, they ate until their bellies ached, and some days, they had absolutely nothing to eat at all!"

"Then why would they live in the forest anyways?" asked the white kit.

"If you stopped interrupting, you might find out!" scolded the mother.

"Sorry," said the kit, sheepishly. He rolled the branch back and forth with his paws.

"Now, where was I? Oh yes, they hunted... They went out in groups to find food- they called it fresh-kill. They ate mice, shrews, moles, birds-"

The kit couldn't resist. "Ew!" he squealed, the stick forgotten. "Mice? Birds?"

"I tried fresh-kill once," said the queen. "It wasn't bad."

"Still, ew!" said the kit,

"It's actually very good. You get used to it."

"But, I mean, *why*? Isn't it easier to live with housefolk?"

"The cats could imagine nothing worse than living with housefolk! They called them Twolegs. They had something called the Warrior code; something that gave them honor. it's their way of life. Their purpose, what makes them warriors. They would be ashamed to be taking food from Twolegs!"

He knew what it meant, but the concept of "honor" felt alien to the white kit. "How do you know all this stuff?" he inquired.

"I met them," was the short reply.

Her son perked up his head and placed his forepaws on his branch. "You met them? They're real?"

"Of course they are," laughed the queen. "They just don't live here anymore. They left the area when the housefolk- Twolegs- started to cut down the trees. I don't know where they've gone... but they're still out there somewhere. ThunderClan, and the rest of them."

"Wow," breathed the small cat. "Tell me more!"

The queen thought for a moment before talking. "Well... there was a cat named Firestar, and he was the leader of ThunderClan."

"That's a funny name!" laughed the kit.

"All warriors had funny names. Don't you know where your name came from?"

"Branchkit..." said the young cat. "I have a warrior name?"

"Yes. When you turn six moons of age, the leader would have changed your name from Branchkit to Branchpaw. You would have begun to train to become a warrior, and when you were done, you'd have gotten your full warrior name."

"I'm almost 6 moons old!" exclaimed the kit. He danced in a circle.

The queen smiled. "Well, if you were a ThunderClan kit, their leader- Firestar- would have soon called the clan to Highrock to change your name. Firestar was the greatest leader the forest had ever seen; anyone would tell you that. What's amazing, though, is that he was once a house cat like us!"

"Really?"

"Yep. His name was Rusty back then, and he lived not too far away from our home. I'll tell you the story of how he joined the warriors...."

The story went on for a long time. She told him all about Rusty's dreams, and his ventures into the forest. She described all the cats of the clans, their jobs, and their traditions. Seasons of stories fell upon the young cat's ears; until the queen stopped her narrative.

"Why are you stopping, mother?" asked the kit.

"It's nightfall," she responded. "Time for sleep."

"I'm not sleepy!" protested the young cat. "Tell me more!"

"Tomorrow," promised the queen. "Tomorrow, I'll tell you about the war between Clans, and the forest fire, and the dogs that attacked the camp; but you must go to sleep first."

The kit yawned, and found himself suddenly tired. "Ok, mother," he said, curling up by her side. "Tomorrow."

I-I-I-I-I-I

The moon changed from a round disk to a slim crescent, and the white kit continued to learn about ThunderClan and its ways, with his branch ever at his side. He soon felt as if he had lived there himself. One morning, he nudged his mother awake excitedly- "Mother! Mother! I turn six moons old today!"

She smiled sleepily. "I think you're right. We'll have the ceremony after the sun rises."

She led him outside, breathing in the fresh air. It was, she thought, a perfect day for a kit to become an apprentice. They stood in the housefolk's garden, by the fence that bordered the trees.

"Today, we're going to go into the forest," she said.

"The forest?" asked the kit, running around her legs. "We're going to the forest!"

"The forest can be a dangerous place," she warned him. "You must promise to stay right beside me and do as I say. And leave your stick behind."

"Ok! Ok!" her son said, eagerly.

"Then follow me."

The queen led him to the wire mesh fence, searching out a raised portion. She slid under the wire and motioned for the kit to do the same; and just like that, they were in the forest. The trees loomed overhead and the ground was littered with leaves. The young cat stood in awe.

His mother smiled, and ushered him forward with her tail. "Stay right by me," she reminded.

They wandered through the undergrowth, as the kit whipped his head left and right to see everything. The crickets chirped louder than ever, and the birdsong floated down from above; he found no end of interesting things.

Soon, they entered a small glade. The mother stopped, and raised her voice dramatically. "This is the camp... of ThunderClan!"

"Wow!" exclaimed the kit. "Wow, wow, wow, wow!" he repeated as he dashed off to investigate the clearing. He sniffed at rocks and rabbit holes, trying to guess the location of the dens. It was a place that came from legends!

The queen watched him, grinning, then bounded up a hill to a boulder she knew was Highrock. Elevating her voice to a manner she thought appropriate for a Clan leader, she said, "Let all cats gather here beneath the Highrock for a clan meeting!"

Turning his head, the white kit saw his mother on top of the rock and bounded happily over. "Today is an important day," announced his mother, as if the glade was packed full with cats. "Branchkit has reached his sixth moon!"

The queen leaped back down to the ground. She gave her son an affectionate nuzzle and said, "Before you become a warrior apprentice, answer these questions;

"Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect the clan with your life?"

Her kit frowned and whispered, "What does uphold mean?"

"Obey," responded his mother.

"Oh, ok, then, I do.

"Do you promise to be faithful in your training and work your hardest?" she continued.

Doing his best to appear solemn, the kit said, "I do."

"Then I give you your new name – and may you bear it proudly. Branchpaw!"

The kit mewed in pride and danced forward to nuzzle his mother. "I'm an apprentice now!" he said.

"Yes, you are," purred the mother.

Their celebrations were cut short when the overgrowth rustled nearby. The pair froze, watching the shrubbery intently. The glade was still.

"Come on, Branchpaw," said the queen, slowly. "Let's go home. It's not safe to be out here for too long." Warily searching the trees, she started back towards their house, with a frightened kit flanking her. Their fur rose on their necks as they proceeded, step after step. The reality of the

situation wasn't to be forgotten.

But then the fence came into view, and the kit's mother sighed in relief. "We're home," she said.

Her son was relaxing too, and going back to being excited, when there was a motion to the left.

He only heard a deafening roar before pain erupted into his back. Crying out, he scrambled away, turning to see a black and white nightmare; a badger had clawed into his mother. The frenzied red eyes of the badger watched her fall, then turned to her son. And it was on him! He could almost feel the teeth in his pelt, his vision flashing a vicious red –

There was a flash of brown and the attacker stumbled. The queen, bloodied and beaten, stood defiantly in front of her kit. She growled as the huge animal came back at her; then she launched herself at it. Claws extended, she raked down its side, then twirled to dodge a glancing blow.

The kit crawled behind a log besides him, horrified. The sounds of battle continued on the other side, yowling and slashing and scraping – there seemed to be at least three cats fighting the badger. The young cat buried his head in the dirt, trying to block out the fighting....

Then it was silent. Fearing the worst, the kit dragged himself from his hiding spot.

"Mother," he whimpered, seeing the prone body of the queen. "Mother!" he cried again. The battered cat laid drooped by the body of the badger, both of them dead. The kit tried to prod her awake, desperately. "Mother..." his voice trailed off.

And then the bodies lied side by side, long into the night: the badger, the kit, and the mother. Her name had been Cody, friend of the warrior cats and martyr of her kit's life. She died fighting.

I-I-I-I-I-I

The white kit stayed there until his hunger overcame him. Leaving his mother, he limped back to his house, mewling pitifully. For now, he had the housefolk to care for him.

But he would not stay forever. Seeing his mother's body, one sentence had sprung to his mind. "*They're still out there somewhere, ThunderClan and the rest of them....*"

A ThunderClan warrior could have saved the queen.

"Mother?" said the kit, returning to her body the next day. "I'm... I'm going to go find ThunderClan."

Feeling more determined, he stood up on shaky legs. "After all, I *do* have a warrior name."

"Branchpaw."

Chapter 2

Branchpaw found himself hungry for fresh-kill.

The dry pellets in the housefolk's bowl no longer seemed appetizing. He had abided by it as his back healed, but he would no longer.

The white cat plodded out the door. The housefolk's backyard was warm and sunny, a perfect place for a cat to bask; it was the middle of greenleaf, and the housefolk had propped open the door. *No, not housefolk*, thought Branchpaw. *Twolegs. What the warriors say.*

He sighed and paced around in a circle. He wanted his mother. Maybe, by age and name, he was an apprentice, but for all practical purposes, he was a kit. A lost kit, all alone. And hungry too; Branchpaw had – rashly – vowed not to ever eat Twoleg food again. He had to learn how to hunt... but he had no one to teach him how. He couldn't even enter the forest safely! *I miss you, mother*, thought the kit.

Branchpaw glanced to a spot under the shade of a small tree. His stick- his namesake, he knew- still laid beneath it. Where he had dropped it last.

He shook his head. Although only a few sunrises had passed, he felt much too old for such a toy.

"Hey, Branchkit!" he heard from behind. "Where's Cody?"

He turned around. The speaker was a handsome gray tabby, a friend of his mother's. His name was Jade. He stood on the brick wall separating back yards, his tail waving incessantly; his words sounded cocky.

"Gone," answered the kit. "And my name's Branchpaw now."

"You can't just change your name," Jade responded as if amused by a kit's antics. "Really, where's your mother?"

Branchpaw had never liked the cat. *He wouldn't make a good warrior.*

"Gone!" repeated the kit. "She's dead! Now go away!"

"No, really. Show some respect to your elders. Come on, answer the question."

Gritting his teeth, Branchpaw didn't bother to answer, instead walking back inside.

"Branchkit!" Jade called. "Come back!"

"The name's Branchpaw!" yelled the cat, disappearing into the kitchen. He immediately regretted it, as the food bowl only reminded him of his problems.

"I need to get out of here..." he muttered.

Branchpaw stayed indoors the rest of the day. He laid on the carpet and thought about his mother; then his promise; then ThunderClan; then his mother again. Then being unable to bear the stillness any longer, he started to restlessly roam the corridors. He dodged around the Twolegs when he saw them. It infuriated him that he was there, doing nothing all day, and that he had nothing else to do. Alone, in the wide world, he was completely helpless. *I need a mentor*, thought Branchpaw. *The clan cats had it easy. They were cared for as kits, then they had mentors to teach them as apprentices. They had a family!*

He agonized through the hours until the sun had nearly set. Getting more restless by the minute, Branchpaw ventured back outside. The twilight cast an unearthly shade on the Twoleg's garden, and it looked as mysterious as it ever had. The ripe harvest of greenleaf was about to be picked soon, and the garden was packed; the Twolegs here grew food and not flowers. The neat rows of plants drew his gaze from the patio, clean and tidy, to the wild mesh fence that contained the forest. The forest! If the garden was mysterious, the forest was absolutely entrancing. He could hardly stand it; the trees pulled at a part of him that Cody's stories had awakened.

Branchpaw started talking, to reassure himself. "I have to start somewhere. Unless I want to be a kittypet, I'll have to leave sooner or later." The kit let himself be drawn closer to the fence. "I have to learn to hunt. To survive. So I'm going into the forest. I'll go visit my mother's grave."

His courage bolstered, he walked towards the fence, sparing hardly a glance to the twig beneath the tree. He padded slowly through the garden, eyes fixed straight ahead. He didn't even deviate from his path for the patch of catnip; he was a warrior apprentice on a mission, and warriors didn't let small things distract them!

Branchpaw couldn't help but pause at the exit. Behind him was a safe home, and in front were badgers, and danger, and the unknown....

No, that's not right, he thought. *In front of me is the warriors' home. It wasn't dangerous for them. And behind me... well, behind me... is Jade.*

He smiled as he entered the forest.

None of the forest's beauty was lost on Branchpaw. While he didn't see it with the fervent excitement of a kit, he couldn't help but marvel at it. Imagine, cats calling this place home! But there was also the darker side. Even with the protection of a whole clan around them, cats could be endangered in the forest. Many, many warriors had died a premature death here.

And his mother too.

Branchkit felt overwhelmed. He was only a kit. What was he doing in the place? Why wasn't he curled up on warm carpet, his stomach full? His self-doubt racked him, until he pulled out a half-rational explanation.

Because, thought the cat, I have a warrior name. He nodded. "I have a warrior name. It's Branchpaw. I'm not a kit anymore! I'm an apprentice! Apprentices belong in the forest."

He kept talking to himself as he walked through the trees. "Besides, Mother's not far from the fence. A lot closer than the camp. I'll still be able to see the house...."

He almost didn't notice the grave, until he stepped on it. Feeling the upturned ground give under his paws, he gasped and leaped backwards. "Sorry! Sorry! I didn't mean to – sorry!" Branchpaw attempted to calm his rapid heartbeat and let out a breath. "Sorry," he mewed again, lowering his body to the ground. *I wonder if she can hear me?*

He had believed in StarClan, the warrior's afterlife, since the day of his apprentice ceremony. He had to. If not, he would have had to give his mother up for good; and he wasn't ready to do that. While he felt he had grown a whole season since Cody's death, the tragedy was still painful in his mind. *Another reason to find ThunderClan,* Branchpaw had thought. *Then, maybe I could talk to StarClan somehow....*

It was unlikely Cody's death had even been noticed by the warriors' ancestors. Why would they let a kittypet into their ranks? Branchpaw had realized this, and immediately averted his mind. He couldn't think that far yet. Not yet. He had to have hope.

His mother's grave was a distance away from the body of the badger. He had clawed at the ground until his paws ached, determined to give his mother a proper burial. *That's what they did in ThunderClan,* thought Branchpaw. *Buried the dead- they might even still be here!* He peered into the darker insides of the forest, and shivered. *So many cats lived and died there....*

Before his courage deserted him completely, he addressed the grave before him. "Mother," he said, then faltered. He tried again, "Mother," but still nothing else came out. What was there to say? "I'm... I'm going into the forest, mother," mewed Branchpaw, but hesitated and stood. *What am I doing?* he asked. *I'm talking to a grave.*

Flicking uncertain eyes around him, he carefully circumvented his mother's grave. He stole one last glance behind him before entering the forest in full.

Almost immediately, the trees thickened. Branchpaw became aware of a cacophony of sound around him- there, birds singing the dusk chorus; there, the shifting of leaves beneath unseen rodents; there, the hammering monotone of the insects. Straining his ears, he could hear even more – a Twoleg opening its door, a stone tumbling down a hill, a Twoleg monster roaring in the far distance. How had he not noticed this before? Using his other senses, he became aware of a whole world around him.

He shook his head, as if clearing the sounds from his ears, and continued forward. He placed his paws carefully amidst the foliage. *A warrior,* he thought, *could sneak up a tail-length behind you without you noticing. Their paws were as silent as a snake.* Doubtless, he was a lot louder and clumsier than this, but he was just an apprentice, after all.

Branchpaw had a flash of inspiration. He didn't have a mentor – so he would be apprenticed to

the forest!

But what a short-tempered mentor the forest was. When the white cat began to run through the trees, he immediately tripped over a half-upturned root. He mewled in surprise as his nose drove into the dirt. He could almost hear the forest saying, *Don't get ahead of yourself, Branchpaw. Find the clearing first.*

It was sound advice. He stopped to rub his throbbing nose, then proceeded warily. *It's wonderful, but dangerous. More dangerous than a tree root, of course.*

Branchpaw pondered a problem as he walked. He didn't really know where the ThunderClan camp was, just the general direction. If the forest was really as small as he had heard, then he'd stumble across it eventually; but the less time he spent wandering, the better. He couldn't help remembering the badger.

No sooner had he thought this he stumbled into the sunlight. Expecting the clearing, Branchpaw was surprised to see Twoleg nests. He let out a mew of confusion, and turned around – there were the trees!

He was standing on a grassy field between the forest and the houses. The Twoleg nests in front of him were unfamiliar – *I must have walked through the whole forest! It's even smaller than I thought....*

So where was he? Had this once been ThunderClan territory? Or WindClan, or ShadowClan, or RiverClan?

Branchpaw walked back into the forest; he wasn't near done in there. *What is there to do? He made a mental list. Find the clearing, first off. Find a place to settle down in there, because I'm not going back to the Twolegs. Then, I might want to try hunting....*

Hunting. If he could catch fresh-kill, then he could officially call himself a forest cat.

He opened his senses to the forest once more. The warriors had navigated by scent, so that they knew where their territory ended and another began. *They knew who was who, just by smell!* Curious, Branchpaw sniffed his fur. He wasn't aware of any odor.

Around him, though, he thought he could scent a few things. Behind him was a bit of a polluted smell, maybe from the Twolegs. Other strands of scent wafted from all sides. *Those would be herbs, thought Branchpaw, or animals.*

Through his eyes, though, the trees still looked the same in every place. Branchpaw wondered where the landmarks had gone. Sunningrocks, Snakerocks, the Great Oak- where were they? *I wouldn't recognize them anyways....*

Then he hesitated. He *did* know where one landmark was... his mother had shown him the house Firestar had lived in. Overcome by an urge to visit there again, Branchpaw started to run. He didn't know what he wanted from there, but he didn't have anything else to do.

Lost in his thoughts, the cat tripped over a root and sprawled into the dirt. Coincidentally, it was the same root as it had been the last time.

I-I-I-I-I-I

The leader of ThunderClan used to live in a house like me, thought Branchpaw. But he was never really at home there. He dreamt of stalking prey through dark forests. He spent hours looking out over the woods. Branchpaw repeated his mother's story to himself, sitting near Firestar's past house.

Firestar had been a kittypet named Rusty. He had been content at first, but then the forest had begun to fascinate him. It invaded his dreams, and filled his mind in all his waking hours. It was inevitable when he ventured into the trees.

Rusty found a mouse. Like he had done so many times in his dreams, he dropped into a hunter's crouch. But then, a sound scared the prey away- a rustle in the bushes. A gray cat leaped! Rusty ran towards the Twoleg fence, but the attacker was quick; so Rusty turned, and fought, with all the ferocity of a Clan cat.

The brawl had not lasted long. With no clear winner, the cats had fallen apart.

"Hi, I'm Graypaw," the attacker had said.

"I'm Rusty," the kittypet had responded.

Graypaw had been impressed. How could a kittypet fight so well?

"It was clear from the moment I met him," he had said later. "Rusty was a warrior."

Bluestar, ThunderClan's leader, had accepted Rusty into the clan. His name had been changed to Firepaw. He had faced opposition, cats who despised kittypets, but he had made it through in the end. He had been apprenticed to Lionheart.

Firepaw was sure he had passed his mentor's assessment. It would be any day now- he and Graypaw would get their warrior names! They were, after all, accomplished cats. They had gotten into no end of trouble, but they had done it for the good of ThunderClan.

Firepaw had been renamed Fireheart. He had assumed full warrior duties and received his first apprentice. Graypaw had become Graystripe. Their lives had continued.

But there was something wrong in ThunderClan, horribly wrong. There was a traitor! There were lies, ploys, even murders! Redtail was dead! Lionheart, too! Paranoia was driving Bluestar into madness!

More disasters had fallen. The forest had been in turmoil.

Bluestar had died.

As she lied on her deathbed, Fireheart thought he could see the shimmer of StarClan already in her eyes. "Fire will save the Clan," she murmured, the strange prophecy from Fireheart's first Clan days. "You never understood, did you?" Bluestar continued. "Not even when I gave you your apprentice name, Firepaw.... Fireheart, you are the fire that will save ThunderClan."

The world stood still as she talked; no longer did the river flow, the wind whisper. "You will be a great leader," Bluestar's voice was no more than a breath. "One of the greatest the forest has ever known. You will have the warmth of fire to protect your Clan and the fierceness of fire to defend it...."

"No, Fireheart protested. "I can't. Not without you, Bluestar."

But it was too late. Bluestar sighed softly, and the light died from her eyes.

Fireheart had entered the cave of the Moonstone, a boulder that StarClan had spoken through. No one knew what had happened in the Mothermouth, the cave; but when the cat had come out again... he had been Firestar; leader of ThunderClan.

And his past home lied in front of Branchpaw. The white cat stood on the very same fence from the story, with the very same view Firestar had had. *Wow*, thought Branchpaw, struggling to find words to describe his feelings. *Wow... Imagine! Firestar, he used to sit right here!*

A sudden sense of loneliness engulfed him. Firestar had gone through the same thing as him. Bluestar had been like a mother to him, and she had died. But then again, Firestar had had the rest of ThunderClan. He had had friends- Graystripe, Cloudtail, Sandstorm, Ravenpaw, and later, of course, the kittypet Cody. Branchpaw would have given anything for a companion – even Jade!

Then he thought again. *Well, maybe not Jade. But anyone else.*

He was quiet for a while, listening to the cicadas chirp.

I miss you, mother.

Chapter 3

The forest rang with the sound of one cat's jubilation. "I've found it!" Branchpaw was exclaiming. "The clearing! I've found it!"

Branchpaw was ecstatic. Finally, here was someplace to use as home base; the camp of ThunderClan. He meandered through the clearing, smiling. There – had that been the medicine cat den? Had that been the nursery? Which den would he call his own?

It had been four sunrises since his first expedition. On his second venture, he had come across an outcropping in the dirt. Branchpaw had leaned over to inspect it closer, and smelled – badger. Badgers! Were there more of them? The cat had scampered out of the forest as fast as possible, nearly running into several trees. He could not share a forest with badgers.

He had been too nervous to enter the woods again. Branchpaw had run inside the Twoleg's nest, chastising himself as he went; *you can't go back to the Twolegs! You're not a kittypet!* But his fear had trumped his resolve, and he had sulked around the house moodily. He had also broken his vow never to eat Twoleg food again – after all, he hadn't eaten for a day.

Branchpaw had only regained his courage after visiting Firestar's past house. He had been comforted that a long time ago, the leader of ThunderClan had once gone inside this very forest. In fact, he had leaped off this very fence, onto this very ground... and entered the trees at this very place.

The sun had progressed noticeably before Branchpaw had found it, but now here he was! In the same clearing the leader once stood! He climbed up to Highrock and surveyed the camp. Emptied of cats, it wasn't much. But it was something. *A start*, Branchpaw thought.

He looked out at the woods. It all looked very precarious; while a clearing was safer than dense trees, there was really nothing separating the camp and the forest. *There was a barrier before, right? Made of... uh, gorse.*

Branchpaw knew this to be true, on his mother's word, but after that he was stumped. He had no idea what gorse was.

I guess it's some type of bush, he thought. But that doesn't help. I need to protect the camp somehow... how did ThunderClan do it?

Sheer numbers was the answer. When there was at least one cat awake at a time, it could be trusted that the alarm would be sounded in case of danger. Branchpaw slumped wearily; he needed a friend. *Or even better*, he thought bitterly, *a mother. A clan.*

Feeling that he had done enough for the day, he took to making an impromptu nest. The only den still completely standing was the leader's den, so he built it in there. But what went in a nest? He didn't really know. *Leaves. Um, some of the soft fern-things.* Branchpaw grinned – *and maybe some gorse.* Improvising as he went, the white apprentice started gathering overgrowth from the nearby forest.

He noticed green on the trees' trunks. *Of course! Moss!* Branchpaw grabbed a mouthful and plodded back to the clearing.

When he was done, he stood back to view his creation. It was dismal at best, an mess of leaves, moss, and unidentifiable greens. Not the most encouraging thing.

Branchpaw jumped into the pile. *Well, at least it's comfortable. Who cares what it looks like!* He squirmed deeper into his nest, closed his eyes, and felt a surge of pride – he was sleeping in a nest he had made himself, in a clearing he had found himself, in the forest ThunderClan used to live in. *And it's only a start, too... tomorrow, I learn to hunt!*

For the first time, Branchpaw really felt at home.

I-I-I-I-I-I

Branchpaw did a great deal of kicking and turning in his sleep. He was a talkative, energetic cat, even at night; and he was used to sleeping by his mother's body. When he woke, he was completely bewildered at the mess his nest had become. He gave the den a critical look.

"You're not even worthy of the name 'nest,'" the cat addressed his bed sleepily. "You're a mess. A mess nest."

He wasn't one to leave his den in turmoil. Blinking against the bright sunlight, Branchpaw tried to tidy his nest, but it was to no avail. The collection of bedding had developed a stubborn personality overnight. *Well, be stubborn if you want to!* he thought. *I'm stubborn too!*

But to his frustration, the bedding proved even more obstinate than he. No matter where he pushed down and where he straightened up, another portion always got out of place in the process. Branchpaw finally gave up and stalked outside, his tail swishing angrily. *I prefer sleeping on carpet.*

Then he saw his surroundings again, and he couldn't help but take back his comment. "Who cares about nests?" he mewed. "I'm living in the forest!" Out in the open, the young cat felt his joviality returning. The forest buoyed his feelings in ways he himself didn't quite understand. His senses, too. Branchpaw took a moment to drink in his new environment, then began his morning ablutions; grooming his fur and licking mud off of his paws. If anything happened, at least he would be clean.

His grooming did not take long. He stood, and wondered, *Now what?*

Branchpaw started to leap about the camp. He found it hard to stand still for too long. Up onto Highrock, down behind some brush, round and round the clearing. *What to do? What to do?*

Branchpaw tried another track of thinking. How had the Clan filled its time? "Well, the apprentices cared for the elders," he mewed to himself.

He halted by an empty den. "Not that that'll be a problem."

Round and round he went again. "How about..." - circle Highrock - "Patrol borders?" - Jump onto a ruined den - "Gather herbs?" - Jump down again - "Share tongues?"

He answered himself, "What borders? What herbs? What... tongues?"

He stopped to frown at the bizarreness of his last sentence, when he felt a sudden pain- his stomach, growling. Grimacing, he thought, *Oh yeah. They hunted.*

There it was again! Hunting!

Branchpaw ended his aimless amble and regarded the forest. *First step of hunting; find some prey, right?*

Without hesitation, he plunged into the trees. Before he tripped on another root, though, he slowed his pace. He would not catch any fresh-kill if they heard him coming! Branchpaw concentrated on where he put his paws. *Don't step on leaves*, he cautioned. *Don't snap any branches*. The white apprentice winced whenever he heard a crack, or pop; he had no way of knowing how keenly the mice and squirrels heard.

Branchpaw halted randomly. *Now*, he thought, *I need to find some prey*. But looking about, he saw only vegetation.

Again, his stomach rumbled. Desperate, he conjured up an imaginary mentor besides him. He modeled it after the image of Firestar; orange-red all over. *Ok, then*, he thought. *Here's Firestar. What would he have done?*

Branchpaw closed his eyes, the better to visualize the fake warrior. *He would have shown me how to do it*, he decided. He reached back to his mother's stories and watched the leader hunt. Firestar fixed his gaze at the tree trunks around him, sniffing slightly. He walked a few paces forward, then sniffed again. *There*, Branchpaw imagined him saying. *Can you smell it? It's a mouse.*

The cat's eyes flew open. He pinpointed the direction that Firestar had gestured to, and watched intently.

Seconds passed.

Then Branchpaw remembered what to do. Of course! Mimicking the leader, he sniffed the air carefully. *The air smells strange this way...* he turned around.

Branchpaw remembered to open his senses. He could see- hear- smell-

There! Motion, amongst wiry tree roots. The apprentice could hardly conceal his excitement- *a mouse! A mouse! I've found a mouse!*

He dropped low, his belly grazing the dirt. Ready to pounce. Though he forced his body to be still, he couldn't help it when his tail started to wave. Sticking upwards, it brushed against a low-lying branch, which likewise shook its leaves.

Then he saw a blur-! Branchpaw leaped, hurriedly, but he crashed down on empty land; he did not even see which direction the prey had escaped to. *Mouse dung!* He thought. *Did it see me?*

But he already knew the answer. *My tail. It heard the branch my tail hit.*

Looking over his shoulder, the problem was glaringly obvious. His tail rose perpendicular to the ground, like a flag announcing his arrival. Branchpaw lowered it, chastising himself. He imagined Firestar saying, *keep your tail down, Branchpaw! The prey have eyes too, you know!*

He smiled. *Oh, be quiet, fake Firestar! You didn't catch your first mouse either.*

There was nothing to do but keep trying. Besides, Branchpaw didn't really know where the camp was anymore. He repeated the procedure again, stopping when he caught the scent of prey. The fake Firestar watched interestedly.

But he stepped on a branch- alerted, the prey scampered off again.

Branchpaw's patience held until he had tried three more times. Once again, a squirrel had escaped up a trunk; he hadn't thought he could follow. "Mouse dung!" he cursed. "Fox dung! Dog breath! Uh, uh..." he found it irritating he did not even have the words to describe his frustration. "What am I doing wrong?"

He watched Firestar hunt again, and come up with a vole between his jaws. And then, again. He was copying the exact movements- what was going wrong? Maybe he just needed some practice.

And some time to rest, he thought. Having no idea which way was which, Branchpaw set off in a random direction, grumbling to himself. He was still hungry, too. Twoleg food would have to do. *When can I ever really belong in the forest?*

Chapter 4

Branchpaw emerged in Twolegplace; it surrounded the forest, after all. It was ironic, in a way. Even when he had escaped to the forest, he would still be entrapped by the Twolegs.

Once again, the houses were unfamiliar. *Should I go back into the forest*, wondered Branchpaw, *or walk around it? Maybe I can just beg food from any home.*

But Branchpaw immediately decided against the idea. It was bad enough that he had to depend on the Twolegs- he wouldn't beg.

He eyed the trees warily. He didn't really want to go back in. The Twoleg nests were comforting, reliable; there were no badgers there. So he leaped a fence, passed a house, and found himself on the road. *What did the warriors call it?* He thought. *Lightningroad? Lightningpath?*

Branchpaw wasn't much of a street cat, but he knew enough to survive. *Stay on the edge of the road*, Cody had said. *Don't cross if you can help it.* But this was only common sense. No sane cat would cross the Lightningpath without a good reason! He had never done it before, and he wasn't planning to.

He set off parallel to the road, keeping an eye on the houses. He hoped he could recognize his Twoleg's nest; they all looked the same to him. So did the Lightningpaths- they were all exactly alike. "Lightningpath..." mused the kit. "that doesn't really sound right. "But its Lightningpath, I know it is. Lightningpath, Lightningpath, Lightningpath...." Branchpaw made the word into a chant as he walked. He set his paws down in rhythm to it, and only just remembered to look for his house as well.

A sudden unsettling feeling came over him. He couldn't quite put a reason to it, but he stopped talking nonetheless. When he wasn't chanting, he could hear much more, and noticed a Twoleg monster coming up from behind; he quickly darted off of the road and slunk behind a mailbox. Branchpaw's ears twitched as the car passed by.

He gave it plenty of time to leave the area before venturing back onto the road; but then he felt the strange feeling again. It was almost like a premonition, warning that something was about to happen...

No, wait, thought Branchpaw. *I know.* He listened closer to the wind, peering sharply at his surroundings, but heard nothing. He also began to sniff the air. Scent had certainly aided ThunderClan, after all.

Then he had it! *Of course!* Giving no warning, the cat suddenly spun around to look behind him. The feeling had been eyes boring into him.

But the Lightningpath was empty. "What?" asked Branchpaw, confused. He was sure- certain- he had been being watched.

"Looking for someone?" a voice came from behind. Letting out a startled cry, Branchpaw

whipped around and skittered backwards, nearly losing his balance. A young she-cat looked at him curiously, her head tilted to the side. Her mouth opened in silent amusement. "You're not very fast, are you?"

"I got caught by surprise!" protested Branchpaw, a bit irritated. "I can be fast if I want to! Who are you, anyways?"

The she-cat ignored the question and proposed her own; "Fast? I bet you can't beat me to the road crossing over there!"

Abruptly, she spun and started racing along the road. Branchpaw only hesitated for a moment before chasing after her. He couldn't resist the challenge, but still thought as he ran, *Who is this cat? And how did she hide so quickly?*

Branchpaw drew closer to the she-cat; he had always been a runner. He examined the mysterious cat closer as he sprinted; she was a splotchy gray-brown, white at the tip of her tail. She was thin from hunger, but not starving; the absence of a collar confirmed her position as a loner. Her expression was joking as she gave him a smile; then she shot forward with a burst of energy.

But the loner was no match for Branchpaw. He soon overtook her, gaining tail-length by tail-length as he neared the crossing.

Then there was pressure on his foot; his paw caught on a rock embedded in the ground, and he found himself falling. He was suspended in the air for a split second, then he tumbled ungracefully onto the grass.

He was greeted with laughter. "So close, too!" said the loner. "Couple more seconds and you would have won!"

His pride injured, Branchpaw stayed on the ground. *Stupid cat*, he thought. *Stupid rock!*

When he didn't move, the she-cat's tone immediately altered. "Oh, no, are you hurt?" The blue-eyed face appeared in Branchpaw's vision, eyes wide with consternation. "Are you okay?" she mewed. "I'm sorry for laughing! Hello? Are you hurt?"

Branchpaw was equal parts appreciative and amused by the stranger's concern. *She can't be that bad*. "I'm fine," he said, getting back up.

"Oh, thank StarClan!" she mewed. "I'm sorry. Here, my name is—"

"Whoa, wait!" interrupted Branchpaw. "What did you just say? Did you say StarClan?"

"Um..." she stammered. "I... suppose you won't forget that I said that?"

"You know about the warriors? Who told you?"

“Who told *you*?” she countered.

“I asked first,” replied Branchpaw, obstinately.

The cats stood for a few moments, stubbornly refusing to talk; but facing the loner’s glare, Branchpaw realized how silly he was being. *You’re acting like a kit!* He reprimanded. *You’ve got to live up to your title as apprentice.*

“Fine,” mewed Branchpaw. “My mother told me. Now you.”

“My mother told me, too,” the loner replied. An edge of stubbornness lingered in her voice. “How much do you know about them?”

The white cat pondered how to respond to this. “Pretty much everything,” he said finally.

“Who was their leader?” she tested.

“ThunderClan? Bluestar, then Firestar.”

“How about the other clans?”

“Uh... WindClan had Tallstar. RiverClan had **IDUNNOBLAHH**, and ShadowClan had *lots* of leaders.” Branchpaw shifted from paw to paw, strangely apprehensive.

“How did Bluestar die?”

“A dog attack.” *What’s the point of these questions?* He wondered.

“Where did Firestar come from?”

“A Twoleg nest. His name was Rusty.”

“Who was his sister?”

“...Princess?”

“And who was Princess’ daughter?”

“What?” he asked. “Her son was Cloudtail, but....” He turned his head. “Did she have another kit?”

She nodded. “You’re looking at her.”

Branchkit took a moment to comprehend this. “Wait, what?” He stared.

“My name is Rain,” said the she-cat, sounding somewhat smug. “And I’m the kin of Firestar.”

Chapter 5

Branchpaw's eyes widened in shock, and maybe a little bit of awe. "You're... You mean... You're really...."

Rain's grin only grew. "That's me."

"But," mewed Branchpaw, "you- you're really related to Firestar? Well, I mean... you know...." he was at a loss for words. *It's not as if she's Firestar himself, he thought, or even a warrior. But she's a part of the story!*

"It's not that amazing," said Rain. "The warriors were just another group of cats. I've never even met them, to tell you the truth."

Branchpaw was a little insulted. "You might not think much of it," he mewed crossly, "but ThunderClan's always been a legend to me. Just compare their lives to the lives of kittypets!"

But then he had to admit; even though Rain shared Firestar's blood, she did seem very... normal. Branchpaw didn't know what to make of that. *I've always thought of the warriors as different from the rest of us. But in the end... I guess we're all cats.*

"Yeah, I guess it would have been cool to have been a Clan cat," said Rain. "The kittypet life never really felt right for me. I went out by myself to be a loner a moon ago!"

"But... What about your mother?" asked Branchpaw.

Rain frowned. "What is it to you?" she responded. "How about you, anyways? How come you know so much about the warriors? You've never told me your name, either."

Cringing, he said, "Well... my name is Branchpaw...."

"But that's a warrior name!" exclaimed Rain. Her resentment was replaced by surprise.

"Apprentice name," he corrected.

"Whatever!"

"I'm not actually a warrior apprentice, though," clarified Branchpaw. "My mother was a friend of ThunderClan; her name was Cody. She named me 'Branchkit', to keep alive their memory... and she changed my name when I turned 6 moons old." He grimaced bitterly. "That was 10 sunrises or so ago."

"That's so cool!" the gray-brown loner said. "And you think my family is amazing? You're the one with a real warrior name!"

"Yeah," said Branchpaw dejectedly.

"Who's your mother?" Rain asked. "I want to meet her!"

"She's dead" said Branchpaw.

"Oh," said the loner, deflating. She looked chastised. "Sorry."

There was an awkward silence, and both cats felt uncomfortable. Shifting her eyes about, Rain avoided looking at Branchpaw's face directly.

The quiet was eventually broken by Branchpaw. "So, where do you live?"

A mischievous look inched back onto Rain's face. "Anywhere that's dry. I'm a wanderer! How about you?"

"Well," began Branchpaw, "I used to live with Twolegs. And sometimes I still do, when I'm hungry- I'm trying to teach myself how to hunt." He added on under his breath, "not that that worked too well." He coughed and began again; "Now, I'm trying to live in the forest. It's not near as bad as I thought it would be."

"The forest?" asked Rain. "But it's so small!"

"I know," mewed Branchpaw, "but see- ThunderClan's camp is still there!"

"What?" the loner's eyebrows raised in surprise. "The camp of ThunderClan? I'd love to see that! Hey, how about a deal; you take me to see the camp, and I'll teach you how to hunt. I'm not bad at it!"

That's a great deal! thought Branchpaw. *Except....*

"Ah..." he mewed, uncertainly, "I'm not really that sure where the camp is." When Rain raised a questioning eyebrow, he defended, "Well, I only found it yesterday!"

Rain plopped onto the grass below her, asking, "Can't you follow your scent trail back to it, then?"

Branchpaw only frowned at this. *I'm frowning a lot, aren't I?* he realized.

"Scent trail," repeated the loner. "Tell me; how did you know I was following you?"

"Uh..." Branchpaw said. "I...." *How did I know? I didn't see anything... or hear anything....*

"Maybe... I... smelled you?"

"Right!" she said. "You smelled cat. It's usually hard to follow your own scent trail, but if you show me where you entered the forest, I could probably find the way to the camp."

This had never even occurred to Branchpaw. "Well, follow me, then!" he said. "It's down this

Lightningpath, I think.”

He took off down the road, startling Rain. She leapt to her feet and hurried to catch up, yelling, “Hey! Wait up!”

Branchpaw couldn't help but grin. *I got my wish! A companion....*

Rain soon caught up, and they continued at an energetic run. Branchpaw never felt as good as he did when the wind was rushing past his face. *I'd make a good WindClan warrior*, he thought. *And so would Rain, I think*. He noticed the sun warming their pelts, and the grass cushioning his pounding paws; he marveled at the good turn the day had taken. Not only was it a perfect greenleaf day, but he had a friend; and she was going to teach him how to hunt.

By the time Branchpaw recognized the house of Firestar, they were both panting heavily. “Did we really have to run that much?” asked Rain, drooping. “And are we there yet?”

“Yep,” said Branchpaw. “Here, the house of Firestar!”

Rain looked up, a gleam of curiosity breaking through her exhaustion. Branchpaw waited for her reaction; *Did she already know about it?*

“I knew he was a kittypet,” she finally mewed between breaths, “but I never really gave much thought to it.” She stopped to give her paw a few half-hearted licks. “I guess you know more about the warriors than I do.”

Both cats jumped at a sudden growl. Embarrassed, Branchpaw realized- *it's my stomach*. “I haven't had much to eat today...” he said. “Actually... I don't think I've eaten anything.”

“Well, why didn't you say so?” asked Rain, her tiredness momentarily forgotten. “Show me where you entered, and I'll catch us some fresh-kill on the way to the camp!”

Branchpaw left the Lightningpath behind and strolled purposely to the woods. He padded along the fence, until he thought he saw where he had been sitting the other day. “Somewhere around here...” muttered the white cat.

Rain walked right up to the tree line. She lowered her head and sniffed at the trees and ferns, saying, “Are you sure this is the place?” the dappled she-cat plodded back and forth on the cut grass, and made a show of investigating every tree.

“This is the place,” promised Branchpaw. “If you can't find a scent, it's something wrong with your nose, and not my memory.”

His companion shot him an irritated glance, but continued her search. It wasn't long before she proclaimed, “I think I have it. Come on!”

She walked into the forest without waiting for Branchpaw to join her. *Hey, wait for me!* He thought, before loping up besides Rain. She was sniffing at the floor, walking forward slowly.

“What do I smell like?” he asked, curious.

“Um...” she responded, looking up. “Like... a tom?” She shrugged, and continued on her path.

The scent trail got clearer soon, and the two maintained a steady plod through the trees. *I feel much more comfortable*, thought Branchpaw, *now that I have Rain. The forest isn't nearly as scary. Except the badgers. And that den might have been abandoned anyways; there's probably not any dangers left in here.* Branchpaw found himself nodding at his thoughts. *I wonder how Rain sees it?*

“So tell me,” said Rain, navigating around some brush, “more about your mother. You said she was a friend of ThunderClan, right?”

Recalling his mother no longer seemed so painful now that he had a friend. “Yes. Her name was Cody,” he repeated. “And she was a kittypet. One day, she was wandering around the forest, just when the Twolegs had started to cut it down. They thought she was a forest cat; and they trapped her, in a cage. She was put in the back of a Twoleg monster, along with other cats; loners, rogues... and warriors. She never thought she would escape.”

“Hold up a second,” interrupted Rain.

Branchpaw stood still as he saw her drop into a crouch, amidst the tall grass. *Did she find prey? She found prey!*

The she-cat slowly stalked forward, towards the unseen animal. She slunk around the trees, and he found himself holding his breath. Rain's muscles tensed....

With a spring near-imperceptible with speed, she was gone from view. It was only a second, though, before she returned to Branchpaw with something dangling from her mouth. “Fresh-kill!” she said, through a mouthful of rodent. “Nice and big, too.”

“Wow,” said Branchpaw, awed. “I wish I could do that.” The animal hanging from her jaws looked something like a mouse; but he couldn't quite pin down its species. “What is that, exactly?” he asked, tentatively.

Rain raised an eyebrow. “You don't recognize a shrew when you see one?”

The white apprentice regarded the prey critically. “That's a shrew?” Now that it was hanging in front of his face, he noticed its smell was rather tempting.

“What did you expect?” she asked. “Did you think it would be green?” with a smile, she dropped it at her companion's paws. “You carry it. I can't smell anything through that.”

Branchpaw leaned down and took the shrew in his mouth, with some trepidation. The taste wasn't bad. *It's good, really.*

“Mind continuing your story?” asked the gray-brown she-cat. “It's pretty interesting.”

“Right,” said Branchpaw, around the shrew. “Well....

“At the same time my mother was captured, Graystripe- ThunderClan’s deputy- had taken a patrol to check out the Twoleg’s activity. They realized that cats were in the back of the monster, and some of them were warriors; so they attacked! A few went off to distract the Twolegs, and the rest started opening cages. First came the warriors. Then came the loners and rogues. Even when the Twolegs regrouped and got back to the car, Graystripe was still opening the last cages. One of these was my mother’s. Graystripe, he managed to free most of the cats. But when the Twolegs closed the back of the monster, he was still in it; trapped! And the monster roared to life, and went away....

“He was never seen again. ThunderClan had moved out of their camp, since the Twolegs came really close; they knew they would have to leave, but Firestar didn’t want to. He was waiting for Graystripe. My mother stayed with the Clan for a while, helping out. She learned to hunt, and learned stories. But when the Clan finally decided to move on and leave, she decided not to go with them.

“She couldn’t stop thinking about the warriors, though; she went adventuring, and found someone who could tell her more. It was Ravenpaw, an apprentice that had run away from ThunderClan to save his life. From him, my mother learned all the rest there was to know.

“Then... then she came back to the Twolegs. She was still, after all, a kittypet. After that, well, there was me. I was the only kit, I think.” Branchpaw paused. “And that’s about it.”

Rain was quiet. Her face showed nothing but concentration as she followed the faded scent trail. *What’s wrong?* Branchpaw felt like asking, but he was wise enough to keep quiet.

Then she asked a question. “Who is your father?”

Branchpaw shrugged. “I have absolutely no idea. I never really thought about it, but I supposed it was just another kittypet. Maybe a loner.” Then something flashed into mind; “Hey, maybe it was Ravenpaw!”

“I wonder if he still lives near here,” Rain mused to herself. Then, “Hey, look, I see the trees thin out!” She bounded forward, crashing through some bracken, and disappeared from Branchpaw’s view.

He didn’t really want to tear through the brush. “Rain?” he called, trying to find a way to circumvent the obstruction.

“I’ve found it! The camp!” she responded. Branchpaw gave up trying to find a way around and jumped straight through the thick undergrowth; and the sight greeting him was compensation enough.

Rain spun around in a dizzying circle, taking in the camp. “Just like it is in the stories!” she exclaimed. “Needs a bit of tidying up, but still... Branchpaw! Can you imagine? The camp of

ThunderClan!" Branchpaw smiled. *I suppose I looked like that too.*

He set down the shrew he was carrying. "How about a meal, now?"

Rain ran over. "Of course! You take the first bite," she mewed.

All right, he thought. *There's no going back now.*

He bit into the fresh-kill. No matter his trepidation, the flavor that ran down his tongue was simply- delicious. He swallowed his mouthful and said, "It's good!"

"Told you," the dappled she-cat said, before leaning over to take a bite herself. "Can't believe I used to like Twoleg food...."

"Yeah," agreed Branchpaw. Then remembering his manners, he said, "Thanks for everything, Rain."

"Right back at you," she said, her mouth full.

Chapter 6

For a moment, the crickets stopped singing, the trees dissipated, and even Rain, watching closely, ceased to exist.

Only the prey.

Breath slowly, he had been instructed. Be patient. But don't get too close: your pelt stands out against the green and brown. And surprise yourself when you spring!

Branchpaw did just that, leaping almost without meaning to. Barely aiming, he focused on speed and silence as he pounced... but came up empty-handed. The vole scurried away, immediately out of view.

"Well," said Rain, coming out from her hiding place, "you've got the speed part down. Just not quite the silent."

Branchpaw was exasperated. Not at Rain; she was just like that. *It's the mice! The prey! They're seeing me get ready to jump.*

It was the split second before the strike that mattered. When the cat was in the air, it was already too late for the mouse; or, as it was then, fresh-kill. From the mouse's perspective, it's only chance of survival was to notice the hunter first, even if it was only a millisecond before the pounce. After that- it was simple. Just get out of the way.

"I've never seen anyone have so much trouble hunting in my life!" mewed Rain, slowly making her way to Branchpaw.

Ignoring the jibe, he asked, "What am I doing wrong now?"

"You just don't have the suddenness," said Rain. You're just..." she stopped to look her companion up and down, sizing him up. "Not a ready-born hunter, I guess."

Branchpaw didn't quite agree with her, but he was beginning to doubt himself. *Why can't I hunt? Why is it so easy for Rain? What if she's related to Firestar!* "Let's stop for the day," he mewed. "I'm tired."

"All right," his companion responded, turning towards the camp. "Maybe next time, you'll get it!"

The white cat was doubtful. It had already been three more days- three long days- learning how to hunt. And so far, it had resulted in naught. Branchpaw estimated that he had missed at least twelve animals by then, Downhearted, he followed Rain towards the clearing. She had buried three of her own kills there: a mouse, a jay, and a squirrel.

She nudged one piece of fresh-kill over to Branchpaw, before leaning over her own. Neither of them had much to say, and he couldn't decide whether the silence was companionable or awkward. *Well, I've been living off of her kills for a few days, he thought. It's at least bordering*

on awkward.

He spent a lot of his time trying to hunt, but the rest of the time was spent restless. Branchpaw had started to tell Rain the Clan stories; she had been surprisingly unknowledgeable about the warriors.

“Are you sure the medicine cats had apprentices?” she had asked.

“How else could they teach their successors?”

“I... I don't know. Ask them!”

Branchpaw also spent a lot of time getting used to the forest. He would run through the trees, climb up their branches, and practice following scents. His ideal was to be as comfortable in the woods as the warriors had, but he still had a long way to go. Rain had devised a game for him. She would sneak out into the forest, and Branchpaw would have to track her down... before she managed to return to the camp. So far, he had only won twice; and in one incident Rain had stopped to eat some fresh-kill.

“What?” she had said to a disgruntled Branchpaw. “I was hungry.”

And lastly, he had considered his ultimate goal; to find ThunderClan. Strangely, Rain had been against this idea. “Why risk a hundred dangers,” she had argued, “when there is everything you could need here? If it's adventure you want, just go wandering; like I used to!”

It's not just that, he thought, It's my mother's memory.

But he had- wisely- decided not to antagonize her further.

The two cats slept in separate dens. While the leader's den was certainly big enough for two, on the first day, Branchpaw had kept Rain awake half the night with his kicking and turning. The other half the night, Rain had left to sleep in the medicine cat den. Branchpaw had been startled when he woke in the morning, fearing the worst; *What happened? Where is she?*

When he'd hurried outside, though, she'd been sitting there, calmly grooming her fur. “Morning,” she'd said.

To those two dens the cats retreated on the third day, for the sun was already half-hidden at the horizon. In his nest, Branchpaw's thoughts kept him awake for a long time; about Rain, and about ThunderClan. *Rain's a strange cat, he thought.*

And the other dilemma; He could not hunt! *What in the name of StarClan is wrong with me? Maybe I'm just a kittypet, but Firestar; he had caught his second mouse, and he was a kittypet. And the warrior kits- it wasn't uncommon for them to catch prey on their first apprentice day!* Branchpaw considered an idea. *Maybe StarClan doesn't want me to be a warrior....*

The next day, Branchpaw already had his schedule planned. "I'm going to visit my mother," he announced to Rain.

"Hm?" she said, sleepily. "I thought she was... you know... in StarClan?"

"I meant, I'm going to visit her grave," Branchpaw amended.

"Should I stay here?"

"If you want to."

"Can you remember the way back to camp?"

"I'm pretty sure I can."

The forest had truly become familiar. Using the borders as references, he could usually pinpoint his location; and if he couldn't, the solution was simple. Walk in one direction until he came to Twolegplace, then follow the Lightningpath to Firestar's house. He knew the route from there.

After gulping down some fresh-kill, Branchpaw left the camp in the direction of the rising sun. His mother's grave would be hard to find, overgrown by weeds already, but he was sure he knew the place.

He was right; it was still late morning when he came across it. *Found it!* He thought triumphantly, before settling down by its side.

In his mother's memory, Branchpaw was silent for some time. *What is there to say anyways?* He decided to tell her about Rain, whether she could hear or not.

"I've found a friend," mewed Branchpaw, breaking the quiet. "Her name's Rain. I found her- or, rather, she found me, on the Twoleg streets. Guess what? She's related to Firestar!" He smiled at the thought. He had become so used to Rain, it was hard to believe she was the niece of the leader of ThunderClan. "She's teaching me how to hunt... but I'm not too good at it." His good demeanor faded. "I'm horrible at it, actually. What should I do, mother?" he asked.

He didn't really expect to get a response, but he paused for a moment anyways.

"But I'm closer to starting my journey," Branchpaw continued. "Except for hunting, I know how to survive as a loner. I'll notice if something creeps up on me. I can run and hide fast enough to avoid danger. And if I have to fight something..." his voice trailed off. "Well, I'm faster than most things out there. It probably won't matter."

Branchpaw realized that he was rambling, and to a grave, besides. But he only gave it a moment of thought. Talking reassured him. "I don't know what the next step is," he told his mother. "Let's say I learn to hunt. I'm ready for the journey, and I convince Rain to go with me. What do I do? What should I do?" The question seemingly resounded in his head. "I wish I knew

what direction they went; and I think I know how to find out. Would you have known, mother? If I just knew the right direction, I'd be good from then on. I could get information from other cats. A whole forest-full of cats travelling together can't have gone unnoticed...."

When a slight creak came from behind him, it was credit to his new skills that he noticed and jumped to his feet. Not knowing what to expect, Branchpaw turned around....

And saw Jade.

"Branchkit!" he exclaimed, from the other side of the Twoleg's fence. "What- what are you doing in there?"

He enjoyed the feeling of uncertainty in the tabby's voice. "I'm visiting my mother's grave," he responded calmly. "And really- my name's been Branchpaw for over ten sunrises."

He could tell Jade was apprehensive. Even he had been treated with forest cat stories as a young cat, distorted as they were. *There were cats in the forest*, his mother had said, *that had claws as long as- as this!* She had placed her paws nearly a quarter tail-length apart. *They had fangs, and a screeching yowl, and they preyed on misbehaving kits in the night! If you're not careful, one of them might come back for you....* Granted, Branchpaw didn't have fangs- or nightmarish claws- but he was *in the forest*. Jade had always been sort of superstitious.

"You mother- Cody's grave?" the gray tom said. "I don't see a grave anywhere," he added, a hint of his condescending tone edging back into his voice.

"Course not," Branchpaw responded, much more sure-sounding than he had as a kit. "It's ten days old."

It was unspeakable, but the apprentice's voice was hard to disbelieve. "So she's- she's dead?" he asked.

Although Rain and the forest had numbed Branchpaw's pain, Jade's words brought back the fresh horror of the badger attack- the overwhelming, terrifying sight of the attacker, the despair with which he had viewed the scene- and there had been blood, staining his mother's features. An uncontrollable shiver ran through Branchpaw's body. Her lifeblood, pooling under the bodies-

Abruptly, Branchpaw spun and marched back into the forest, managing to avoid stepping on the grave. "Hey, where' are you going?" called Jade. "How did she die?"

Again, the cat shuddered. "I was there.... You probably don't want to know."

He darted into the trees before Jade could say anything else. The kittypet was surprised at how quickly he moved, and he stood stock-still for a moment. The uncertainty in his eyes spoke of disbelief.

In the end, he thought, *He's a forest cat now. Who knows what he meant?*

Jade glanced once more at the grassy clearing before leaping back into his comforting backyard.

Back in the forest, Branchpaw was almost sorry that he had left so abruptly. Not to Jade, of course; he deserved what he got. To his mother; he hadn't even said goodbye, had he?

Then again, if she was listening, she could hear him just as clearly here as there. "Eh... goodbye, mother," he mewed, but somehow, that didn't seem right. *If she can hear me everywhere, why am I saying 'bye'?*

Branchpaw shrugged. Why did it matter?

I-I-I-I-I-I

The next part of his schedule was routine; eat, then try and hunt with Rain... which was a rather lopsided order of things. Rain (who had been taking a nap) agreed readily, if sleepily.

She continued blinking from sleep and stopping to smooth her fur down, though, as they reentered the forest. Branchpaw could tell Rain wasn't up to it when she was giving her instruction.

"Ah... I'll go catch some fresh-kill to get you started, then..." she yawned widely. "Well, you know what to do." She meandered slowly off to the side, shaking her head to get rid of the morning cobwebs. "Couldn't sleep yesterday," she added. "Went out for a walk... got lost a bit..." Her voice faded out into the distance. *Lost?* wondered Branchpaw. *What sort of place did she walk to?*

Dismissing it as unimportant, Branchpaw concentrated on hunting. *Right*, he told himself. *Haunches down. Be patient. Be unexpected.*

His mouse escaped beneath the leaves before he even sprung. Resigned to failure, he continued his exercises.

It was soon about noontime; Branchpaw hadn't continued for long. Much less determined than before, he never even got close. He shook dirt off of his paws, and looked around for Rain.; *where'd she go? She never brought me any fresh-kill, either.*

He found her dozing at the camp, a raggedy bird lying at her side. Branchpaw helped himself, thinking, *that's Rain for you.*

But as he chewed, he had to rethink his statement. *Rain's usually full of energy... sure, getting side-tracked and going back to camp sounds like her... but falling asleep?* Rain wasn't airy, or distracted often; but she did what she pleased, paying the slightest attention to what she actually *said* she'd do. *She must have been awake all night!*

Branchpaw had not meant to stop working in the forest until much later; but without Rain, there was a limit to what he could do. He skipped to the next, and last, item on his list; find Ravenpaw.

It had come to him in a moment of inspiration the night before. Rain was a great mentor, but inexperienced, and young. The two of them needed a *real* teacher- *no offense*, he added afterwards. Someone who had truly known the secrets of the forest, who had lived the Clan life. And there were still cats like that; cats ThunderClan had left behind. *I can't believe I didn't think of it before!*

Seeing no reason to delay the trip, he immediately started planning. Barley, the loner who Ravenpaw had escaped to, lived in a barn. It had been far away, all the way across the WindClan territory. *How big were the territories?* he asked. *Surely at least twice, three times the distance of the forest.*

Another variable was the direction, but he knew this one. No matter how meager his warriors' geography, he knew – about- where WindClan territory had been. Twolegplace, and Firestar's home, had been behind ThunderClan territory. WindClan had been in front, past Fourtrees- the Clan meeting place. There had been a Lightningpath connecting all three places; Twolegs to Fourtrees to Barley's barn. So if he could find the correct place near Firestar's house, he could try and find the original Lightningpath and make his way to the barn.

Doubt had halted him before, but he was determined. *What if the Lightningpath's gone? What if my mother's wrong about Firestar's house? What if the barn's been torn down?*

To this he responded, *If any of that's true, then I'll turn back to the forest. I'll wait 'til Rain's awake, so even if we can't find the forest again, we'll be alright. I have to do this- not only is Ravenpaw really and truly a warrior, he can direct us towards the Clans!*

Of course, it could all fail. They could set off in the wrong direction. Lose the forest. Perhaps, they'd be together... but he wouldn't have much else. Without the familiar woods, his purpose was destroyed; one direction out of a hundred would lead to ThunderClan. Well, he supposed, one direction would lead to the forest, from where they could try again; but two out of a hundred was not good odds.

And if the journey to Ravenpaw was hard, the journey to the Clans would be hopeless....

Branchpaw redirected his thoughts before he collapsed under all the self-doubt. *Ravenpaw made it. My mother made it. I'll make it.* He reassured himself, *I don't have to do it all at once. I'll venture out a little, get used to the territory; then I'll come back and try the next day. Then I'll go out further.*

For now, though, he decided the best course of action would be to stay with Rain. *I could use a nap....* He stretched out at Rain's side, making sure not to awaken her. The sun felt good on his pelt, making him drowsy....

He slowly realized that there was a sound to his right. It sounded... a bit like whispering. When he swiveled his head, though, he only saw Rain.

The whispering dissolved into more of a murmur. Starting to become frightened, Branchpaw

heard snippets of conversation; *You let him go... why not me?... let me leave....*

It quieted for a moment, then came back once more;

You let Cloddtail go....

Cloddtail. *Rain's brother.*

At that moment, Rain snuffled and staggered to her feet. "Rain?" Branchpaw asked, cautious, but when she paid no heed, he stood and examined her. Circling her, he found that her eyes were still shut tight.

She started a stumbling walk out of the camp. As she went, he heard her mutter, "I'm going after him...."

With a start, Branchpaw realized that Rain had been the one murmuring. "Rain?" he called out again, more forcibly. She didn't hear him that time either, but before she could leave the clearing, he finally yelled out- "Rain! Stop!"

She jerked and stumbled back a pace. "Wha- what..." shaking her head, she turned to see Branchpaw eying her curiously. "Oh. Um... hi, Branchpaw...."

Incredulously, he asked, "You sleepwalk?"

She sighed. "Yeah. It's very inconvenient."

Branchpaw was still skeptical. "I guess that's how you got lost yesterday?"

"It's not the first time, either." She shrugged; "I'm just glad I found my way back."

The white apprentice nodded slowly.

"Um... hey, did I... say anything? While I slept?"

"While you slept? Something about leaving... and you mentioned Cloddtail. And something about following him." Branchpaw paused and waited for an explanation, but there was none coming. Rain simply nodded, saying "Alright," and loped over to the medicine cat den.

Branchpaw couldn't help grinning towards her den. Somehow, now that he thought of it, it didn't seem too hard to imagine Rain stumbling through Twolegplace, fast asleep. *And I thought I moved a lot when I slept!*

He glanced towards the leader's den, then the forest, but the sunny afternoon sky was welcoming. *I'll just take a nap here*, he thought. *I'll tell Rain about Ravenpaw later.*

His last thoughts before drifting off to sleep were, *I wonder what she meant about following Cloddtail? Maybe she meant joining ThunderClan....*

Chapter 7

The next day, when he brought it up in the afternoon, Branchpaw found that Rain was completely against looking for Ravenpaw. "I guess it's closer than ThunderClan," she accepted, "but you know how easy it is to get lost in Twolegplace! We've just found this comfortable place to call home, and you already want to leave?"

Branchpaw refused to acknowledge her argument. "I thought you were a wanderer, Rain. Aren't you just as happy in the streets?"

"Aren't you more happy here?" she countered.

"Yes, I am; but listen. The day before I *buried* my own mother..." he paused a moment as the words carried an ominous sound. "I went to her and told- promised- her, that I would someday try and find ThunderClan. Maybe she heard me, maybe she didn't; but it was my final promise to her, and I'm planning to keep it."

"Then go on! Find your way there yourself. I'm staying."

Branchpaw was bewildered by her vehemence. "But why, Rain? You've left your own mother, you've decided to follow Clodtail, you're fine living as a loner... I'd think you would be eager!"

"Well, I'm *not!*" exclaimed Rain, her voice rising at the mention of her family. "I'm allowed to keep my secrets, and they're no business to you. If the Clan is so precious to you, go find them yourself!"

"I might just do that!"

"Good," Rain said, then turned around. Her tail rose strictly, she held her head high, and she kept her secrets closer to heart than she ever had before.

"Come on, Rain!" said the white apprentice. "Just tell me what's bothering you!"

"Mind your own business!" she responded.

She's as bad as Jade! Branchpaw, despite himself, started becoming angry. "You've hunted for me and taught me for the past several sunrises! Now, why are you being such- such a *mousebrain?*"

As soon as the insult escaped his lips, he regretted it. "Mousebrain? *Mousebrain?*" she asked, spinning around and fixing him with a cold glare. "That's what I get for all I've done?" She turned again and stalked out into the forest.

He watched helplessly as Rain left; *why did I say that?* Branchpaw thought. *Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid...* he turned and walked out of the clearing, in the direction away from Rain. *How did I manage to make her angry in the span of- of ten sentences? Stupid! Mousebrain!*

He berated himself all the way to the edge of the forest, where Branchpaw was surprised to see Firestar's house. Was it coincidental? He leapt up onto the leader's fence, his mood gloomy, and paced back and forth. *Did Firestar ever squabble with Graystripe? Did one of them ever get so angry, they turned their back on the other and left the camp?*

And all that, just because of his idea of visiting Ravenpaw. "You know what?" he mewed, out loud. "If Rain wants me to go by myself, then I'll do just that. I'm coming back, anyways." He nodded; he was sure he'd go crazy if he spent another day trying to hunt, especially without Rain there. The daunting prospect of crossing hours of confusing Twoleg place was dulled by his inner turmoil. Perhaps, just perhaps, this would take his mind off of things....

"Who are you?" someone said.

In his hurry to turn around, Branchpaw almost fell off the fence, his back paws slipping. "Wha-whoa, hello," he stammered, locating the speaker as he regained his balance. It was a tabby she-cat, standing in Firestar's past garden. "Sorry, I didn't know a cat lived here."

"Well, who are you?" she demanded, sitting down on her haunches. "I haven't seen you around here before. My name's Hattie, what's yours?"

"Uh," said Branchpaw. "Branchpaw."

"Branchpaw...." Hattie looked thoughtful. "Branchpaw? Paw as in foot, right?" she asked, lifting a paw to demonstrate her point. "That sounds familiar."

"I... I don't see why it would," Branchpaw replied, feeling a bit bewildered. "Uh, did you ever know a cat named Cody? Or Rain?"

"Nope!" she answered. "Hey, come with me; I want you to meet someone." She bounded up to a low branch in a tree, then over a fence to the adjoining yard. "Well come on!" her voice came.

Branchpaw stored his thoughts about Rain away for later, and hopped over the fence after her.

"Hey, Smudge!" He was just in time to see Hattie waking a plump white and black tom. "Get up," she meowed, poking him with her paws.

"Mm... get off me," the cat stumbled onto his feet.

"Meet my mate," Hattie said, turning to Branchpaw. "Smudge!"

"Hello," Branchpaw said, uncertain.

The white and black tom stretched, arching his back; "Hello...."

Branchpaw examined Smudge more closely. His name sounded vaguely familiar, as if part of a long-forgotten dream....

“Smudge, this is Branchpaw,” said Hattie. “And you know, I thought his name sounded sort of like- you know-“

“Branchpaw?” interrupted Smudge. He turned to face the white apprentice; “Paw, as in...” he held up one foot.

“Uh, yes,” Branchpaw replied once more. “Look, it’s nice meeting you two, but I was... doing something.”

“No you weren’t,” said Hattie. “You were walking back and forth on my fence.”

Branchpaw flicked his ears in annoyance.

“Oh, sorry,” said Smudge, “if we bothered you; but before you leave, could you answer a question?”

Branchpaw shrugged. “Sure.”

“Have you heard of a cat named Firestar?”

Branchpaw had his mouth half-open to speak, but caught by surprise at the question, he was unable to respond. *How do these cats know about ThunderClan?*

“What are you doing?” asked Hattie. “Why are you-“

“Well, have you heard of Rusty, then?” Smudge quickly asked, stepping in front of his mate. “He used to live where Hattie does now.”

Branchpaw regained his voice. “Yes, I’ve heard of Firestar,” he meowed. “He was the leader of ThunderClan. But how do you know? You’re just a kittypet...”

Hattie gave him a skeptical glance. “And you’re not?” she turned and whispered to Smudge, “Kittypet means house cat, right?”

Recollection hit him like a blow. “Wait- you- Firestar- you were Firestar’s- Firestar’s“

“Friend?” Smudge supplied.

“Yeah! Wow, really-“ Branchpaw felt a bit embarrassed. “You actually knew him?”

“Yes, we did,” interjected Hattie; “but now I want to know – is ‘Branchpaw’ a forest cat name?”

“Uh, well yes; see, my mother was a friend of ThunderClan, and she-“

“What’s that?” asked Hattie.

“Uh... I mean she was a friend of the forest cats, and she gave me a name like theirs....“

Branchpaw wanted to ask Smudge about Firestar, but he couldn't think of a good question.

"Okay, then," said Smudge. Then she made a face; "But I don't know why she wanted to name you after the forest cats."

"They weren't just savages," said Branchpaw, knowing the common misperceptions among kittypets. "They... they lived in groups called Clans, and every cat was supposed to care for their clan...."

The group was surprised when the Twoleg's door suddenly opened. Branchpaw gave a start, then hesitated, not sure if he should dash over the fence.

"Oh, I've got to go," said Smudge. "Come back some other time!" she meowed as she padded to where a Twoleg squatted on the ground.

The two remaining cats were silent until the Twoleg disappeared back into his nest. "Well, come on," said Hattie. "Let's go over to my house." She jumped into a tree, then over the fence, leaving Branchpaw alone.

He looked back towards the forest, reluctant to follow the energetic she-cat. *Unless she knew Firestar too?*

"Are you coming?" she yowled through the fence.

Shaking the indecision from his head, he said, "Actually, I really was doing something earlier; so I've got to go...."

Hattie appeared on top of the fence. "Already?"

"Yeah. Sorry." Walking hesitantly, he headed back towards the trees.

"Well, see you later!" the she-cat yelled after him.

That was strange, he thought.

Musing over the past events, Branchpaw had walked halfway to the camp before he remembered his squabble with Rain. *I was going to go to Ravenpaw's barn,* he remembered. His conversation with Smudge had only invigorated his interest in the warriors.

Might as well get started....

He padded back to Smudge's house, hoping to avoid Hattie. "Ok, then. A Lightningpath that leads from Firestar's house. Um..." he padded over to the front lawn, surveying the road; but he already knew this one circled all the way around the forest. "Maybe... a road coming off of this one? Yeah, that's right; about in the direction of the forest." Branchpaw ventured out to the curb and started walking down it to the right. "Can't be too far."

But it was two hundred steps before a road appeared heading parallel to the forest. He looked down it, then shook his head. *The original Lightningpath was straight*; this one curved away from the trees.

He retraced his steps and tried the other way. This time, he struck gold; an arrow-straight Lightningpath heading parallel with the tree line, before the woods curved away from it. *That's the one!*

Branchpaw started down it, happy that he had found it so quickly. "Simple from now on," he said cheerily. "Keep going until you see a barn." He only had two qualms; one, the building could have been torn down, and two... well, he wasn't exactly sure what a barn looked like. *Like the gorse*, he remembered. His description of a barn stated simply that it used to house animals and contained hay. *The double doors at the front will be a good clue*, thought Branchpaw. *Especially since... you know... I don't really know what hay looks like either. It's yellow, right?* It felt good to be travelling, out in the free world.

Though his thoughts were fairly light-hearted, the matter of Rain still persisted in the corner of his mind. This strange mixture of freedom and melancholy occupied him for a while down the path; but then he was halted.

It was a crossing.

As the main Lightningpath intersected another, smaller path, Branchpaw realized he would have to venture across the road. *Of course!* He thought. *I should have thought of that!*

His fur was blown back by the wind of monsters passing by in front of him. From one side- then another- the automobiles raced by. Roaring and splashing up puddles, they were unstoppable; Branchpaw could not imagine getting past. There was a new car every half a second!

He sat back on his haunches. *Great. Of course the roads would be more busy than when ThunderClan was here.* The place absolutely reeked of Twoleg; not only their scent, but the acrid Lightningpath, the voices echoing from down the street, the lights flashing from the monster's eyes. Why were the Twolegs so obsessed with lights? They shone from every vehicle, radiated from every house; there were even lights hanging from wires strung over the road. *Pointless lights.* He watched them, bored, as they flashed from red to yellow; then green. *Maybe the Twolegs are amused by flashing colors*, Branchpaw thought.

He was interrupted from his musings by a loud roar from his left. Yowling in surprise, he skittered away from the Lightningpath; now, the monsters were coming down the main road, fast and furious.

Then Branchpaw caught sight again of the asphalt in front. As the monsters on the main road roared by, the cars on the smaller, intersecting Lightningpath had stopped. A hunch grew inside him; *do the monsters follow some sort of pattern?*

He settled down to wait again. He fixed his attention on the street, perfectly still. Moments ticked by... one... by one... more cars rushed by....

Then there! Again! The direction changed; the main road stopped its traffic and the side road started up again. Branchpaw meowed in triumph; maybe these monsters weren't as unpredictable and rash as they were said to be. *Now*, he thought, *I only have to wait for the direction to change again*. He smiled. *Surviving out in the world isn't hard. You just have to think a little*.

But then the traffic changed, and Branchpaw found himself full of trepidation. He had ample time to cross the road... but who in their right mind wouldn't be apprehensive to crawl around those huge monsters? He crept up to the Lightningpath, where the cars stood rumbling lowly. And then he froze; *I can't get past those things, they could move any second!*

His hesitation wasted several precious seconds, but then he yowled, "I don't give a rat's tail about monsters!" and darted onto the path. For the moments that he was on the Lightningpath, he blanked his mind of everything; in the split second of action, Branchpaw lived only in the *now*, and there was no past when the cars had roared, nor a future where he could be cruelly flattened to the ground. Only *now*, when the asphalt sped under him and the monsters held their breaths.

Then it was over. Branchpaw emerged on the far side of the road, faltered his pace, then collapsed, as the cars started up again behind him.

He stayed on the floor until his head calmed, then he rose unsteadily. He was still intact. In fact, it hadn't even been that bad. "Just... just a moment of danger." He grinned; *those monsters never even had a chance!* Now that the terror was over, he could feel proud of himself. He had crossed a Lightningpath, having solved the monster's puzzle. And all by himself, too. Feeling in good humor, Branchpaw continued down the road.

Ravenpaw was waiting.

I-I-I-I-I-I

He sighed; it was all too easy. Branchpaw had crossed three more Lightningpaths, quicker on his feet every time; and now, he was starting to look for the barn.

But it was all too easy.

He had expected a long, arduous journey. He had expected to meet dangers, perhaps to be lost hopelessly... but was the only thing in his way the streets? Presently, the white cat came across another road. *How many more before the barn appears?*

The cars had just stopped as he arrived. Hardly hesitating, he bounded across; then he didn't pause at all before drawing back down to a walk. *This is getting sort of repetitive*. Branchpaw looked around at the Twoleg nests that had looked the same at every crossing. *No, scratch that; very repetitive*.

He had only just thought this when the Twolegplace seemed to give way. The last nest, and the

last fence passed by him, and then Branchpaw was on a grassy field. Beyond that was rocky, hilly, uncultured ground. It was a novel experience for him.

He soon got over the initial shock. "And now," he mewed grandly, "the wide world!" Wide world, indeed; beyond this boundary laid ThunderClan. Beyond this boundary laid the Tribe of Rushing Water; the soothsaying badger Midnight; beyond this border laid adventure! It was the world!

He smiled, and continued on his way down the Lightningpath. *I'm free now! I've escaped!* And now that the Twolegplace was over, the barn would be more likely to pop up.

But irritatingly, there was one more road to cross. It was deviating and gravelly, curving around out of view over a hill. There weren't even any flashing lights; or any cars he could see. *Just one more Lightningpath, he thought, and I'm officially out of Twolegplace!*

Branchpaw pranced to the road in a jaunty manner, appreciating the moment. Purposely placing one paw, then the other, carefully on the path, he took in the surroundings. It was a moment to treasure. He could imagine that his mother was watching him take his first real steps from up above....

But freedom was denied to him. As he placed a paw over the boundary line, an old, tumbling, mud-stained buggy appeared from his right. It roared over the hill that had obscured it, as if it was nothing but an anthill, and Branchpaw only had one moment to yowl in fright before it overtook him.

Chapter 8

Rain's dreams were always rather confusing. They were a mish-mash of past events, random fancies, and even the world around her as she slept. Unknowingly, her stumbling steps in her dreams were often copied in real life. As she dodged a speeding monster in her imagination, her body jerked back just quick enough to avoid getting her nose grazed. Sleepwalking was a curious thing, indeed. No one knew how she didn't run into trees.

Nothing stopped her from getting lost, though. She had woken the past night deep in Twolegplace, in an undeterminable direction. Her dream had been of her life as a kit, with her mother and her nestmate, Snow; she had been chasing them, yowling their names. *Mother! Snow! Wait up!* They never heeded her calls, though, and continued running away... the scenery had faded to a startling whiteness, and her family had only been a speck in the distance, that suddenly was quenched-

Then she had stumbled, and tripped, and found herself sprawled on grass. Awake.

The Twoleg nests had been nondescript, but Rain had been paranoid. She'd had this dream before – so surely as she chased her mother and her sister in her dreams, they had been leading her to something important in real life, some revelation or reward. And, as she always hoped, they could have been leading her to her own house, where her family still lived.

Even if she were to leave again, maybe even go with Branchpaw, she had to say something to her mother; she couldn't just leave her home like *this*. Finding Ravenpaw, finding ThunderClan... all of it, in truth, sounded grand to her. But she couldn't in good conscience agree with Branchpaw's propositions. If she went adventuring, there was little chance of finding her family again. No matter the arguments and resentment she had had towards her mother, she hadn't really been ready to leave.

Rain found nothing of interest in Twolegplace, and It had taken the rest of the night to find her way back to the forest.

She still hoped, however. In so many of her dreams, Princess and Snow were just out of reach; someday, she would be able to keep up with them, and *then* she would be led back home....

It hadn't happened yet.

Rain's adventure that night had included some harrowing close calls with Twolegs and monsters, and she was still exhausted. Mind *and* body, she was relieved for extra rest. That is why, after leaving Branchpaw and the argument in such a foul mood, she had fallen back asleep on the soft outskirts of the forest. She wasn't too afraid that she would sleepwalk again; her night wanders were few and far between.

Rain dreamt again, but now of the Clans. For once, the images congealed into one, manageable picture, and she saw the camp as it had looked a season ago. *There*, she mewed quietly to herself, *that's my den. And there's Branchpaw's*. But even as she looked, out of his den came Firestar; and out of her den came a strange dark-gray she-cat. Rain didn't recognize

her.

Other scenes swam in and out of the picture. Hey, look- the little kits, playfighting. *How cute*, thought Rain. A patrol left the camp, a warrior stalked a mouse. The images became more and more abstract, as a cat leaped and flew up to heaven, the fresh-kill pile jumped up and scurried away- and a quartet of foxes suddenly marched into the camp.

We've got to get them out! She thought hurriedly, and rushed to aid the warriors; but irritatingly, they rose up to stop her in unison. *Who are you?* one of them snarled, as more foxes rushed through the entrance. Completely disregarding the rules of nature, the red storm started pouring out of the gorse as well; and the warriors advancing on her took the form of leering, looming shadows. Sideways, she noticed the sky was crashing down in a tidal wave of water, and the foxes were waltzing around her in an ever-growing circle; but she paid no attention to this, as a voice came from behind. *Over here, Rain*, she heard. *Why are you standing out in the rain?* It was, indeed, raining. The tidal wave rushed close with it as well, until the unknown speaker grabbed her by the scruff and dragged her into a bubble.

It was rather interesting inside the bubble. The water crashed down over and around it, whipping the shadows away. The foxes, in their neverending dance, were forgotten. *You're all wet!* Exclaimed the voice, and Rain realized that it was her sister, Snow. Her blue eyes were the same as hers, though her white pelt contrasted dramatically. She started to lick her, straightening the ruffled fur, when (unwarned) the bubble popped; with the sound of a tree crashing down, the bubble popped and her sister was torn away with the wave. Yowling out, Rain tried to swim towards her denmate, but she was being carried far, far away....

By sheer force of willpower, Rain made the waves harden into a solid, blue floor; and then she raced over the top of it, trying to catch up with Snow. The white cat's laughter echoed back to her, along with the words, *catch me if you can....*

And as the foxes resumed their minuet in lines around her, she poured all her energy into her legs. She ignored the voices that sounded out. She could hear Branchpaw asking if she needed help (*Will you be all right? Do you need a paw?*) and her mother, offering her a freshly caught vole (*You used to love them, Rain*). She ignored the views that suddenly appeared by her (*Why, isn't that the Moonstone? Say, doesn't that look like Fourtrees?*). She ignored the badgers and monsters and Twolegs that appeared in her path (*Just run past them, Rain!*). Her world sprung into dazzling colors as she drew closer and closer to her sibling, who turned back to her and revealed shocking eyes that had turned to an emerald green that was not her own -

There was a crack of thunder, and Rain fell forward onto drenched fur, awake. She yelped and leaped up again, and she hardly bothered to take in the fact that she was standing in the fringes of Twolegplace instead of the forest – she had gone quite a distance - because, for a moment, she thought that the cat lying in front of her was her white-furred sister Snow.

But a second glance revealed Branchpaw, unmoving. "Branchpaw!" she mewed, crouching down to investigate him closer. Rolling him over so that she could see his face, she suddenly caught sight of red on his pelt. "Oh, oh no!" she cried, frantically. The lightning overhead made all too clear his wound; it was a bleeding bruise, stretching from his hind legs to his mud-stained

side. "What happened? Oh, no, Branchpaw; I'm sorry for telling you to go alone!"

The rain on her face was startlingly cold, her legs ached from running so much distance at such a rapid pace. The Lightningpath beneath was real, the blood seeping into the dirt was real. *I must have ran all the way through Twolegplace in my sleep!* Rain didn't linger on how unlikely this was, and started to drag Branchpaw off of the road. "What should I do? What should I do, what should I do?" Rain was used to depending on herself, but now... she was powerless. The unconscious body of Branchpaw could not be hauled all the way back to the forest, and what protection was there anyways? No, she needed help; close by! She needed a medicine cat!

Then she thought of something to do; find shelter. There, she could look at the wound more closely and do her best to treat it. Rain looked up through the pounding rain, and found she could see near nothing. Along with the storm and rain had come a stifling fog.

Even so, she thought she saw something in the distance, in the direction away from the Twoleg nests. She could make out no features, only that it was vaguely cubical. Quickly, Rain started to drag Branchpaw towards it. She winced for him whenever his body slid over a rock or bump. "Sorry, Branchpaw, sorry..." she murmured, even to her friend's unhearing ears. "But we're almost there, don't worry. We're almost there...."

A sudden fear struck her heart. *What if I can't help him?*

I-I-I-I-I-I

Two older cats, caught in the rain, were making their way back to their home. Their ears flicked in irritation as the water droplets landed on their heads, but their fur was already drenched.

"Horrible weather, this is," said a black and white tom. It seemed as if age had started to take its toll on the cat.

"There's been worse..." muttered his black-furred companion.

The first speaker sighed. "It's been gloomy all around lately." The other cat said nothing in reply.

After a while, the black and white tom said quietly, "Do you wonder if it's storming where the Clans are?"

The second cat didn't look up.

"Do you ever wish you stayed?"

There was a sigh. "I don't know. Before... before my incident in Twolegplace, I would have said no. But now... maybe it would have been for the better."

The first cat nodded, thoughtful.

But then the black cat, hesitantly, shook his head. "If I had gone with them, then I wouldn't have

met you, would I?"

The other loner smiled good-humoredly. "Life certainly wouldn't be the same without you."

They were silent for some time, padding onward, until the second cat's head shot upwards. Sniffing, he said, "I smell something...."

The first speaker shook his head. "I don't know how you smell *anything* through this rain."

"No," said the other tom. "... I smell strange cats." He sniffed again, then he jerked with surprise. "I smell blood!" he mewed, and started to run forward.

The startled black and white loner hurried to follow. "What? Blood?"

Chapter 9

It was a barn – probably what Branchpaw’s destination had been. Ravenpaw’s barn. It fit every description ever told to her. Yes, it was a large, stone, one-room building, it had two doors at the front, and it was filled with strange yellow material. Yeah, it was on the correct road, at about the correct distance.

But it was empty.

Rain only needed one glance to tell this, for the room’s view was unobstructed. “We’ve got the wrong barn,” she whispered to Branchpaw, hardly daring to believe it. “Or they’re off somewhere else....”

She dragged her friend farther from the wet entrance, and laid him down on a pile of the yellow material; but after that, the sense of helplessness returned. She was hardly over six moons old! She could do nothing but lean over Branchpaw, softly grooming his fur, wondering what to do. What to do?

Her head snapped up as a steady voice sounded out from the direction of the entryway. “Who’s there? Show yourself!”

Rain, warily, heeded the call, and padded out into the center of the barn. “Just me...” she mewed softly.

She found herself facing two toms, one pitch-dark and the other splotchy black and white. *Could they be?...* she wondered, but she was unwilling to finish the thought, lest it jinx the situation. But in every way, it did seem so. These two cats had to be the ones she was looking for.

“Who are you?” asked the black cat.

Rain, as usual, felt reluctance to give away information. “Who are *you*?”

The dark cat hesitated to respond, and the other tom took up the conversation. “My name is Barley. My companion’s name is Ravenpaw. We are simple loners that make our home here.” He fell silent, urging Rain to respond.

So this is Barley’s barn! Rain was relieved. “My name... is Rain,” she responded. “I... I’m a loner too. I came here too look for shelter.” She took a breath; the cats seemed friendly. “And... and, my friend is injured. He’s over here. In... the yellow stuff.”

Rain gestured with her tail to where Branchpaw lied, then walked back over to his side. She knew, in different circumstances, she would have been awed, or at least somewhat curious in the presence of cats so deeply rooted into the warriors’ story. Branchpaw certainly would have been. But who cared if they used to know ThunderClan? It only mattered that they could help Branchpaw, who she had grown to like over the few days she’d known him. *Besides*, she thought, *he needed a friend after his mother died.*

The other cats bounded over to see for themselves. "The yellow stuff is called hay," Ravenpaw mewed quietly, near drowned out by the pattering rain. "But what happened to him?"

"He was hit by a Twoleg monster," she replied. Ravenpaw nodded sympathetically, then turned and leaped away.

"He's going to get cobwebs," Barley explained. "A monster, you say?" he leaned over to give a critical look at the wound. "If he was run over by one of those, he wouldn't be alive."

Rain thought for a response. "He was on the edge of the Lightningpath, so the monster must have only hit part of him." It occurred to her how immensely lucky Branchpaw was to still be breathing.

Barley heard the strange use of the word "Lightningpath", but passed over it for more urgent matters as Ravenpaw returned with the cobwebs. He walked quickly past Rain and Barley and began to apply them.

"What is he doing?" whispered Rain.

"He's treating him," Barley replied. "Cobwebs stop the bleeding."

"Webs? From spiders?"

Barley wasn't sure how to respond. "I guess...."

Rain didn't dwell on it. "Is he going to be okay?" she pressed, still uncertain.

"He'll be fine."

"Is there... any chance he might... you know...."

The older loner caught on to her meaning. "Oh, no, of course not!" he mewed hurriedly. "He won't be able to use that leg for a few days, but the wound's not life-threatening." Barley's face set into a grimmer expression; "Ravenpaw and I have seen much worse injuries in our time."

"Barley, do we have any other herbs?" asked Ravenpaw. "For infections? And anything else? Do you know what to use for broken legs?"

Rain swallowed. *His leg's broken?*

"There's a bit of marigold somewhere," he responded, and leaped away. Ravenpaw made no move to continue the conversation, so Rain acted likewise and was quiet. The rain was the only sound.

"I can't find any," called Barley after a pause.

His companion blinked apologetically at Rain, before going over to help. "Where do the elders

keep their stuff anyways?" Barley asked, sniffing around the walls. "Stupid rain, it muddles the scents...."

Rain watched with intelligent eyes. *Elders?* she wondered. *Don't the two cats live alone?*

She looked over the barn closer, now that she knew Branchpaw was safe. The wooden ceiling soared high above their heads, with great arching supports that seemed to hold up the sky itself. The illusion was only shattered by a single hole in the roof through which the rain fell. There were several vertical wooden supports, stretching all the way from the floor to the ceiling. She spied one window, offering meager yellow light on the wall opposite the entry, and a little doorway on the left wall; there were also stalls lining that wall, rickety old wood, where the two loners were searching. The only other thing was the hay; the yellow straw covered most of the right wall, bunched up around the poles. There were bales of them, tied together, but the rest were scattered all over. She saw evidence of nests among the mess where Ravenpaw and Barley would have slept; *and*, she thought, *where I'll sleep tonight too.*

Again, she started to lick clean her companion's fur. "Look at that, Branchpaw," she said in a low voice. "It took some trouble to get here, but we're here! Barley's barn!" He would probably have been jumping around in excitement. "Barley's barn, where Ravenpaw escaped when Tigerclaw was bent on killing him. Barley's barn, where Bluestar lost one of her lives. We're in that very same building, Branchpaw!" she smiled; her friend would probably be pelting the loners with questions if he were conscious. "I just wish you were awake to see it," she finished.

"Look, his wound's not going to be infected in one night," she noticed Ravenpaw talking. "I'll go out to find some marigold when the rain stops, and whatever else the elders say we should get."

"All right," Barley mewed. "But I know we had some somewhere."

Ravenpaw acknowledged him, and the two came back to where Branchpaw was lying. Watching them pad closer, Rain mused, *you couldn't tell with a glance what they've gone through. They just seem... normal.* The stories Branchpaw had treated her with had altered her view of the warriors quite a bit. They were just another group of cats, yes – but there was more to them than she'd thought.

"We don't have a large stock of herbs," stated Barley when he reached her. "We can't do much else for your friend right now, but you're welcome to stay the night. There's plenty of prey around the barn for all of us."

Rain nodded, relieved. "Thanks," she said. "But... you said his... leg was broken?"

"Yes," replied Barley. "Uh, Rain, is it? His bones are lined up straight, so if he doesn't move it too much, it should heal quickly."

The she-cat nodded. Because of her inexperience, she didn't know whether he meant a day or a moon; but she wouldn't mind staying there for a while. The two loners were kind, and they had said there was plenty of prey.

Besides, she thought, I would never get Branchpaw to leave this place. It's all he's ever wanted; a temporary home, a Clan-born mentor, and a nudge towards ThunderClan. Rain shifted uncomfortably; in fact, if he's ever going to leave, it's going to be to the Clans. And I can't leave Twolegplace yet.

She had strings left untied here.

I-I-I-I-I-I

It wasn't like most days, when Branchpaw would wake as if he was breaking the surface of the lake. For an instant, there would be silent awareness; then with a kick and a splash, he would awaken.

But that day was different. Now he felt like he was swimming up a muddy bog, full of molasses. The surface would be tantalizingly close- but then the marsh grass would wind around his ankles and drag him back under. Branchpaw only caught glimpses of the world around him; he saw Rain often, as she stood watch over his unconscious form, but he also saw a pair of toms. One was as black as a starless night sky, but the other was splashed with white.

Fighting as he was just to stay semi-awake, he didn't have the energy to dwell on the pair. He briefly saw Rain holding a plump mouse, and one of the toms pressing material to his side- which, he now noticed, was a bit itchy. Branchpaw was determined to reach the surface, and he felt the bog release its pressure on him. And then-

The itch in his side suddenly flared up and became pain, racing up and down his left hind leg, diving in and out of his pelt. It hit him so quickly, Branchpaw saw red flash under his eyelids. With a low groan, he tried to move his legs; which resulted in more agony. He couldn't even muster the energy to yowl his discomfort.

Then he heard something more welcoming. It was a voice, saying, "Branchpaw! Hey, you're waking up- Barley! Ravenpaw! Branchpaw's waking up!"

He managed to open his eyes. The sight that greeted him was Rain's wide blue eyes, watching him intently. "Hey, Branchpaw," she said.

He tried to respond, but taking in breath for the words hurt his side. The white cat could only gasp, "Mmmrow..." *Where am I?* Branchpaw wondered, forcing coherent thought through the pain. *Did she just say Ravenpaw?*

The black tom's face appeared in his view. "Here," he said, pushing some black pellets towards his mouth. "Eat these."

Branchpaw hesitated. He'd never seen anything like the black objects, but a fresh wave of pain from his leg made up his mind. They didn't taste like much; in fact, Branchpaw had no idea what they were supposed to do.

Thinking on the same track as him, Rain said, "They're poppy seeds. They'll dull the pain."

Weakly, he thought, *that's nice of them.*

"Do you think he needs more?" asked a new voice.

"No," said the black cat, looking behind him. "Just give it time to start working."

If it was supposed to stop the pain, Branchpaw thought that it was already effective. *It's not so bad anymore*, he thought. "Thanks," he murmured, wincing at the breath that it took.

"Don't talk," mewed Rain, nudging him lightly. "You're still weak."

Branchpaw found it hard to disagree with her. The pain was slowly numbing, but now he felt drained of energy. *I suppose getting run over by a monster will do that to you*, he smiled. At least grinning didn't hurt.

Rain smiled with him. "That's just like him," she said. "He's woken up after getting hit by a monster, and he's already smiling."

"Sounds like someone I could like," said the unknown voice, before its owner padded into his vision. It was the black and white tom he had seen earlier. Branchpaw looked closely at the three cats side by side, gray-brown, black, and black-white, when his recent memory came rushing back.

"Woah, woah!" he said, ending with a cough. "You- you're Ravenpaw and-" he broke down to more racking coughs- "Barley!" The pain welled up again at the sudden outtakes of breath, and Branchpaw immediately regretted talking. *Ow*, he thought. *Ow ow ow ow ow...*

"Shush," said Rain, but gently. "Save your breath. Yes, this is Ravenpaw and Barley." She gestured around with her eyes; "We're in their barn."

"Welcome," Barley said.

Branchpaw's pain dimmed again, and he thought back to that morning. He had gotten into an argument with Rain, hadn't he? She hadn't wanted to go to Barley's barn... so he had gone by himself....

He frowned. *And got myself run over. But what's Rain doing here?* She not wanted to go to the barn; she hadn't even known where it was, or even that he was going in the first place! Still dragged down because of his injury, his brain whirled in incomprehension. *I'll... figure it out later*, he thought.

"We should leave him alone," said Ravenpaw, who had been standing back a bit. "Let him rest some more."

"Right," said Barley, standing up. "You're going to stay here with him?" he asked Rain, but it was more of a statement than a question. She nodded in response, her tail waving in rhythm with her

head.

Rain lied down in a makeshift nest by her friend. The rain on the roof was the only sound for a few minutes, as Branchpaw rested his injury. Then Rain said, "Imagine that, Branchpaw. You've just met a Clan cat."

It was still amazing to him. "That's... really Ravenpaw?" he asked, keeping his voice low so he wouldn't trigger another coughing fit.

"Hard to believe, huh?" she said.

Branchpaw looked down to survey his wound for the first time, and winced at the sight of it. A cobweb-covered gash ran from his hind leg to halfway up his side; there was bruised and torn skin all around the area. And his leg... it looked crushed, cracked; and it would not listen to any signals he sent for it to move. "What... what happened to my leg?" he asked, apprehensive.

Rain looked down at her paws. "Ravenpaw says it's broken."

Branchpaw was quiet at first, then whispered, "what happened?"

"As far as I can tell, you got run over," mewed Rain. "I found you on the far side of the last Lightningpath- oh, actually, Barley tells me they're really called Thunderpaths- with that wound. I dragged you to the barn, that I saw in the distance; then the two loners showed up and treated you. Those are cobwebs," she pointed at his injury, "and marigold leaves. They stop infections."

Something didn't seem right about her narrative. "Mm... what's an infection?"

She shrugged. "I really have no idea. But I trust those two."

Again, the pair was silent, as Branchpaw thought, *there's something wrong with her story.... What is it?*

Then the answer jumped at him. "Wait- wait," he said, his sudden words making him cough. "Why- how did you know where I was?"

"You're not going to believe this," she said. "I sleepwalked all the way to you."

"What?"

"I fell asleep again at the edge of the forest. I had some crazy dreams, and I was running after my sister- her name is Snow- and when I woke up, I was standing right in front of you!"

"But- how?" Branchpaw was still too weak to make more eloquent comments.

"Who knows? Maybe it was StarClan. Maybe it was your mother. Maybe I'm just magic!" Rain grinned. "Isn't it cool?"

“Yeah,” her companion replied. “But not just that. I think it saved my life.”

Meanwhile, Ravenpaw and Barley were doing their best to hunt indoors. Neither of them wanted to go out in the rain, but their small family needed nourishment. The mice won't like the rain either, they reasoned. They'll find shelter; even in the barn.

Their logic was solid. When they had caught enough for everybody, Barley returned to the two younger cats and Ravenpaw retreated into a corner.

“Hey,” said Barley, talking through two pieces of fresh-kill. He set one down in front of the white cat; “Branchpaw; this is for you.”

He had never been so glad to see a mouse in his life. He gulped it down hungrily in the span of thirty seconds, then looked up pleadingly

Barley shrugged and nudged the other piece to him. “Have mine too, then.”

The two guests were startled when a new voice suddenly came from a back corner. “Visitors? We've got visitors, you say? Well here, let me up- let me up! Why didn't you tell me before?”

From behind a bale of hay came a dark brown tom, walking haltingly. Ravenpaw trailed behind him, holding a shrew. *Where'd he come from?* thought Branchpaw, bewildered. *Has he been here the whole time?*

“Who's that?” he asked Rain.

She shook her head. “I have no idea.”

By the slow, half-limping way the tom walked, Branchpaw realized that this cat must be elderly. “I haven't seen a new face in moons!” he said, then gave a coughing laugh; “Shadepelt! Come out and greet these young cats!”

“This is Loudbelly,” said Barley, “an elder from RiverClan.”

A dark gray she-cat emerged from behind the bale of hay as well. “And that's Shadepelt,” he continued, “another RiverClan cat.”

“Nice to meet you, Loudbelly, Shadepelt,” mewed Rain, dipping her head. Branchpaw hurried to follow suit, doing his best to bow from his position on the floor. *RiverClan elders?* he wondered. *And what sort of a name is Loudbelly?*

“And to you to,” said the brown tom, smiling. “Look, Ravenpaw,” he mewed, turning his head. “A cat that knows respect!”

Shadepelt walked past her Clanmate. “What are your names?” she asked, kindly. She didn't strike Branchpaw as especially old, although she walked with a pronounced limp.

“My name’s Rain,” the gray-brown cat said.

“And I’m Branchpaw,” her companion followed.

Loudbelly and Shadepelt gave a start. “But that’s a Clan name!” Loudbelly exclaimed.

“His mother was a friend of ThunderClan,” Barley explained. “She gave him a warrior name to keep alive their memory.”

Not that that’s needed anymore, Branchpaw thought. Their memory is right here- standing in front of me!

“What happened to your leg, Branchpaw?” asked Shadepelt, lowering her body to the ground.

“I got hit by a Twoleg monster,” he replied, to sympathetic wincing from both elders. “It’s broken,” he added.

“You’ve fed him, Ravenpaw?” asked Loudbelly. “And gave him marigold? You’re keeping the visitors comfortable?”

“Yes,” said Ravenpaw, annoyed, “I’ve done all I can.”

His tone flew right by the elder’s head. “Have you gone out for more herbs? Comfrey’s for broken bones, right?”

“Its root, yes,” agreed Shadepelt. “And goldenrod, if there’s any close by.”

“Have you bound his broken leg?”

“I’ve tried with cobwebs,” Ravenpaw said patiently.

“Rush would be better,” said Loudbelly

“Rush?” asked Shadepelt.

“It has tall stalks; it’ll keep his leg straight.”

“I’ve never heard of it being used like that.... Do you know where it grows?”

Ravenpaw’s patience ran out. “It’s *raining* outside! Branchpaw’ll be fine for a day.”

Loudbelly and Shadepelt fell silent, listening to the rain hit the roof. “Huh. So it is.”

Barley watched the happenings with an amused look. “Do you know of the four elders that stayed behind when the Clans left the forest?” he asked Branchpaw and Rain.

Branchpaw, now that he thought of it, *did* remember a mention of cats left behind. “The cats

were Loudbelly, Shadepelt, Frostfur, and Speckletail,” Barley continued quietly. “Frostfur died of injury when a tree fell. Speckletail was with her, and she was wounded. Later, they came up with the idea to come to our barn, but on the way here, Speckletail passed as well. Perhaps of some combination of hunger, injury and age.” He bowed his head; “We buried her outside.” The two young cats lowered their heads, too, in honor of the dead.

Branchpaw suddenly became aware of Loudbelly watching them intently. “So,” he said, smiling, changing the subject to something lighter. “You two, are you lovebirds?”

Their reaction was immediate. “Yuck, no!” exclaimed Rain, over Branchpaw’s “Of course not!”

“What made you think that?” she added afterwards. “And why are you laughing?” she demanded.

“Nothing, nothing,” laughed Loudbelly. Then he leaned over to talk to Ravenpaw; “We should have visitors over more often!”

Chapter 10

Branchpaw's body must have needed extra rest to begin healing itself. When he woke up, the sun was already shining high and the only other cats in the barn were the elders. His body ached terribly; it no longer hurt to cough, but his side continuously throbbed with pain. Instinctively trying to stand up, the movement sent daggers and knives into his leg. He softly cried out.

Alerted by the noise, Shadepelt raised her head. "Morning," she called from her resting place.

Cringing, Branchpaw echoed, "Morning..." He spied Loudbelly, sleeping near his companion's side, but all the other loners seemed to be gone. "Where are the others?"

"They're hunting," she responded.

"All... all three of them?"

"They're also searching for herbs."

"Oh, right," Branchpaw said. He gave his forelegs a few half-hearted licks, but found it hard to groom without being able to move his back legs. Even bending forward intensified the pain.

"How are you feeling?" asked Shadepelt.

"Better," said Branchpaw, not untruthfully.

"Do you want more poppy seeds?"

"Uh, well, yes-" Branchpaw coughed slightly- "yes please."

The elder nodded, then slowly picked herself up. She padded to a corner on the opposite wall, where she disappeared momentarily before emerging with one paw held off the floor.

"Here," she mewed, offering her paw to him. On it stuck three of the black seeds. Branchpaw lapped them up quickly, just remembering to say "thanks" to Shadepelt. "Any time," she answered, before lowering herself back down to the hay.

Branchpaw spent the next few moments tidying his fur as much as possible. He also gave his wound a few licks, ignoring the pain that resulted. *There's not much else I can do with a broken leg*, he thought.

"So," he finally asked, "what do *you* do all day?"

Shadepelt laughed slightly, making herself sound younger than she was for a moment.

"Nothing, really. Us elders... we're content just as long as we have something to eat and some quiet sleeping time. Not like you bouncy youths."

Branchpaw gave that a moment of thought, then revised his question. "Well, what is there to do in here?"

"Well, for Barley and Ravenpaw? Mm, well, they hunt." Shadepelt considered his question a little longer; "And... that's... that's really about it." She laughed again. "Ravenpaw spends some time wandering the fields past the barn. Barley's getting old, but Ravenpaw's still has a lot of energy. He's in the prime of his life. He'd be a great warrior if he was still with ThunderClan."

Branchpaw liked the direction the conversation was going. "What was there to do in the Clans?" he asked, though he thought he already knew the answer.

"Now, the Clans; those were busy places! All the warriors had everyday chores, mostly hunting and patrolling the territory... you know, making sure there weren't any badgers or foxes or invading cats. Renewing the borders, as well. See, the borders were scent marks separating the Clans' territories..." Shadepelt paused. "Hm, how much do you already know?"

"I know about the borders, and the four Clans," Branchpaw supplied. "My mother told me a lot."

"And you said your mother was a friend of the Clans, right? What is her name?"

"Er...Cody."

Shadepelt concentrated for a moment, but said, "can't say that sounds familiar...."

"She only met ThunderClan."

"That explains it." The elder laid her head on her forepaws. "You tell me, then," she mewed. "What the warriors had to do."

Branchpaw was suddenly hesitant. He knew the answer, of course. He could practically map out a warrior's day, from sunrise to sundown; but now that he was asked to relate it, he wasn't sure he could. *And I don't want to sound like I'm showing off...* he thought.

Shadepelt, patient and understanding, prompted, "The elders needed caring for, for one thing. The nursery queens, too."

"And the apprentices," Branchpaw pitched in despite himself. "They had to train the apprentices."

"Right. They needed to know how to fight..."

"And hunt." *Except me*, Branchpaw thought, remembering his disability.

"And hunt," she agreed. "Hm, what else? Everybody who didn't hunt for themselves needed fresh-kill. Medicine cats, and their apprentices-"

"Elders-"

“Leaders-“

“Queens!”

Shadepelt opened her mouth and took a breath, as if to speak- but nothing came out. She gave a half-frown; “Looks like you got the last word on that one.”

Then hearing her laughter, Branchpaw couldn't help but smile back. Here was a cat who knew how to brighten an atmosphere; he felt almost at home in Barley's barn.

“Hey, Branchpaw! Shadepelt!” Rain's voice came suddenly from the front of the room. “You're awake!” While her companion craned his neck to see, the gray-brown she-cat loped over to the cats' spot in the hay.

“Good morning,” Branchpaw mewed placidly to her.

Rain dropped two pieces of fresh-kill from her mouth and said, “Morning? Barley, Ravenpaw and I have been out there in the damp since before dawn!” She yawned slightly, as if to prove her point, then nodded her head to the elder. “Hello, Shadepelt.” She pushed a plump mole towards her.

“Thanks, Rain,” Shadepelt responded, “but there's no way I can eat this all by myself! You must be hungry, have some as well.”

“You eat first,” she replied hastily. “Barley tells me you- and Loudbelly- should be fed before I eat any.”

Shadepelt nodded and took a bite, humoring her. “All right.”

“How's your leg feeling?” Rain asked Branchpaw, who had been watching this small exchange curiously.

“Better,” he mewed. *A lot better, now that I think of it*, he thought. He tried to stand up, supporting himself with his three intact legs; and he did get halfway off the ground, placing his broken leg gently on the floor, before-

“Hey!” Barley came running from the entrance. “What are you doing, Branchpaw?”

Before he could answer, a spasm of pain shot through his leg. He gave a surprised *mrowr* and collapsed again onto the ground, and the pain started all over again in his wound. *Ow!* He whimpered quietly as the daggers and knives returned to stab him.

Barley, Shadepelt and Rain crowded around him. “Hey- Branchpaw-“

“Oh StarClan, Branchpaw, are you okay-“

“You shouldn’t have done that-“

“Don’t crowd him!” Ravenpaw’s voice came. The cats retreated from Branchpaw, as the black tom came running with herbs clamped in his jaws. “Get some poppy seeds,” he instructed Rain. “Just two!” The she-cat dashed off.

Coming closer to his companions, Barley asked, “Are you okay?”

He could only whimper more for a response, the throbbing pain sucking feeling out of him.
Just... two?

“That was an idiotic thing to do, Branchpaw,” Ravenpaw muttered distastefully as he started to work with the herbs. “Your leg was hurt enough already.”

The white cat found it hard to be offended by the loner’s remark. Frankly, it just *hurt* too much.

Rain dashed back. “Uh, where- exactly- are the poppy seeds?” she asked.

“Through the door- in a stall-“ Shadepelt stood up and started hurrying towards the opposite wall. “Here, come with me....”

There was silence for a split second before Loudbelly woke up, adding to the confusion. “Huh - what’s happening?” he called sleepily. “Barley? Ravenpaw?”

“Eat this,” Barley said, ignoring Loudbelly, and pushed an collection of herbs towards Branchpaw. He slowly began to consume it, pausing ever so often to gasp at a new surge of pain.

“What do we do about his leg?” Ravenpaw asked Barley quietly. Branchpaw’s hind limb was not looking its best. Stuck out at an awkward angle, it lied inordinately crooked to the side.

“We’ll have to... realign it, I guess,” Barley responded while watching the young cat eat. “Why did you tell Rain to only get two?”

“The reason he did such a *mousebrained* thing in the first place was probably because of the poppy seeds. He couldn’t tell how bad his leg was.” Ravenpaw talked in a monotone, keeping his expression straight.

Loudbelly started towards the group of cats. “Ravenpaw, Barley- tell me already, what’s happening? Is Branchpaw- er, no, Barkpaw hurt again?”

“Branchpaw,” Barley corrected, “and yes, his leg is hurting again.”

Rain suddenly came into view, stumbling on three legs. “Here, poppy seeds!”

She had four of them stuck on her paw. Ravenpaw wiped half of them off, then motioned to Branchpaw. *Thank Starclan... he thought. Poppy seeds!* He gulped them down quickly.

"We have to realign your leg now," Ravenpaw said. "You got your broken bone crooked." He began to pad towards the white apprentice's leg, as Branchpaw almost imperceptibly shrunk away.

"But Ravenpaw," Barley mewed quietly, "it's going to hurt..."

"I'd say," interrupted Loudbelly. "I broke my leg once back in the Clans, and it hurt like I was being branded by a lightning bolt."

"Shh," Shadepelt nudged her companion, having appeared by his side. "You're not making this any easier for Branchpaw."

Branchpaw, for his part, was duly frightened. All the cats around him seemed like a blur, and the prospect of even sharper pain made him wish his mother was here so he could bury his head in her fur. He was fully at the loners' mercy.

"Can't you give him the other two seeds?" Barley continued. "He's only just an apprentice."

Ravenpaw hesitated for a moment, but said, "No."

Rain spoke up; "Just give him the seeds already! What comes out of hurting Branchpaw?"

Not answering, Ravenpaw bent down over Branchpaw's leg.

Branchpaw squeezed his eyes shut, dreading the following moments. And his expectations were filled, and then some; the surge of pain rushed up his legs and jabbed at his whole body, turning his vision a murky red and making him clamp down on his teeth. His leg felt like it was being broken all over again! All thought but for the pain left his mind, and for a moment only the blinding pain existed.

Then the pressure left his leg and the pain suddenly receded. Leaving behind a groggy throb, the grating of his injury stopped, and a single-minded gratitude filled his head.

There were sounds of light pawsteps fading away, then a voice near his head. "Are you okay, Branchpaw?"

A rustling of hay. "Take these poppy seeds now..."

But Branchpaw just wanted to rest.

Chapter 11

Rain had never really appreciated the importance of hunting. She had never had to hunt for anyone except herself and Branchpaw; but with two elders, a lame apprentice and signs of age showing in Barley's motions, she and Ravenpaw could never catch too much fresh-kill.

So she was hunting again. She stepped out of the barn and basked in the morning sunlight, enjoying her day. *I have good company, and steady hunting, and plenty of time to search Twolegplace. What else could I want?*

She had, in fact, planned to keep searching right after she caught some prey. She had been looking for half a moon, but perhaps, just perhaps, this would be the day she'd find her home again.

Just like you've told yourself every time, Rain, she thought.

At that moment, Ravenpaw appeared from the barn. Rain's demeanor changed - her tail snapping upwards, she stalked swiftly away from the other cat. She amended her earlier statement; *Everything's good in life, except for Ravenpaw.* She understood his reasoning; the poppy seeds had clouded Branchpaw's perception of the injury. But still, it seemed unnecessarily cruel. It was nothing like the timid, quiet Ravenpaw of the Clans' stories. He had changed.

Ravenpaw accepted her cold shoulder quietly. He had made no attempt to apologize or even start a conversation with her, and Rain was quite fine with this. Ravenpaw could go jump off a cliff for all she cared.

She turned her attention to hunting. The terrain beyond the barn was unexplored and riddled with Lightningpaths- *uh, no, Thunderpaths*- which didn't help to create much appeal for exploration. Rain had only ever ventured into it far enough to encounter prey. Which wasn't far at all.

The fields greeted her immediately. Ringed with fences and populated with crops, the patchwork plains extended as far as eye could see; although with all the plants in the way her vision ended abruptly. In the far distance she could barely make out mountainous peaks extending over the fields; and past that... well, past that were the Clans. The only way to traverse the fields without getting lost seemed to be the big Thunderpath, which continued even further than the barn.

On the other side of the Thunderpath was - *umm, what did Branchpaw call it* - Highstones? Yes, that sounded right. A series of rocky mountains that had been neutral territory in the Clans. It had held a cave - the name of which Rain had forgotten - and in the cave had been a stone called the Moonstone. At just the right hour, the moonlight had come through a hole in the roof and bedazzled the rock, making it sparkle with the light of the sky. Here, cats had spoken with their warrior ancestors in StarClan.

StarClan. Did they exist? Rain was skeptical.

She turned back to the fields. The sheer distance of it all had impressed on Rain the scope of what Branchpaw was going to attempt. Finding ThunderClan... it seemed more impossible and useless than it ever had. A lifetime of wandering, it seemed to be. She was content where she was.

Noticing Ravenpaw padding past, Rain was shaken from her reverie. As the black loner walked towards the left, she purposefully headed towards her right, and soon caught the scent of shrew in a small grove of trees.

Smiling, she crouched down in the hunting stance.

I-I-I-I-I-I

Branchpaw was talking with the elders when Rain got back to the barn. The trio was lying comfortably in the sun-lit hay, the light struggling past the one dusty window but streaming right through the hole in the roof. Barley was nowhere to be seen.

"Do you remember who it was?" Shadepelt was asking.

"How should I know?" Loudbelly countered. "I'm from RiverClan."

"I think it was Cinderpelt," mewed Branchpaw.

"The medicine cat?" Loudbelly questioned, doubtfully.

"Firestar blamed himself when she broke her leg," Branchpaw continued. "He thought he should have been able to stop it, as her mentor."

"Hm... now, that does ring a bell," Loudbelly said. "Eh, Shadepelt?"

"You've heard about WindClan living in the Twoleg tunnels?" Shadepelt mewed, ignoring him.

"Firestar and Graystripe brought them back," the young apprentice answered.

Shadepelt looked thoughtful. "You know about the Bonehill?"

"I thought it was the Bonepile," responded Loudbelly.

"It was Bonehill," Branchpaw assured. "And yeah, I do know."

"What, a hill made of bones?" Rain asked, sitting down at the group's side and dropping her fresh-kill. "Creepy."

"Fresh-kill!" Branchpaw started eating ravenously. "I'm starving!" Rain watched, amused. How could he remain so high-spirited after his injury, and yesterday's incident?

"Morning, Rain," Shadepelt said amiably.

“Hey, Rain,” Loudbelly echoed, looking more interested in a thrush lying before him.

“Hello, Shadepelt, Loudbelly,” Rain dipped her head to both of them. Her mother had expressed the importance of manners to her and Snow at an early age. “How’s your day?”

Shadepelt let out a *mrowl* of amusement. “Loudbelly and I are having trouble finding a story Branchpaw hasn’t heard of yet!”

Rain smiled. “You can give up now,” she joked. “Branchpaw knows all of them!”

There was silence for a while as the four devoured their fresh-kill. It was a peaceful morning; and hopefully the first of many. Branchpaw wouldn’t enjoy lying there all day, but there wasn’t really anything to do about it. The life at the barn was free of strife.

Finishing her fresh-kill and reminding herself of her plans, the gray-brown cat stood and stretched. “I... think I’ll go back outside,” she mewed. “I’m feeling restless today.”

“Already?” Branchpaw asked, looking up from his second mouse. “Well, have fun,” he said, his voice hiding a trace of wistfulness.

“Don’t go too far,” mewed Shadepelt. “There are some... unsavory characters out there.”

“Alright,” she responded, padding towards the door. “See you later!”

Stopping for only a minute to rub herself against a tree and notice for the first time that the blood on the road had been washed clean, Rain headed to Twolegplace. Her search for her home was always methodical and consistent; she never searched the same road twice. It was simple, really; all the Thunderpaths came off of the one main Thunderpath, which had been there since the Clans’ time. Always returning to that road after looking down the side paths, she slowly made her way from one end of Twolegplace to the other.

But before she could disappear between the orderly Twoleg nets, she caught sight of Ravenpaw and Barley approaching from the direction of the wild. She stole one wary glance at them and sped towards cover; *I don’t feel like explaining why I’m going into Twolegplace right now....*

“Hey, Rain!” she heard. “Where are you going?”

Mouse dung! “Uhh,” she said, scrambling to find a plausible excuse. She didn’t feel like relating the truth, but at the same time, what could she say? “I... I was going exploring,” she finished lamely.

Barley bounded over. “Exploring Twolegplace?” he said, skeptically.

Rain watched Ravenpaw slip inside the barn out of the corner of her eye. “Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t advise that,” Barley mewed. “You’d do better exploring the wild. It’s... safer.”

“Safer?” Rain asked, surprised. “Why?”

“The cats in Twolegplace, they... they aren’t very friendly,” he warned.

“I can take care of myself,” Rain responded. “I’m faster than most cats out there, anyways.”

“Alright,” Barley relented. “But be careful, okay?”

“Sure,” Rain mewed, continuing towards the houses. “I’ll be back before sundown,” she called over her shoulder.

“Yes - alright,” Barley said, looking distracted, as he his gaze flitted from the young loner to the barn to the Twoleg houses.

What was that all about? Rain wondered.

She thought as she padded along. She had usually used the forest as a starting point, but she could continue searching from this side of Twolegplace and work her way towards the forest, to save time. There were only so many roads between her current location and the forest, and she had searched the five closest to the trees already. *How many do I have to search, she wondered, before I reach a road I’ve already done?*

She turned down the first Thunderpath. Many of the houses were identical, but Rain remembered that her old home used to be white; so every white building she encountered, she leapt into its backyard. If there was no cat door, she moved on. But if there was....

She stuck her head into the first likely home. “Hello?” she asked, her ears twitching as the sound of Twoleg life reached her. No smells or sights seemed familiar.

A plump ginger tom lazily looked up from his resting place. “Hm- what?” he asked, sounding confused. “Who are you?”

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “Wrong house.” She withdrew her head.

The adjoining house was also white, but it had no cat flap, so she padded back to the street. As the occasional monster roared past, she pondered her encounter earlier. *Barley was acting weird, she decided. Like he wasn’t telling the whole truth. And what did he mean by unfriendly cats? I never got hurt when I lived here alone....*

But she realized that wasn’t true. When she was a kit, she and Snow had once seen a malevolent group of rogues stalk by their house. They were thin with hunger, and battle-scarred, and held everything with a threatening glare. Frightened, she and her sister had shrunk back behind their house; but she had had the peculiar feeling that the rogues’ glares were piercing through the brick to stare at her....

And later, when searching Twolegplace, she had seen these other cats often. Most of the

inhabitants were soft housecats; *or as the warriors would have said, kittypets*; but there were also the rogues that accosted her in various different stretches of land. The first time, she had been scared. The brown tom that had jumped out at her then had looked very much- well, *evil*.

“What’re *you* doing here?” he had growled, advancing.

“I’m just- just- just passing through,” Rain had responded, attempting to seem brave but utterly failing.

The rogue had glared straight at her eyes, talking purposefully slowly. “Just passing through? Well, where are you going, little kit?”

“Just- just the end of the road,” she had stammered.

“Now why would you want to do *that*,” he had asked, drawing out the final syllable. “There’s only more of us down that way. There’s no place for you out here on these streets!” And upon the last word, the tom’s claws had slid out. Rain’s courage breaking, she had raced back the way she had come from, to the laughter of the awful rogue. Huddling behind a tree in the outskirts of the forest, she hadn’t dared explore more that day.

She soon had learned the way of Twolegplace. Loners like herself were few. Kittypets kept to their homes, and if they visited each other it was through backyards. And rogues... the rogues lived on the streets, down the sewers, in the dumps. Further away from the forest, the residential houses were interspersed with taller buildings and dirtier alleys, which just seemed to hold higher concentrations of them. Each rogue seemed to have their own territory, their own stretch of land; but the forest, the big Thunderpath and some cleaner residential areas nearby seemed to be neutral land.

After the first encounter, her ventures down the side paths had been less perilous. Much more sure of herself, she had neatly talked her way around the rogues and continued unharmed, or avoided the cats altogether. They seemed to come out mostly at night.

“Hey, you!” she suddenly heard from behind. “What do you think you’re doing?”

She spun around, where a black cat was standing. *Where’d he come from? I’ve got to keep a better watch.* “Nothing, nothing; just going down the street,” she answered.

“And who, say, told you to come down here?” the rogue continued. “Because this is *my* street, and this territory happens to be protected by White herself.”

“White?”

“The one and only,” the cat replied, menacingly. “Wouldn’t you rather avoid her?”

What an eloquent rogue. “I’m terribly sorry,” she mewed. “I won’t take any prey, and I’ll leave your territory soon as possible. Just down this way.” She disappeared into a backyard.

Most rogues, confronted with this, just let her by, watching her warily. It wasn't as if her sleek frame posed much threat to them. A few were intent on chasing her all the way out themselves; but she could outpace the fastest of them, and would come back later to stealthily search the road's white houses.

But who was White?

She shrugged- it didn't seem to matter. Every rogue she had encountered had been more nuisances than anything, and if they were the cats Barley were referring to, he was obviously underestimating her.

But still. Perhaps he was just worrying over a young cat's safety, but all the same he had been acting....

It took her a moment to find the right word. *Shifty*.

She shrugged once more and peeked into the next house. *Everyone has secrets around here.*

"Huh- what-" a kittypet raised her head. "Uh, hello."

"Sorry," she said, "wrong house." And then she left. It was comical, really, the way all these kittypets reacted the same.

Chapter 12

The schedule for the next several days was, in fact, the same. Hunting came first. Then she would spend some time in the barn with Branchpaw and the others. Then she would head back out to Twolegplace.

I-I-I-I-I-I

Rain slunk through the barn's shadow, stalking an unsuspecting mole. The sun wavered behind some clouds, and the wind blew against her. Fresh-kill aplenty for tonight.

I-I-I-I-I-I

"So then what happened?" Rain inquired, swallowing a mouthful.

"It was hard for any cat to tell- with the dogs everywhere- but Fireheart was right there, and he could tell you exactly how it went! One of the dogs, he was herding them towards the cliff- and- Branchpaw stopped for a breath.

"What?" Rain asked, her food forgotten.

"And then *Bluestar falls off!*"

"What- the cliff?"

"Yeah!"

I-I-I-I-I-I

"Where are you going this time?" Barley asked. "We've got all the fresh-kill we need."

"Um, I'm not hunting. I found something in Twolegplace last night, and I want to go look at it some more."

Barley didn't say anything for a minute, giving her time to explain; but seeing no answer forthcoming he said, "Alright."

"Hey, on an off note," she said, "how long is it going to take for Branchpaw to heal?"

"At least a moon," Barley admitted, "or two."

A moon? "Thanks," she said.

Just as Rain disappeared out the door, Ravenpaw came out from the side room. "Where's Rain going?" he asked after a moment.

She could barely make their words out as she paused outside the barn. "Back to Twolegplace."

“Did she tell you why?”

“Not really.”

I-I-I-I-I-I

“Hey, you-“

“Oh, excuse me. You must own this stretch of road?” Rain had heard the rogue coming a while before.

“Yeah, and *you* have no business on it!” He flinched as a monster raced by, and she noticed this one kept his distance; *one of the weaker ones*.

“What if I’m a messenger, sent by White?” she said, craftily.

A hesitation. “I know all her messengers. You’re lying.”

“Fair enough. I’ll be leaving.”

I-I-I-I-I-I

It was already late at night, but Rain shifted in her nest as she heard a strange *myowl* noise. Branchpaw was still fast asleep a tail-length away from her, and the barn was still dark; *who’s up so late?* she wondered.

After a while, she managed to pick out Barley’s frame from the dark walls, padding slowly from the doors to his nest. The sound had most likely been the loner’s exclamation. Looking closely with the usual feline vision, she noticed that Barley held something mouse-sized in his jaws and that there were strands of straw stuck all over his fur. So he had been hunting... and... had he fallen on a pile of hay? A trace of amusement flickered onto Rain’s face.

Rain laid her head back on the straw. Having walked through Twolegplace all day, she still felt tired. *I’ll just go back to sleep*, she thought.

I-I-I-I-I-I

Ah, morning. The sun on her back. Hunting. The mouse never even saw it coming.

I-I-I-I-I-I

“But then what happened to Tigerstar?”

“Tigerstar;” Shadepelt arose from her spot. “Now there’s a mean character.”

“That’s a whole other story,” Branchpaw said. “About the battle between LionClan and

BloodClan.”

“Two new Clans?” Rain asked, bewildered.

“Not quite. See....”

I-I-I-I-I-I

She managed to evade Barley that day as she crept out to Twolegplace, but she thought Ravenpaw glimpsed her. *They're going to get suspicious. Maybe I should just tell them?*

I-I-I-I-I-I

No rogues this time, either. Thank StarClan.

“Hello?”

“Hello...? Who are you?”

Rain was bored. “I’m a cat from StarClan,” she said, mysteriously. “We have chosen you.”

“What? What’s StarClan?”

“Never mind. Good bye.”

I-I-I-I-I-I

Night. Branchpaw turning restlessly.

I-I-I-I-I-I

Pounce! A plump blackbird.

I-I-I-I-I-I

“And Scourge?”

“Dead.”

“Hm. Good riddance.”

I-I-I-I-I-I

“Rain, why are you going outside so much?” Branchpaw.

“...Because... well, because... I’m searching for something. Something I lost;”

Suspicious glances from Barley.

I-I-I-I-I-I

Searching. Halfway through the first road.

I-I-I-I-I-I

And then night once more..

Chapter 13

"It doesn't even *hurt* anymore!"

"Yes, but if you put too much weight in it, you'll have to start all over again."

"I'm willing to take the chance!"

Branchpaw was arguing with Ravenpaw; although his wound was healing, the loner would not let him attempt to stand up. Rain was eating a shrew nearby in the hay, and Loudbelly was watching as well. It was about sunhigh.

"Well, I'm not willing to risk it."

"It's not *your* leg!"

This must be torture for him, thought Rain, finishing her fresh-kill. *He's been placid enough for the past few days, but... this is the cat that can't sit still for a conversation!*

Ravenpaw frowned and started to pad away. "Barley agrees with me," he called behind him. "Not yet."

"Please, Ravenpaw?" Branchpaw asked, almost desperately; but there was no answer.

"Come on!" said Rain, breaking her silence. "If he's careful, he'll be fine!"

But Ravenpaw simply walked out of view.

Branchpaw was visibly upset. His tail lashed relentlessly and he averted his eyes from everyone else's; although he didn't say any more complaints, Rain could see the restlessness building in him. Her dislike for Ravenpaw only grew.

Perhaps I can convince the others, she mused; but when she looked behind her to talk to Loudbelly, she found him fast asleep in the hay. *Of course*, she thought, even as a smile touched her face.

She looked around at the now-familiar barn. Shadepelt was asleep in the corner and Rain did not want to disturb her; both Barley and Ravenpaw were outside. *We're alone. I suppose.*

"Oh, who cares about Ravenpaw," she said to Branchpaw decisively, standing up. "Come on. Get up."

"What?" he asked, turning his head towards her.

"Don't you want to get back on your feet?"

Branchpaw grimaced. "More than anything." He sighed; "But I can't just disobey both Ravenpaw

and Barley; I mean, they helped me when I was hurt, and they're letting us stay here in the barn-

"If Ravenpaw really wanted to help you, he would have given you those poppy seeds that one day," Rain interrupted. "Stand up."

"You... you can't still be sore about that," Branchpaw said, hesitantly.

"Cats can hold grudges for seasons!" *I thought he'd jump at the opportunity to stand up again.*

"Well, if there's any cat who should be angry, it's me," retorted Branchpaw. "But I'm *not*. Barley and Ravenpaw are the only ones who have ever been kind to me other than my mother; and I don't want to lose their trust."

Rain caught herself before she replied hotly. *So that's what it's about?* She could only imagine how much Cody's death had hurt him.

"...Oh," she said, finally, feeling sheepish. She sat back down.

"It's alright. I don't mind sitting here," Branchpaw said half-heartedly. "The hay's comfortable enough."

Rain knew he was lying; but she had to admire him a little bit. If she was in his position, she would have been absolutely sick and tired of the straw.

"It's what the kittypets do," the white apprentice continued listlessly. His tail swept back and forth. "Sit. Day after day. It's what the elders do...."

"I'm going to go talk to Barley," Rain meowed. "I'll see you later."

"Okay."

Branchpaw's voice faded behind her as she headed towards the entryway. "It's what the queens do... it's what the new warriors do on their vigil. I don't know how they do it...."

Rain found Barley sitting with Ravenpaw in the shade behind the barn, sharing some fresh-kill. Twolegplace was to the left, the fields to the right, the Thunderpath was on the other side of the building and a flat plain directly in front. *I'd rather Ravenpaw wasn't there,* she thought, hanging back behind a corner. *Should I go talk to them anyways?*

She surveyed the area. Maybe she could draw Ravenpaw away somehow; or just wait for a better time....

No, Rain decided, thinking of Branchpaw rambling to himself inside. *Better do it now.*

She strolled around the barn. "Hey, Barley. Ravenpaw."

“Hello, Rain,” said Barley, looking up from a vole. “Fresh-kill?” he motioned to a mouse lying near. Ravenpaw remained as he was.

She stretched casually. “No, thank you. I already ate.” The gray-brown cat sat down near him. “So, what are you doing here?”

“Just enjoying the day,” responded Barley. “And eating.”

“Mm,” said Rain.

“...”

The quiet that followed was a little awkward. *Uhhh, okay, what do I say now?*

Ravenpaw, surprisingly enough, broke the silence. “Is there a reason you came to talk to us?”

“Uh, yes, actually. I was talking with Branchpaw earlier... Ravenpaw was there.” Barley looked at her curiously. “And we thought that... even with his leg, he should be allowed to get up again.”

“But his leg is broken,” said Barley.

“Yes, he does; but he doesn’t have to use it.” She stood up on three legs to demonstrate her point. “Branchpaw’s a really energetic cat; before he got hurt, he was always jumping around and blundering through the forest. It’s torture for him to sit still for so long.”

The black-and-white loner frowned; “If it is, he doesn’t show it.”

“He doesn’t want to complain,” Rain reasoned. “He doesn’t want to be disobedient because of what you’ve done for him.”

“Remember what happened last time,” Ravenpaw pitched in.

“He tried to stand on his wounded leg. You’re right; it was the poppy seeds’ fault. He won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“But still. Better safe than sorry.”

Rain was adamant; “Did you know, he even moves in his sleep? When he sleeps he thrashes around and keeps everyone awake. If he agrees, then I say the risk is worth it.”

“And we say otherwise; and we’re your elders.” Ravenpaw kept a straight, unwavering face through all of this. Rain could see no way to convince him.

“He’ll try and get up anyways.” Rain’s eyes narrowed; “It’s better he does when you’re watching.”

"If he's so reluctant to even complain, I doubt it." Their voices never raised, but their argument was as heated as any.

"Are you planning to keep him grounded for over a moon? All his energy's got to escape somehow."

"With a broken leg, it *can't*."

"Yes, it can. I can run on three legs, and so can you, and so can Branchpaw."

"But can you run on three legs for the whole day through, without letting your fourth leg touch the ground?"

"Then moderate! Let him up some times and keep him down at others." Rain went for a compromise.

"That'll just make him want to get up even more at times. It's still not worth the risk."

Barley, who had remained quiet the whole time, suddenly said; "Rain, Ravenpaw, look over there." He motioned to the empty plain in front of them with his tail. "What do you see?"

Rain tore her eyes away from Branchpaw's prosecutor. "...Nothing," she meowed. The empty field was - well, empty.

"Ravenpaw? What about you," he continued.

The black loner remained quiet for a moment, before replying, "The same."

"Well," he said. "I see something else. Right there," he pointed to a hollow in the earth, "There used to be a ditch. There used to be rats in that ditch. One of them took one of Bluestar's lives.

"The leader of ThunderClan before Firestar?" asked Rain.

"Right. She was killed right..." he pointed again - "there."

"What does this have to do with Branchpaw?" Rain asked softly.

Barley ignored her. "And behind that hollow stood the house. The Twolegs lived in it; but they didn't bother us." He curled his tail over his forefeet. "The dogs were a different story."

Ravenpaw stayed quiet. If he was thinking anything, he kept it to himself.

"It was all torn down a while ago. At the same time the large Twolegplace was built. The Twolegs moved out, and with them the dogs, and with them the rats. And now it's peaceful."

Rain was quiet.

“Loners live simple lives, Rain,” Barley continued. “We don’t need honor or loyalty like in the Clans. We don’t want power. We just want a peaceful life.” He motioned to Ravenpaw: “and good company.”

He sighed and stood up. “If Ravenpaw agrees, Branchpaw can get up if he wants to. But tell him to stay off that leg.” He walked away into the barn.

Ravenpaw exchanged glances with Rain, then followed after his best friend.

Rain stayed at her spot for a few more minutes, solemnly staring at the place where Bluestar had been attacked by rats. She padded over to it; but there was no longer any sign of a scuffle. *Of course not. It’s been seasons.* She shook her head; *What did you expect, bloodstains?*

With a sigh, she turned towards Twolegplace. *Might as well search some more.*

I-I-I-I-I-I

For the lack of things to do, Branchpaw was scrutinizing the barn. As he noticed, every now and then his eyes fell upon some new detail- although he thought the whole place was familiar by now. Something as small as a knothole, maybe.

The rickety stalls... the ditch in the ground he had noticed the day before... three mouse holes here and there... the strange carvings in one of the poles. They looked human-made, strange characters like trees with arms branching off in strange directions.

With a pang, Branchpaw was suddenly reminded of the stick he had used to play with as a kit. He missed the simple toy; even more so, the happy times that it represented.

He was interrupted from his thoughts by Barley’s appearance through the door. Not wanting to have a conversation right then, he closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

“Barley...” he heard. It was Ravenpaw’s voice. “Do you really think Branchpaw would be okay standing up?”

“I don’t know,” the other cat admitted.

There was a pause. Then, “Do you know where Rain went?”

“I think she went back to Twolegplace.”

“She’s starting to worry me....” Again, there was a pause. “Ravenpaw, do you think- maybe- you know....”

“The rogues. StarClan forbid if it is.”

“Not to be blunt, Ravenpaw; but I am worried that she might be making the same mistake as....”

"I know. Me."

A chuckle. "Will you let me finish my sentences?"

A small laugh in response. Branchpaw was surprised; he had never heard Ravenpaw laugh before.

"In all seriousness, though, Ravenpaw, I think we should be looking into this."

"I think so too," Ravenpaw agreed slowly. "Should we talk to her?"

"No... if she really is visiting rogues, I don't want to alienate her even more."

"Then what?"

"Could you... follow her?"

"Into Twolegplace?" the black loner sounded apprehensive.

"She seems perfectly capable of taking care of herself, but if that's not what we should be worried about..."

Silence in response.

"...Ravenpaw?"

"I know... you're right. But..." A small sigh. "I'm scared, Barley."

This startled Branchpaw most of all. Ravenpaw, so silent and sure; what in the world could frighten him?

"That's not like you," Barley mewed quietly.

Nothing from the black loner.

"I won't force you into anything, but think about it, alright?"

"Alright."

The hay rustled softly as paws stepped away.

Chapter 14

The world was empty.

Darkness. Was she blind? "Hello?" she called, stumbling about the rocky ground. "Hello-anyone there?" she felt dirt and stones under her paws; "Where am I?"

She blinked her strained her eyes; and the blackness slowly dissolved into something more tangible. What was that? She turned about. What was....

Woosh! She meowed loudly and skittered backwards as a monster roared past in front of her. And then- *Vroom!* -she jumped out of the way of another one. She flinched as a third raced right behind her, and then blindly, her eyesight still not fully returned, she ran away from the growls of the Twoleg monsters.

But they were everywhere! *Shwoosh*, another reared up behind her. She barely got out of their way in time. And another- Jump left, hurry! *Where are they coming from?*

The blaring screech of another monster bore down on her. She yelped once in fright, her paws scrabbling on the ground- and her vision blacked out once more to a dreadful *crack!*

Then it was suddenly quiet.

With a gasp, Rain woke up - and stumbled, in quick succession. She was hurtled onto a dark pavement, where she rolled once before stopping.

She laid there for a moment, gasping a few more times. Had she just died in her dreams?

Quickly, she scrambled to her feet, then ran into the grass off the side of the - the - a *Thunderpath? Strange*. The sky above showed the beginnings of Silverpelt - the stars - and a half moon, but not one cloud. It was silent but for the chirping of the cicadas and a distant monster, growling to itself. She was breathing hard - and she still felt the adrenaline rush that had hit her while dancing away from the paws of the monsters. Her pelt was matted and tangled. Her paws were sore.

Attempting to quiet her rapid heartbeat, she looked around her. She was somewhere, in Twolegplace - *Great*, Rain thought. *I sleepwalked again.*

She smiled wryly and sat down to rest. Walking while sleeping - or probably in this case, running - took a surprising amount of energy.

It was about time it happened again, she thought, while licking her forepaws.

When she was done hastily grooming her legs, Rain stood up again and stretched out. She calmly assessed her situation; it was only Twolegplace, after all, and it wasn't as if it had never happened before. *Well... Barley's barn is alongside the main Thunderpath, right? If I can find that again, I'll be good.*

She was at the intersection of two smaller Thunderpaths. Neither were the right one.

She shrugged, then started along one of them. *I'll think as I walk.*

How else could she find the barn again? Rain, after a minute or so of ruminating, concluded that two directions out of four would bring her back home. Towards the big Thunderpath... or towards the patchwork plains. The other two could just as well make her hopelessly lost.

Having thought this, she stopped her walk. Being lost wouldn't be good. Not at all. But wasn't she already?

She sat by the edge of the quiet road, thinking hard. What was the solution? There *had* to be one, if only she could think hard enough. Then it hit her. *Of course!* She lowered her nose to the ground and sniffed about, catching sight of her own scent. She'd just backtrack to the barn.

Confident that she had resolved the conflict, she started back along the trail. *I'll be back home before anyone even notices.*

She had to stop often to untangle her scent from the putrid ones of the Thunderpaths; but for the most part she made steady progress. There were also fewer monsters out at night, thank StarClan! With all the air being thrown every which way, she could never have found her way home. Lines and lines of droll nests filed away behind her, but yet more loomed in front. A monster with glowing eyes rushed by, making her flinch. The grass parted limply beneath her paws. The still air rested heavily on her shoulders.

Well, this isn't quite as fun as I thought it would be, she thought sarcastically. *It feels like I'm going around in circles. Which I might be doing, actually.*

Rain frowned as she dashed across a road, following her scent, only to lose it on the other side. Impatient, she had to search for several dragging moments. *It's so depressing, being out here in the night.*

She shivered, imagining she could see shadows flickering behind some houses. *Alone.*

Rain caught track of her scent once more and set off. After she had travelled fairly far along the street, she suddenly lost it again- and realized that she had crossed the road again. *Mouse dung! Stupid me!*

She grumbled to herself all the way back to the other side, hardly paying attention to where she placed her feet. *Can't I even walk in a straight line in my dreams?*

Her head down, she barely noticed a movement ahead of her. She normally would have put it down to an unseen prey animal, or maybe just some shadows thrown from Twoleg lights; but in her gloomy state she snapped to attention. The night made it seem far too likely that some rogue was about to pounce on her from behind. It was also a harsher area of Twolegplace, where the buildings rose several stories and there was little grass to be found anywhere.

Rain watched longer, paranoid. The patch of trees where the motion had come from was unremarkable, but for a large boulder placed right in the middle of it. *There*. Rain moved stealthily closer, planning to spring as soon as she was in range...

Now! With a yowl, she leapt to the other side of the boulder, to behold-

Nothing.

Rain cocked her head and wandered about the rock. *I must have looked really silly doing that*, she thought to herself.

She jumped on top of the stone, which was even taller than the one in the ThunderClan camp. She curled up as she attempted to stifle her pessimism. *The barn's probably close. It's not that late at night yet, so I can't have wandered far. I'll be back soon!*

She surveyed the land around the boulder. *Yeah.... Probably.*

"Kit!" Rain heard, quite suddenly. "Get off my rock."

Twisting, she saw (strangely enough) a cat climbing out of a sewer drain. She examined him as he walked closer. This rogue was a mottled gray with a brownish stripe down his back. His yellow eyes narrowed, and his ears drew backwards as he stalked closer to her.

But why was he in the drain? wondered Rain. "What were you doing down there?" she called, more to be difficult than out of true curiosity. She waved her tail lazily, not moving from her position.

"Just get off my rock," he said. "Save me the trouble of chasing you off." While his words were relaxed, his tone and his position suggested otherwise.

Strange rogue, she thought. *No death threats or anything?* Intrigued by the gray cat, she said, "Right, I'll come down."

She jumped, and landed easily in front of the rogue.

"Good. Now, let's not see you here again," said the tom. "Good night." The rogue turned his back on her and started back to his drain.

Rain's interest flared even more. "Hey, wait a moment," she said, taking a step as she called out to him. "No threats or warnings or anything? You'll just let me go like that?"

"Leave," said the gray cat, and leaped back into what Rain now suspected was his den.

"Oh, come on," she said. "Why? You're probably just bluffing, anyways. You wouldn't lay a paw on me!" Now she was just having a little bit of fun.

She waited, but no response came from the sewers. "See! I was right!" she exclaimed.

The rogue uttered again his monosyllabic response; "Leave."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll hurt you. Now go."

The threat sounded half-hearted to her. "I'm having trouble believing that," Rain meowed.

She heard a slight sigh, before the gray cat appeared again on the street. She suddenly noticed a shape looming up behind him.

"Threats are for bluffers, little cat," said he. "And bluffs are for those who can't follow up on them. Learn to be wary."

The oncoming shape grew larger. "Are you lecturing me?" asked Rain, incredulously. She started to inch further from the road. "And... ah... you know, there's a...."

The monster roared past the rogue, mere tail-lengths away; but his only movement was his fur being blown back. He didn't even blink. *Whoa*, she thought.

"No," said the gray tom, as if he hadn't just escaped death by a few inches. "I'm not lecturing. Now go."

Seeing him unfazed by the monster, Rain was starting to think leaving was a good idea. "Well, I mean, then...."

But the rogue had jumped back down into his den. She sighed, again deciding that the cat wasn't serious with his threat.

"Hello?" she walked to the drain and called down through the grate. Her voice echoed back to her- *Hello? Hello? Hello....*

"Haven't you left already?" he hinted. *Already? Already? Already?....* Rain strained her eyes and noticed his dark shape sitting in the shadows.

"No," she said. *No, no, no....*

There was a near imperceptible flurry of movement, then the gray cat leapt out, faster than she could have imagined. With a yowl, Rain skittered backwards, losing her grip on the gravelly road.

The rogue glared at her, definitely looking irritated now. "Leave."

Rain found her footing a distance away. She had the urge to leap up and dash away - but her pride would not allow her. Besides, she still didn't think him too dangerous. *I'll outrun him.*

"No," she said, defiantly.

Some rogues would have leered at that moment. This one only said, completely straight-faced-

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

And then it was with blinding speed that he was on her! Yowling, she scabbled away from him, barely avoiding a lashing claw; she caught a glimpse of a gray face - still unemotional - before she found purchase and dashed down the road.

But the silent rogue pursued her. She spared a glance behind and saw claws bearing close to her- and she gave another yowl and a burst of speed. *Great StarClan, this cat is fast!* she thought.

Faster than even her, apparently; for the rogue gained, little, by little, until he was close enough to claw her. Rain tried zigzagging back and forth, but to no avail; she only lost more ground slipping on the ground while the rogue stayed sure-footed. *Oh, StarClan, oh, StarClan, oh, no, ohno ohno -*

A mighty yowl came from behind, as well as a rush of wind. Rain flinched and shut her eyes, expecting to feel claws in her pelt any moment - but there came nothing but more yowls. Skidding to a stop, she turned around.

It was Ravenpaw! He was holding the rogue to the ground with his forepaws, as the gray cat struggled and squirmed.

"Hey!" Rain called, astounded. She paused, hesitant. "What - how -"

"Raven!" spat the gray cat from the floor, trying to kick at him with his rear legs.

"My name's Ravenpaw," growled the black loner, before jumping back to let the cat up.

"Hey! Ravenpaw-" Rain dashed to his side. "How did you get here- how- I mean-"

"Raven," interrupted the rogue, crouched down. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Who is he?" she whispered into Ravenpaw's ear.

"An old friend," he responded, not once looking away from the gray cat's eyes. Rain looked from one to the other; although both their fur were bristling, neither of them had hate in their voices.

The gray cat stood straighter, returning Ravenpaw's stare. "Who is this young cat?" he asked, referring to Rain but not sparing her a glance. "Surely not your kit?"

"Of course not," said Ravenpaw. "She's... a friend."

The rogue nodded. "I suppose I ought to be remorseful for trying to kill her."

The black cat hesitated, but answered, "Perhaps."

"What?" hissed Rain, feeling betrayed.

"You should have known better than antagonizing a rogue. He gave you plenty of chances."

"Why were you out here anyways?" inquired the gray-brown she-cat.

"I followed you. I could ask you the same."

A rumbling voice attracted everybody's attention on the opposite side of the road. "What's going on out here? Can't a cat get a night's sleep?" A large yellow tom emerged from a sewer, white fur marking his paws and stomach. "Who're these cats, Stone?"

"Visitors," he replied shortly.

Ravenpaw tore his gaze away from the gray cat. "Sheer?" he asked.

The yellow cat's eyes grew wide. "Raven!" He started to pad closer. "What are you doing here?"

"My name's Ravenpaw," he corrected once more.

Close up, Rain could see that this Sheer's largeness was not fat. He wasn't obese; he was *imposing*. He had a strange name, but Rain wasn't in the mood for laughing. "And who's this?" the yellow cat asked, noticing her watching him.

Rain shrunk back. "No one," she said quietly. She wasn't one to act scared before another cat; but the duo that she faced looked like a good exception. Sheer and Stone didn't seem as bloodthirsty as other Twolegplace cats; but they, unlike some, definitely looked like someone who could back up any threats they made.

Sheer gave her a curious glance, but lost interest and turned back to Ravenpaw. "He hasn't crawled back to join us again, has he?"

"No," said Stone. "That would be...."

Ravenpaw stared icily.

"Unacceptable."

Ravenpaw touched Rain's shoulder with his tail. "We'll be leaving now." He began to pad forwards towards an intersection. Rain looked up at his destination, and found that it was, in fact, the main Thunderpath. Her headlong rush from Stone must have brought them there.

Sheer, moving quickly, slid into their way. "But don't leave yet. It's been ages since we talked."

"It's been two moons," said Ravenpaw stiffly.

"It's been three."

"It doesn't matter. Let us leave."

Rain was about to suggest just running past the yellow cat; but then she remembered Stone's frightening speed. She clamped her mouth shut.

"Come on, Raven," said Sheer. "Sit down and talk with us for a while."

"Why would I do that?" asked Ravenpaw, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Well, we were companions." As Sheer talked, Stone sat impassively to the side.

"Rogues don't have companions," Ravenpaw said quietly. "They have allies."

"Let him go," said Stone, unmoving from his position. "If he wishes it, I would have nothing to do with him."

Sheer, slowly, moved out of their way.

"Thank you," said Ravenpaw; but he did not begin to move forward like Rain expected him to.

"Aren't we going to go?" whispered Rain, feeling intimidated in the rogues' presence.

Ravenpaw turned his head, watching the loners. "Where's Moss?" he asked.

"Dead," replied Stone, unemotionally. His face may as well have been set in his very namesake, for all its stillness.

If the black loner felt anything, he kept it well hidden. "How about Trip?" he asked.

"He abandoned us," said Sheer. "Went off on his own. He never was too grateful," Sheer stretched and padded over to sit by Stone.

"Then..." Ravenpaw paused slightly. "How about Phoenix?"

"Dead," replied Stone once more.

Ravenpaw didn't move or respond for a moment. "Hey?..." asked Rain, nudging the black cat.

"She died fighting White a second time," said Sheer. "So did Moss."

Ravenpaw still didn't move. *White?* thought Rain, remembering what the rogue had said to her the other day.

“But we won,” continued Sheer. “This is our territory for good, now. Stone has her trust.”

“So it’s just you two?” Ravenpaw said, so quiet the breeze nearly drowned him out.

“We recruited some new cats to defeat White,” replied Sheer. “One of them died, one of them left. The third lives further that way.” Sheer motioned away from the main street with his tail. “His name’s Quickstep.”

Ravenpaw fell back to silence. Neither of the rogues said anything either.

The seconds passed.

A crow flew overhead. *Caw! Caw!*

“Hey,” said Rain, finally daring to speak. Three pairs of eyes turned on her. She gulped; “Can we, uh... leave now?”

Stone watched her for a moment, and she shrunk back; but he said, “Yes.”

Ravenpaw stood. “Goodbye,” he meowed.

“Good-“ began Sheer.

“One of White’s cats is coming,” interrupted Stone in an undertone. “Leave, now.”

“Come on,” Ravenpaw whispered to Rain, dashing towards a Twoleg’s yard.

Sparing one last glance at the strange rogues, Rain followed.

“Who were you talking to?” she heard a new voice hiss, just as she raced around the back of the Twoleg’s nest.

“Only each other,” replied Stone.

“Why at this time of night?” came the hiss.

“Neither of us could sleep,” replied Sheer.

“What if I don’t believe you?”

“Then don’t believe us. There is no one else here.”

Pause. “We’ll be watching your territory closer.”

“So be it.”

Rain almost didn't hear the sound of pawsteps leaving for its quietness. With a sigh at not being discovered, she turned to Ravenpaw.

"Come on," he said, stiffly, and leaped over a neighboring fence.

Chapter 15

Rain was surprised to find Barley waiting for them at the entryway of the barn. Seeing her fur matted, walking slowly along, he rushed forward to intercept them.

“Ravenpaw, Rain!” The black and white loner stopped in front of them. “Are you two okay?”

“Fine,” said Rain. “I just need a wash.”

Barley looked over at Ravenpaw, worried. “You too?”

He only nodded, slightly.

Barley sighed and sat down on the thick grass. “Well, that’s a relief. But what happened?”

Ravenpaw took a moment to speak. Finally, he said, “Rain was attacked by a rogue. I stopped him.”

Rain smiled, guiltily.

“Must have been a fast rogue,” said Barley, looking down at her. It was well known to all at the barn Rain and Branchpaw’s speed - although the latter had had little chance to show it off.

“He was,” said Rain, drawing circles in the air with her tail.

Ravenpaw clarified. “It was Stone.”

Barley’s head snapped up to attention. “Stone?”

“Oh, come on, you know him too?”

“One second, Rain,” said Barley; “Well, then, what... what did he do? Or say?”

“He doesn’t hold any grudges against me,” said the black cat. “He let us go peaceably.”

Barley smiled and let his strict attention waver. “Good, then!”

“Well, okay, before you guys continue,” said Rain, attracting both loners’ attention, “could you try and explain to me what’s up with these rogue guys?”

Barley looked up at Ravenpaw. “That’s his story to tell.”

Ravenpaw didn’t speak.

“He’ll tell you when he will,” Barley assured. “When he feels it’s the right time.” He stood up; “Come inside, what are we doing sitting out in the grass?”

“Right,” said Rain, starting towards the door; but she stopped abruptly at the sight she beheld.

“Hey, what’s going on out here?” asked Branchpaw, limping forward on three legs. His green eyes were bright, his fur was immaculate, and he looked happier than he had in a while.

“Branchpaw!” exclaimed Rain. “You’re walking again!”

“It feels great,” he meowed, smiling widely. “But really, what’s happening?”

“Let’s go inside,” said Barley, catching up to Rain. “We’ll tell you.”

Ravenpaw had been sitting in the same spot the whole time, his head down.

“Ravenpaw, are you coming?” asked Branchpaw.

After a moment, the loner slowly looked up, but didn’t answer.

Giving him a curious glance, Branchpaw disappeared back into the barn; so Ravenpaw was left alone outside, sitting under the dancing light of Silverpelt. It gave his fur a strangely silvery sheen.

I-I-I-I-I-I

The moon was past its highest, throwing its light slantwise into the hole in the roof. It cast a pole’s shadow across the barn, by which five cats sat; Barley, Ravenpaw, Rain, Shadepelt, and Loudbelly. Branchpaw was wandering about, making full use of his mobility. Nighttime sounds floated in constantly through the open doorway, the ever-present crickets, a distant monster’s roar, the *scritch-scratch* of a mouse faint in comparison.

“He kept telling me to get off his rock; and I said no, just because I was bored. He didn’t seem very tough at the start.” Rain was relating her recent adventure. “When I finally got back down, he was telling me to leave - no threats or anything, just “leave,” over and over again. And then I just kept saying no....”

“Now why would you do that?” asked Loudbelly. “You don’t *mess* with rogues. Remember that one rogue that got onto out territory, Shadepelt?”

“What rogue?” she asked. “Anyways, shush, Loudbelly, she’s telling a story.”

“I was just feeling sort of stupid for a moment, I guess. Sort of, frustrated.”

“We all have our bad moments,” assured Barley. “Keep going.”

“Well, I kept saying no,” meowed Rain, “until he jumped out of his drain - oh, yeah, he was in a drain for some reason - and, uh, attacked me,” she said.

“But you outran him, right?” said Branchpaw loudly from across the barn. He was sniffing about

the wooden stalls.

"...No," she admitted.

"Really?" her friend asked, squeezing out from under a stall door to look at her.

"He was fast, Branchpaw," she said. "Even you couldn't have outran him."

"Are you sure?" he asked, rubbing his back against a pole.

"Hm." Rain shifted as the cats around her held back smiles. "Well, anyways..."

"Did he catch you?" asked Shadepelt.

"Course he didn't catch her," said Loudbelly, "she probably wouldn't be here!"

"No. Ravenpaw saved me."

The two elders turned to look at the black cat. Branchpaw would have too, but he had ventured off into the side room.

"I never said thanks, did I?" said Rain. "Thank you very much, Ravenpaw."

He looked up slightly, but didn't say anything. After getting back from the rogues, he'd been even quieter than usual. Barley gently touched his shoulder with his tail.

Rain coughed slightly. "Then they... started talking a little. I didn't understand any of it, really. And a yellow cat came out of another drain...."

"What do they do in the drains?" asked Branchpaw, emerging from the side room.

"That's where they sleep," said Barley.

"Oh."

"So, uh, they mentioned some other cats..." Branchpaw wandered out the front door, leaving Rain to her story. It was magnificent to feel the fresh air on his face after being kept inside for so long; it was invigorating, and freshening. He could go wherever he wanted!

He was careful to keep his hind leg off the ground as he limped around the barn. If he had learned anything in his life as a loner, it was caution. *That's what got me this stupid wound in the first place*, he thought.

Branchpaw paused on the side of the barn adjacent to the Thunderpath. Across the tarmac, he could see the beginning of the mountains; the stone behemoths that the warriors had called Highstones. There, another piece of the Clans' memory had survived, along with the ThunderClan camp and Barley's barn; it was where the Mothermouth and the Moonstone was.

Where StarClan would come to talk to the warriors, and a place where you could go to solve all your problems.... Branchpaw never forgot his mother's stories.

He decided that he wanted to visit Highstones. Maybe seeing the Moonstone would be a stretch, but he wanted to anyways. *I'll ask someone to go with me*, he thought, glancing behind him at the barn; *maybe Ravenpaw. He knows it the best....* But then he remembered the black cat's recent unresponsiveness. *Or maybe Barley*, he added. *Or if he's busy, I could even get Rain. She'll probably be glad to.*

Thinking of his friend, Branchpaw was struck by a sudden curiosity. He never did figure out what Rain was doing in Twolegplace. "Maybe it's something about the rogues?" he mused, standing up. "She once said she was looking for something...."

Moving as fast as he could on three legs, Branchpaw scampered back into the building.

"So then, the new cat left... and... we came back," Rain was saying. Branchpaw wound his way between the stacks of hay to join the group; "And that's it."

"Huh," said Barley, thoughtfully.

"Hey, Rain." mewed Branchpaw, settling down at his friend's side. "Did I miss anything?"

"Nah," said Rain. "Just some conversation. How's the air outside feel?"

Branchpaw grinned. "Amazing! I nearly forgot what the dirt smelled like."

"Darned rogues," Loudbelly grumbled to his Clanmate. "All trouble and nothing else. To think they're living where our territory used to be!" Shadepelt frowned sympathetically, and rested her tail on his shoulder.

Ravenpaw raised his head slightly to look at the elder. Branchpaw only noticed out of the corner of his eye, and didn't think much of it. *On a note, though; I'd like to know how Ravenpaw met those cats*, he thought. *And what Rain was doing out there.* He frowned; *and what Ravenpaw was doing out there.* He was about to speak, but Barley beat him to it.

"Hey, Rain, I just remembered something Ravenpaw told me." He looked between the two young felines. "He said that the rock you saw? That used to be the Great Rock at Fourtrees."

"Fourtrees?" asked Rain.

Branchpaw leaped up, just barely remembering to tuck his wounded leg under his body. "The Great Rock? What- really?" he turned from Barley to Ravenpaw and back, his eyes wide. The Great Rock was where the leaders of the Clans had addressed the warriors at the monthly Gathering. It had been at Fourtrees, which was at the center of their territories; one tree for every Clan, it was said.

Ravenpaw raised his eyes once more to meet the eager green ones of the apprentice. "Yes," he

said, quietly.

“You mean those mangy rogues are living at *Fourtrees*?” exclaimed Loudbelly, standing up as well. “They’re living at our *Great Oaks*?” Branchpaw was taken aback; he had never seen him angry before.

“Loudbelly, calm down-“ said Shadepelt in a soothing voice, trying to calm him. She stood up by him and gently nuzzled him. “It’s not our territory anymore.”

“Hey, wait-“ said Rain- “What’s Fourtrees and this rock thing again?”

“It’s where the Clans met every moon,” replied Branchpaw, glad to share information. “In the Gathering, on the full moon....”

“I know, Shadepelt,” grumbled Loudbelly, ignoring the two. “but it just makes me *mad* to think of those flea-bitten mongrels living where we used to meet!”

“Me too,” answered his companion, sadly. She sat back down, and soon, Loudbelly followed suit, grumbling to himself.

“There were four oaks at the meeting place - they say there’s one for every Clan - and the leaders would jump up to the boulder you saw - the Great Rock....” Branchpaw trailed off, awkwardly noticing the others’ silence.

“Fourtrees must have meant a lot to you,” said Barley to the elders, empathetically.

“Sort of,” replied Shadepelt, looking over at Loudbelly. “It symbolized a lot.”

Copying her, Branchpaw looked at Rain, and found her with somewhat of a nonplussed expression. “Can we get back to the matter at hand?” she asked.

“Alright,” said Barley.

“Well, then,” she said, propping herself up on her forepaws. “You said Ravenpaw would tell us the story later, but I really don’t think he’ll be saying much anytime soon.” She spared him half a glance. “But I would really, really like to hear an explanation; couldn’t you tell us?”

“I’d love to,” said Barley, shifting in the straw; “But it’s really not my place to do it.”

“Then...” Rain sighed. “Ravenpaw?”

Five pairs of eyes watched him for several moments, but his head was lowed and he did not answer. *He has lots of secrets*, thought Branchpaw. *More than anyone I’ve ever met. Even Rain.*

“Oh, come on,” she said. “We’re part of your life, now, Ravenpaw. I got attacked by that cat! We deserve to know!”

"I saved your life," reprimanded the loner quietly.

This struck Rain down. She stood with her mouth open for a second, before offering, "He probably wouldn't have killed me...."

"He wouldn't have killed a stray loner going down the street," Ravenpaw replied. "But... I don't know. He knows the order of Twolegplace; if you hesitate to kill, then you can't be expected to live long."

She shivered. "So he'd kill a complete stranger, for no reason?"

Ravenpaw didn't speak for a moment. "I don't know. It's how rogues work," said the black cat, his voice not much louder than a whisper.

Looking troubled, Rain shrunk back down into the hay.

Branchpaw watched, and decided to pipe up. "Please, Ravenpaw?" he asked. "You seem to know a lot about rogues. Couldn't you explain to us what happened in Twolegplace? I'd really like to know." He looked up at the loner, hopefully. While Rain had been out, Branchpaw had managed to coax some conversation out of Ravenpaw. He had talked about Cody, when she had visited the barn - but he hadn't known who his father was. He had told him about Graystripe's return with Millie, his new kittypet mate; which astounded him as much as it gladdened him. Ravenpaw had become a good, if reserved companion other the past several days; if he didn't open up to Rain, maybe he would to Branchpaw.

His conversation with Ravenpaw had incited some strange questions, however. Badgers really were as large as he remembered them, and even more ferocious. Ravenpaw had refused to believe that a kittypet queen had been able to fight one off alone... and even Branchpaw was having second thoughts. How *had* his mother been able to kill the beast?

Ravenpaw's introverted personality had also struck him as they had talked. In his mother's stories, Ravenpaw had always been happy and helpful, and the thing he had hated the most was seeing a cat in pain. His mentor had been Tigerstar, which had been a mistake. Ravenpaw could not fight, unwilling to hurt another cat. He must have changed over the seasons....

"I..." meowed Ravenpaw.

Ignoring their current thoughts, both Branchpaw and Rain listened, rapt.

"I used to know those rogues," he said, slowly. "There used to be more of them. I met them after Graystripe and the elders came and... and I hadn't seen them in a while."

"How'd you meet them?" asked Branchpaw, wondering what sort of affiliation he could possibly have with those street cats.

A slight grin might or might not have appeared on Ravenpaw's face. "They attacked me."

Rain had to stifle a grin. Shadepelt, Barley, and Loudbelly watched attentively - well, not so much Loudbelly. Branchpaw suspected he might have fallen asleep again.

"Who's White?" inquired Rain.

Ravenpaw raised his head and stared straight at her. "Someone, StarClan forbid, I hope you never meet."

"Who?" breathed Branchpaw.

Ravenpaw looked back down, retreating into his shell. A hint of a troubled thought shone in his eyes.

"White is the most fearsome of the rogues," said Barley in an undertone. "She takes over territory with a vicious group of cats. If she reaches yours, the only way to win her favor is to prove you're strong enough to defeat her own cats; if you do, she'll allow you to stay in your land, though she'll still claim it as hers. Her cats patrol her territories often. If you don't win, though, then..." Barley took a breath. "It's either leave, or be killed."

The silence afterwards was dreadful. "So... you mean, Ravenpaw's friends were killed fighting White's cats?" asked Rain in almost a whisper. Asking such a question, no louder of a voice could be sanctioned.

"I wouldn't say *friends*," said Barley, glancing over at Ravenpaw. "But yes."

Movement from the elders attracted Branchpaw's attention. "I'm so sorry, Ravenpaw," said Shadepelt, looking over at his hunched form with sympathetic eyes. *She must know how he feels*, the white apprentice thought.

"I... oh, I don't know what I'm doing feeling sorry about rogues, but," Loudbelly said, "I'm sorry, too." With a groan, he stood.

Oh, thought Branchpaw. *He wasn't asleep.*

He suddenly realized that Rain still hadn't told them why she had been in Twolegplace. *Should I mention it?...* he only took a second to decide; now was definitely not the time.

Rain stayed on the floor, looking at the ground. "That must have been terrible," she said, addressing Branchpaw but speaking of Ravenpaw.

He imagined Ravenpaw's dark shape, bowed over a fallen comrade out in the streets of Twolegplace; and unbidden, he was also suddenly reminded of his mother. He could see her kind face smiling at him. He was suddenly filled with a persistent pain - and all in a quick moment, he was squeezing his eyes shut to try and block out the image; and he realized that he, too, could relate to the loner's plight.

A long time passed, before Shadepelt excused herself and led Loudbelly back to where they had been sleeping. After, Barley also murmured some good-byes and retreated to his quarters. Ravenpaw followed, and then the two young cats were left alone.

“Hey, Branchpaw?” meowed Rain. He looked up, and found her watching him intently.

“Yes?” he replied, his attention fixed on her blue eyes.

“Don’t ever die, alright?”

With perfect seriousness, Branchpaw replied, “I won’t.”

She smiled. “Good.” Then she yawned; “Come on. I’m tired; let’s go to sleep.”

Branchpaw stood and stretched. “Right”

He followed Rain, limping, back to where their nests were, and they both made themselves comfortable in the hay.

“Goodnight, Rain,” said Branchpaw.

“Night.”

He closed his eyes after that; but soon, through the darkness, Branchpaw called, “Hey, Rain?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t die either, okay?”

He swore he could hear her grin. “Of course I won’t, silly. Now go to sleep.”

Branchpaw, happily, obliged.

Chapter 16

Rain was helping Branchpaw around the barn; he was feeling much better. Out the large doors, across the grass, looking over at Highstones, Branchpaw was telling his gray-brown companion more about the legend of the Clans. Twilight had fallen, and they sat lazily, for once content to just stay still and talk. Looking over the Thunderpath, they could see the sun high in the sky.

“So... that’s it?”

“That’s all I know,” responded Branchpaw. “I really wish there was someone we could talk to that knows what happened to the Clans after they left!”

“There’s probably no one but StarClan themselves that could tell you that,” said Rain, perfectly serious.

Branchpaw looked over at her. “Do you believe in StarClan?”

Rain shrugged. “I really don’t know. I don’t think it’s possible, but then again, other impossible things have happened too, like when I found you when you got hurt. Running all the way through Twolegplace with my eyes closed....”

“That was pretty awesome,” agreed Branchpaw. If anything, he was supremely grateful.

After a moment, Rain spoke again. “And how your mother killed that badger....”

Branchpaw didn’t respond for a moment, trying not to think about the spot where he had buried her. “That was pretty... unlikely too,” he meowed. He sighed; “I really miss her.”

Rain reciprocated, “I know how you feel.”

“How would you know?” asked Branchpaw, feeling miserable.

“I...” Rain stuttered.

Noting his friend’s uncomfortable manner, Branchpaw hurried to change the subject. Just because he was depressed didn’t mean his friend had to be. “You know, I used to have this stick,” the white cat said, “from a tree. And when I was young, I couldn’t stop playing with it. My mother would call me over to tell me a story, and I’d bring the branch with me and roll it around while she talked....”

Rain tilted her head. “Where is it now?”

The young apprentice thought for a moment. “Just in my Twoleg’s back yard,” he said. “Under... under a tree. I remember leaving it there.”

Rain nodded, and leaned over to lick herself clean.

“What about you?” asked Branchpaw. “You’ve never talked about your family.”

The gray-brown cat straightened suddenly. “My family?...”

“If you don’t want to talk about it,” Branchpaw quickly said, but was interrupted by Rain.

“No, it’s alright. I had a sister - I think I might have told you - her name was Snow. Rain and Snow, a perfect pair,” she said, grinning. “My mother was always hesitant to let us travel far from the house. It made sense, really. We were only a few moons old, and there were rogues on the street. Snow was happy with what we had, but I was always restless. Remember Cloudtail? Our older brother... We’d hear stories about him all the time, and I was jealous of him. It wasn’t really because he was a warrior. It was because he was off somewhere in the big world, having adventures.”

She coughed, seeming self-conscious as she glanced at Branchpaw. She probably hadn’t ever told anyone this before, he realized. *I wonder why she’s always so secretive?* He was excited to hear about her past; maybe she’d finally answer some questions.

“Anyways, well, I guess you know a little about how I left. ‘Following Cloudtail’ and all that.” She sighed. “To tell you the truth, I was mostly bluffing. I just wanted to get out and do stuff – I like to think I inherited some of Firestar’s warrior blood. I never really planned on finding ThunderClan, like you did. It seems impossible! How can any two cats make a journey like that alone?” She finally voiced her skepticism about Branchpaw’s goal.

Branchpaw mulled on the question for a while. “Graypaw,” he finally said. “And Millie! They must have made it.”

“You don’t know that,” dismissed Rain.

Branchpaw looked down. “I guess not.” He’d always just assumed they’d been able to make it from the barn to the Clans. But really, how would they have done it? *Were there signs that they could see? Something that pointed to the Clans? Maybe you have to be born a warrior to do that.*

Before he could get any more discouraged, he asked, “What was your sister like?”

Rain looked thoughtful. “Well, I mean, we were littermates. We did practically everything together! She always thought up of new things to do around the house, and always finding new things to investigate. I don’t know how she did it; I always just ran by everything, looking for the big picture. But she could see all the little details.” She smiled, sounding a little wistful. “Now, I keep stopping to think what Snow might say about things. She’d warn me to be cautious, probably. She would always sleep with one paw resting on me so that she would wake up if I started sleepwalking.”

“I wish I could meet her,” said Branchpaw. “She sounds nice. Do you ever visit?” *How come she doesn’t like talking about her family?* he wondered.

Rain stiffened again, like she had often done when Branchpaw talked about touchy subjects. Before he could retract his question, though, Rain started speaking. "No. I don't. I don't know where they are." She looked down at the ground for a moment, and said, "Remember when I said I left my home to become a loner?"

"Yeah," said Branchpaw, quietly.

"That wasn't really true. I wasn't ready to leave; I was just angry and wasn't thinking right." She looked up at Branchpaw. "I had a big argument with my mother, because I wanted to go explore. She offered to give Cloudtail to ThunderClan herself when he was young, did you know? And you know what he did? He started running off from the Clan to eat kittypet food!" Rain hit the ground with one paw, sounding angry now. Branchpaw listened, silent. "He was always giving Firestar trouble and acting up. But he got to be a part of the Clans. After he left with all the other warriors, when the forest was cut down, my mother started missing him. Firestar was gone, and Cloudtail was gone. The Twolegs had sent away the rest of her kits to other houses, and she was left alone. So when she had her next litter, she didn't want to let either of them out of her sight." She paused to sigh. "That's me and Snow."

Rain looked over at Twolegplace, Branchpaw followed her gaze too, now understanding much more about his friend. *That's why she gave up kittypet life. She probably does have warrior blood - just look at how good she is at hunting!* He wanted to speak, but he didn't know what to say. "Wow," he finally said, wishing he had something better to say. "That... that sounds really unfair."

"Yeah," sighed Rain. "I guess."

"What happened then?" asked Branchpaw.

"Well," the young loner started again. "Not much more. The night after the argument, I ran away from home. Snow woke up when I left, but I lied to her. I told her I was just going to make dirt. I remember she sounded like she didn't believe me." She sighed, only looking sad and tired now. "And, you know, that's the last thing I ever said to her. A lie."

Branchpaw nuzzled his companion, wordlessly trying to comfort her. She accepted the motion, leaning towards Branchpaw. He thought she looked grateful.

"I didn't go too far away that night," she continued. "I was actually a little scared, because I'd never been alone in Twolegplace before. I curled up somewhere beneath a tree and fell asleep; I was planning on coming back home in the morning." She looked away for a moment, curling her tail by her side. "But... I sleepwalked. When I woke up, I had no idea where I was."

Branchpaw's eyes widened in surprise. Sleepwalking was what had taken her away from her family?

"And, there you have it. I found the forest and taught myself to hunt – I never came across the clearing, though. I only stayed there a few days, though, because some cats warned me about that badger that lived there. Even the rogues stay clear of that forest."

Branchpaw sucked in a breath at that – the badger, which had killed his mother. Blinking a few times, he said quietly, “I guess that danger’s gone now.”

Rain looked over, sympathetic about Cody’s passing. “Yeah...”

The white apprentice shook his head, clearing his thoughts. “So is that what you’re searching for in Twolegplace?” asked Branchpaw.

“Yep,” breathed Rain. “I’ll find them someday. This is why I didn’t want to go looking for ThunderClan, or even the barn. I can’t leave the area; I know they’re here somewhere.”

The recounting of the tale over, a small smile came back to her face. “I bet you’d love to meet my mother. The very own sister of Firestar.”

“Yeah,” responded Branchpaw, but somehow, the prospect of meeting Princess seemed less exciting to him. *Maybe it’s because I’ve already met Ravenpaw, Barley, Loudbelly, and Shadepelt. Maybe I’m already a part of the stories too!* It was a novel thought. He, himself, the little white kittypet who could not hunt, was also someone worth a story. After all, he was definitely a part of Barley and Ravenpaw’s story. It was only one small connection from that to ThunderClan.

He looked over at Rain, who was looking off towards Twolegplace. Shifting over, he started sharing tongues with his friend, grooming her gray-brown fur.

There was another reason for his lack of awe. If he met Princess, it wouldn’t be simply meeting a cat from his mother’s stories. *Firestar probably has lots of family around the area anyways, now that I think of it.* Princess, she wasn’t only Firestar’s sister - she was Rain’s mother. She was someone that his friend cared for, and that was more important than any old story.

Chapter 17

The barn was bright and cheery the next day. Rain seemed relieved to have told Branchpaw about her story; *it must be nice to have someone else know*, he thought. The weather was pleasant, and a cool wind was blowing from the fields. The leaves on the trees swayed, dancing along with the birds flying from roof to roof in Twolegplace. The sun poured in and gave the straw a sharp definition.

Despite Branchkit and Rain's high spirits, Ravenpaw still seemed very distracted. He'd been gone for most of the day, leaving the barn after he dropping off some fresh-kill for the elders. He was just going for a walk, he'd said. Barley seemed worried for his friend; "He hasn't told me what's wrong," he confided in the others. "Probably something the rogues said, but what it is, I haven't got a clue."

Shadepelt was sympathetic. "I hope he's alright. It's been a long time since he went to Twolegplace; he probably had some bad memories dredged up."

"I thought he'd gotten over all that," chimed in Loudbelly loudly,

"You never know," responded Shadepelt, unusually philosophical. "Sorrow strikes at the strangest times."

Barley's voice was sad with empathy. "Rain? You were with him. Do you have any idea?"

The gray-brown cat had been wondering that herself, but she only shook her head. What had they heard in Twolegplace? Perhaps news about White, or maybe an old friend that had been lost. Or maybe Shadepelt was right, and Ravenpaw was simply being forced to recall a troubled time in the past.

Barley sighed. "I suppose there's no use in sitting around worrying about it. Ravenpaw will tell us if he wants to." He stood and began to pad off, towards the small pile of fresh-kill.

"Maybe this is a burden he has to bear alone," added Shadepelt.

Branchpaw watched contemplatively from the side, remembering the conversation he had overheard several sunrises ago. Ravenpaw had admitted to being scared of Twolegplace. *I know a little more about that, now*, he thought. *Something to do with Stone and Sheer, and something to do with White. But other than that, he has as many secrets as ever*. What had scared him in the Twolegs' homes? What sort of experiences had he had there?

There was a stale sort of atmosphere in the barn after that conversation. Although at first glance, nothing seemed out of the ordinary, the matter of Ravenpaw continued to meander through all of their thoughts. Branchpaw soon stood. "I think I'll go outside a bit," he said, wanting to escape the confines of the building a little. Tall as the ceiling might be, it was still a ceiling. Maybe he'd talk to Rain.

"Can I come with you?" asked Shadepelt, rising from her position in the hay. "I wouldn't mind

stretching my legs a little.”

“Sure,” responded the apprentice, amiably.

Outside, Branchpaw looked about. “Do you know where Rain went?” he asked, wondering where his friend could be.

“Hm,” said the elder, a thoughtful expression on her face. “I think she’s hunting.” She sniffed at the air; Branchpaw realized she was searching for her scent.

Shadepelt saw Branchpaw examining her. With a laugh, she said, “Can you smell her trail anywhere? I’ve gotten too old for tracking scents.”

“Oh, well,” said the apprentice, quickly turning his nose to the air. It had been a long time since he’d had a chance to scent animals for hunting, and even longer since he’d tried to find another cat’s scent trail – but he didn’t want to admit that he’d never actually learned to follow a scent trail. He tried to find anything that reminded him of Rain, and came across a faint smell that definitely reminded him of his friend. “I think she’s this way,” he said, padding towards the wilderness on his three healthy legs. Shadepelt followed after, tail waving contentedly.

The scent was always stronger in one direction; after finding it at first, Branchpaw found it easy to sniff it out again in the air. *This isn’t so hard, he thought. It probably would have come in handy back in the forest, too!* He found her hunting in the fields, having ventured through a hole in a wooden fence to find prey between the crops themselves. There were several spots that the rodents liked to gather in, but the cats didn’t go there often; there were too many dense plants that prey could easily escape under.

She was only a splotch of gray and brown through the yellow grain at first. “Hey!” he called out. “Rain!”

There was a small commotion, and the she-cat sprang out of sight, quickly lost behind the crops. Branchpaw frowned, confused, before Rain emerged again from the plants.

“I was stalking a rabbit!” she complained. “Why’d you have to go and do that for?”

Oh, she was in the middle of hunting! “Oops”, he said.

“A rabbit?” asked Shadepelt, stopping beside the white apprentice. “Those are really hard to catch.”

“Hello, Shadepelt,” said Rain, politely.

“Hello, Rain.”

“What, no ‘hello’ for me?” asked Branchpaw feigning indignity.

“Nope,” said Rain. “I almost had that one!” She gave Branchpaw a friendly shove as she passed

by. A small flash of alarm showed in her eyes when her friend stumbled, trying to stop his fall with only three legs. However, Branchpaw righted himself and even gave her a nudge in retaliation.

“Why don’t you two go look for some more prey?” suggested Shadepelt. “I think I’ll stay here and enjoy the sun.”

“Will do,” replied the gray-brown she-cat, leaping back into the grain. Branchpaw hesitated and looked back at Shadepelt, who nodded in encouragement. He was remembering, all of a sudden, his tribulations trying to learn to hunt. *I hardly would have gotten better lying around for a moon!*

Rain’s head emerged again from the crops. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah, coming!” With one last glance back, Branchpaw hurried after his friend.

She was standing with her mouth open, trying to detect preyscent in the air. “I think there’s something this way,” she whispered, stalking to her left. Branchpaw, very carefully, followed her. It had been a long time since he’d last tried to hunt, and he was worried he would mess up Rain. She must be an expert at catching prey by now, while he was still as clueless as a kittypet. Oh, why hadn’t he inherited Firestar’s skills?

Branchpaw nearly bumped into Rain when she halted, eyes fixed straight forward. He didn’t dare speak, but he searched her line of sight until he saw something. *Stay quiet, he thought. Balance. Open your mouth. Don’t step on leaves. Don’t alert the mouse!*

Without warning, Rain leaped, latching onto the rodent with a yowl. She tossed it forward, where it hit the ground and laid still, stunned. Her fangs finished the job quickly.

She turned around, smiling around the mouse. “Nice catch,” meowed Branchpaw, although still a little disheartened.

Rain spat out the prey. “Why don’t you take the next one?”

Branchpaw tilted his head. “With an injured leg?”

“You’ve got to start learning sometime. I’m smelling more mice over there,” she said, motioning with her tail.

Skeptical, Branchpaw lowered his body and took a sniff of the air. There was definitely something hiding behind the grain. He quietly slunk forward, getting within sight of the rodent, which was scratching around for food in plain sight. *Step lightly, he told himself. Prey can feel your footsteps.*

“Tail down!” hissed Rain. Branchpaw quickly corrected his posture.

There it was, ahead of him. He took a breath, and jumped – the mouse skittered away, but

Branchpaw stretched out his paws and pinned down the rodent's tail. For a moment, he had it captured, but it broke loose and scampered back into hiding.

"Hey!" he said, optimistic, as he straightened back up. "I almost had it."

"Maybe next time," Rain agreed.

The sun was on its decline by the time Rain and Branchpaw returned to the barn, meeting Shadepelt as she gazed off at Highstones. "Good catch!" she complimented, appraising the prey they held in their mouth. Rain nodded in thanks.

Later, Branchpaw saw Rain of the corner of his eye, slinking out of the door to continue searching Twolegplace. He called out for her to stop.

"Yeah?" she asked, as the white apprentice trotted up to her on three legs. He shook some hay off of his body before replying.

"Can I go with you today?" he asked.

"Uh, well," she said. "Sure, why not?" The young loner bounded out, and Branchpaw followed after.

They were silent for a while. Branchpaw followed Rain without question, turning his head side to side to see the sights. Twolegplace was the same as it always had, but there was new understanding in the apprentice's gaze. This was rogue territory. It reminded him of home, but it was also plagued with monsters and unfriendly cats. His life as a kittypet had not prepared him for the harshness of this land.

For now, though, it seemed peaceful. Branchpaw let himself be lulled into feeling secure, padding amongst white and red-shingled nests that he still associated with the carelessness of being a kit. Rain seemed to understand, content to walk quietly. At Thunderpath intersections, they ran across together at an unspoken signal. Both were used to dodging monsters by now.

Eventually, Rain stopped, at the foot of a white fence. "So, this is where I stopped searching yesterday," she said, looking around. "I think."

Branchpaw took stock of his surroundings. He didn't understand how Rain navigated; every scene seemed identical to him.

"How much more do you have to search before you get to the end of Twolegplace?" he asked.

Rain grimaced. "A while. This place is huge, and I keep worrying that I'm missing spots." Branchpaw glanced at her sympathetically.

"Come on, then," the gray-brown she-cat said, hopping into the backyard of the nest. By the time Branchpaw managed to scramble over the fence with his three good legs, Rain was already peering through the cat flap on the back of the dwelling. "Hellooooo?" she called out.

“Anyone in there?” questioned Branchpaw, dropping down to the artificial-green turf.

She pulled her head back out. “I didn’t see any cats, but this definitely isn’t my nest. I would have remembered if the walls were bright pink.” She made a face, then progressed over to the next home.

“Could you wait up?” asked Branchpaw, his breath labored as he leaped onto the fence. His paws, not used to exercise, scrabbled before gripping tightly to the grainy wood. “I’m not at my best right now.”

“You’re the one that wanted to come,” she responded playfully, pausing to let him catch up.

They continued like this for a while, fence after fence, nest after nest. Branchpaw perpetually lagged behind. Before long, without encountering any rogues, they returned to the main Thunderpath.

“You know what?” said Rain, pausing. “That Great Stone you were talking about earlier—”

“Great Rock,” corrected Branchpaw, licking at his fur while they were stopped.

“Yeah, that thing – it should be near here. Wanna see it?”

“Really?” asked Branchpaw, abandoning his grooming to look excitedly at his friend. Then, before Rain could respond, his vigor suddenly faded. “Nah, we should – we should probably stay away from those rogues.” He tried not to look disappointed.

“Oh, don’t be silly. We’ll stay on the other side of the Thunderpath. Stone probably won’t even be around. Come on!” She dashed off. Branchpaw followed slower, excited, despite himself.

She was standing near the edge of the main Thunderpath when the white apprentice caught up. “Where is it?” he asked quickly, kneading the earth below him.

“Over there,” she responded, gesturing with her nose. “That boulder. In front of the nest with the yellow door.”

Branchpaw caught sight of the rock and gazed solemnly. It was not very spectacular: a large piece of stone in the corner of some Twoleg’s territory. It was only a shadow of what it used to represent. However, Branchpaw caught a glimpse of past Gatherings under the light of the full moon, where leaders discussed war and peace and treachery. It had once been sheltered under tall oaks, where there was some sense of importance and intrigue, but it was now bare and revealed to the sun. If he concentrated hard enough, he could imagine Firestar standing proudly at the top.

“They had meetings here?” asked Rain, looking at her friend. Branchpaw resisted the urge to roll his eyes; she didn’t understand what this place meant.

“Every full moon,” he explained. “For all the Clans. There was peace for just one night,” He turned to look at her, excitement creeping back into his voice. “It was considered a big honor to be chosen to go to one, you know. And we’re here now!” Branchpaw practically beamed.

Rain caught out of the corner of her eye movement from across the road. “That’s pretty cool,” she relented.

Branchpaw noticed the movement as well, and both of them turned to see the stirring cat leap out of the storm drain. It was the large one: Sheer, if he remembered correctly. The two young cats were frozen for a moment, but the rogue gave them hardly more than a glance before padding down the road in the other direction.

“We should get back to searching,” said Rain, leading her friend down the road.

“There are clouds moving in,” mentioned Branchpaw, looking upwards. Rain followed his gaze, seeing the black monoliths that had emerged from the edge of the sky. “Looks like there’s a storm coming.”

Chapter 18

sdfsdf

EXCERPTS (I abridged these seriously in the story, so the full excerpts are also shown here)

In Chapter 1, Warriors 5; A Dangerous Path
p. 162

Bluestar fixed her blue gaze on him. Fireheart thought he could already see the shimmer of StarClan in her eyes. "Fire will save the Clan," she murmured, and Fireheart remembered the mysterious prophecy that he had heard from his earliest days in ThunderClan. "You never understood, did you?" Bluestar went on. "Not even when I gave you your apprentice name, Firepaw. And I doubted it myself, when fire raged through our camp. Yet I see the truth now. Fireheart, you are the fire who will save ThunderClan."

Fireheart could do nothing but stare at his beloved leader. He felt as if his whole body had turned to stone. Above his head, wind tore the clouds into shreds, letting a ray of sunshine strike down and touch his pelt to flame, just as it had in the clearing when he first arrived in the Clan, so many moons ago.

"You will be a great leader," Bluestar's voice was the merest whisper. "One of the greatest the forest has ever known. You will have the warmth of fire to protect your Clan and the fierceness of fire to defend it. You will be Firestar, the light of ThunderClan."

"No, Fireheart protested. "I can't. Not without you, Bluestar."

But it was too late. Bluestar sighed softly, and the light died from her eyes.

NOTES

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EDITS/IDEAS

Ahhhhh Highstones, Mothermouth, Moonstone, Fourtrees, Silverpelt, Great Oaks, Highrock, Great Rock, gotta remember all these compound words! **TO EDIT (IF I CAN REMEMBER WHAT I WANTED TO EDIT)**

Scourge once named Tiny?

Willy and his band. Don't forget to mention.

SkyClan? Think I can ignore....

Edit Ch. 14. Too short and choppy. **TO EDIT**

Add more cat-like actions. Nuzzles, sharing tongues, grooming, scratching things. **TO EDIT**

WHEN RAVENPAW IS TELLING HIS STORY:

Mention Willy, BloodClan battle, Barley's past

Mention Tigerstar- out on a limb, other ThunderClan cats

Tell Phoenix legend

Talk about how Ravenpaw has "a strange choice of friends"

STORY

Ch 14+

Rain encounters Stone. Ravenpaw saves her. Soon they meet Sheer.

Stone mentions winning the favor of White. Ravenpaw mentions the Great Rock.

Stone mentions the death of Moss.

Phoenix appears, but her name is unknown to Rain.

The two leave as White herself appears.

Rain just barely hears Stone assuring her that they had had no visitors.

After, Stone decides that he has given to Ravenpaw all the loyalty that he deserved. White talks about reaching through a final few territories and taking over the barn, and Stone does not advise otherwise. When she orders Stone and his group (Stone, Sheer, Phoenix, and the new rogue Quickstep) to take part in the attack, he protests, but they go anyways.

Upon reaching the barn, Rain has to tell Ravenpaw and Barley about her family.

Two days after, Rain brings Branchpaw to see the Great Rock from across the road, because he wanted to walk somewhere. She is smart enough not to let him cross and risk an encounter with Stone's group.

Two days after *that*, in the rain, White's attack commences. She leads 4 cats, Stone's group and two others. They attack from the front of the barn. Rain, Barley, and Ravenpaw do their best to hold them off, while Branchpaw, Shadepelt and Loudbelly hide in the side room. There is a door there, but it has been barred shut by a wooden plank, set halfway up the door. Although Branchpaw can reach it by jumping, he cannot move it. He thinks fast and pushes a hay bale to the side of the door, then leaps on top it; but he is not strong enough to move the bar. Neither are the elders.

Sheer enters the room. The cats there speak nothing, but Sheer- silently- goes up and pushes the bar away. "20 seconds," he says, and the three dash out the door. Sheer goes back in the room, deliberately takes time finding White (who is not fighting), and tells her that three are escaping. Ravenpaw, Barley, and Rain hear this and run out- the 7 rogues follow.

They try to shelter in Mothermouth, at the Moonstone, but the Thunderpath blocks their way; the cats had been herded south to Twolegplace and they must cross quickly. Loudbelly is killed by a car. White and one of her followers chase them, while Stone's group and another stay behind. Phoenix eventually saves Ravenpaw from White's follower and kills him. Now it is four against one, White, but she continues to fight until Rain, of all cats, inflicts on her a cut. Another two come soon from Phoenix, the last one debilitating, and White turns back. She screeches for help from the others, but they seemed to have gone back inside. White is furious and snarls revenge, but retreats. The six manage to escape to safety in Mothermouth, the rain masking their scent. Strangely, only Branchpaw is able to get a dream from the Moonstone, but faint and uninformative. Branchpaw, however, is inspired and again feels determined to find ThunderClan when this is all over.

The next day, White attempts to find them in the cave. This makes Ravenpaw, Phoenix and Rain's job harder as they try to go out for fresh-kill.

A distraction comes when Twolegs come to investigate the barn. In the rogue's confusion, all six of them sneak out and escape into free rogue territory. Rain suggests that they hide in the forest, but they decide it is too close to White's territory. They travel further east, where Rain eventually finds her missing family. Princess no longer lived where she used to in the Clan days. Snow accompanies them in finding a place for them to stay. About 5 days after leaving Mothermouth- 2 after leaving Princess- they find larger Twolegplace, equivalent to a small city. South of this city, they find forest. It is actually a nature park. It is no further from there to Princess than from the forest to Mothermouth, so they settle there. Rain is asked by Snow to come back home. Branchpaw is hesitant, wanting to join either Barley or Snow, but remembering the Moonstone he says that he will continue on to ThunderClan.

Rain leaves for her home. Branchpaw stays with Barley, Ravenpaw, Shadepelt, and Phoenix for

a day, before leaving for the north. Rain lives as a kittypet for two days, then decides that she couldn't live like that any longer. She races to the nature park, then races to catch up with Branchpaw.

Stone, Sheer, and Quickstep are speculated to be living in White's territory still.

Back story on Ravenpaw

The BloodClan battle is won by LionClan. BloodClan scatters.

Ravenpaw and Barley house the Clans before they leave to their new homes.

The forest is demolished, Twolegplace is built, and BloodClan remnants immigrate.

One moon: the elders find the barn.

Territorial system emerges. Some rogue cats have their own, small territory. Others are more powerful, attract followers, get more territory. The most powerful of them all- White- gains much territory. Hers is southwest of the forest, and fairly far from the main Thunderpath.

Two moons: Ravenpaw begins to squabble with Barley and spends more time out in Twolegplace. He sees his first glimpse of Stone's group. After an especially heated fight with Barley, he leaves the barn. He is apprehended by Stone, Moss, and Phoenix, and joins them, mostly because of an attraction to Phoenix and his argument with Barley. He is renamed Raven. Their territory is west of the forest, north of White's. Some surrounding, smaller territories have pledged allegiance to them, but wish to remain alone. They are: Trip's, Rust's, and Ice's.

Three moons: White begins her bid for power. The forest is neutral, because of the badger that Cody later kills, and the main Thunderpath is also, simply because there is nothing to be had near it. Any cat may travel along it. However, White goes about taking over territories. Her group of followers grows when she finds sufficiently powerful rogues. Some of her followers choose to live in their own territories but have pledged allegiance. Knowing that, the choice is to be run out of their territory, be killed, or join White, so Stone's group starts taking territory for themselves. They find and integrate Sheer as well as take other rogues' territories. Trip joins. Ice joins. Rust stays with his own territory. When trying to fight a similar group of cats, Raven sees Stone in a battle frenzy for the first time.

Four moons: White reaches Stone's territory. They ask to join her, and she says they may- if they can beat her own team of followers. In the battle, Ice dies. An enemy cat dies. Stone, Sheer, Trip, Phoenix, Raven, and Moss escape alive. Rust disappears. White takes their territory. Seeing no need to stay with the group any longer, Trip leaves. They fight another, six-cat group for territory. They are outnumbered by one, but they win; in the battle, Raven is stuck in a situation where he has the last cat to fight pinned down by the throat with Stone urging him to kill him. Phoenix watches. Raven ends up killing him, along with one other that the other cats killed. Stone congratulates him. Phoenix is more reserved, but she does too. Horrified, Raven does not eat that evening, and when Phoenix acts blunt about the rogue she killed, Raven runs away in the night. Raven- or Ravenpaw, once more- rejoins Barley, Shadepelt, and Loudbelly in the barn.

Five moons: No notable events for Ravenpaw. Stone finds favor with White at this time, and defeats her group of elites, having gathered three other cats. He at first advises her not to attack Barley's barn. Moss and another new cat die. The other two new cats drift away once more, although one of them pledges allegiance to them. She now has so many followers that they have regrouped into smaller territories, but are all ruled over by White. She marks out her own territory and has several trusted cats watch over her territory. They all know not to act out - for White deals with problems personally. Besides, they are safer in her rule than out.

Six moons: Nothing much.

Seven moons: Branchpaw and Rain reach the barn.

CAST (in order of appearance)

Red = deceased **Bold = living** Neither = unknown

Name	Appearance	Class, in order chronologically	Home 1	Home 2	Home 3+
Branchpaw	White apprentice with green eyes and long legs	Kittypet/loner/Clan	Cody's house	The old forest	Barley's barn
Cody	Brown tabby queen with blue eyes	Kittypet	Cody's house		
Jade	Handsome gray tabby tom	Kittypet	Jade's house		
Rain	Young brown and gray she-cat with blue eyes	Kittypet/loner/Clan	Princess's old house	The old forest	Barley's barn
Hattie	?	Kittypet	Hattie's house (Firestar's old house)		
Smudge	Plump black and white she-cat	Kittypet	Smudge's house		
Ravenpaw	Sleek black tom	Clan/loner/rogue	ThunderClan	Barley's barn	Stone's old territory, Stone's new territory, the nature park
Barley	Stocky black and white tom	Loner	Barley's barn	The nature park	
Loudbelly	Elderly dark brown tom	Clan/loner	RiverClan	Barley's barn	
Shadepelt	Elderly black she-cat	Clan/loner	RiverClan	Barley's barn	The nature park
Stone	Powerful gray tom with a brown stripe and yellow eyes	Rogue	Stone's old territory	Stone's new territory	
Sheer	Large yellow tom with white paws and stomach	Rogue	Sheer's territory	Stone's old territory	Stone's new territory
Phoenix	Ginger she-cat	Rogue/lone	Stone's old	Stone's	The nature

	with yellow eyes	r	territory	new territory	park
White	Massive white she-cat with black eyes and large fangs	Rogue	White's territory		
Quickstep	Brown tabby tom with black paws and long legs	Rogue	Quickstep's territory	Stone's new territory	
White's follower 1	?	Rogue	Unknown		
White's follower 2	?	Rogue	Unknown		
Moss	Large gray tom with dark green eyes	Rogue	Stone's old territory	Stone's new territory	
Trip	Small black and white tom	Rogue	Trip's territory	Stone's old territory	Unknown
Rust	Ginger tabby tom	Rogue	Rust's territory	Unknown	
Ice	Gray and white she-cat	Rogue	Rust's territory	Stone's old territory	
Quickstep's mate	?	Rogue	Quickstep's territory	Stone's new territory	
Stone's recruit	?	Rogue	Unknown	Stone's new territory	
Snow	White she cat with blue eyes	Kittypet	Princess's old house	Princess's new house	
Princess	Light brown tabby she-cat with white chest and paws	Kittypet	Princess's old house	Princess's new house	

ThunderClan has Highrock

In Highstones is Mothermouth is Moonstone wow bad grammar.

In Fourtrees are the Great Oaks and the Great Rock what the heck's with the "high"s and the "great"s?

And Silverpelt's just out there by itself.