

WARRIORS

RAVENPAW'S FAREWELL



SHORT STORY
EBOOK
EXCLUSIVE!

ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WARRIORS

RAVENPAW'S
FAREWELL

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HUNTER

HARPER

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DEDICATION

For Missy
Special thanks to Victoria Holmes

ALLEGIANCES

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

RAVENPAW—sleek black tom

BARLEY—sturdy black-and-white tom

VIOLET—pale orange tabby she-cat with dark orange stripes and white paws

RILEY—pale gray tabby with dark gray stripes and blue eyes

BELLA—pale orange she-cat with green eyes

LULU—pale sandy she-cat with long fur

PATCH—gray and pale orange tom

MADRIC—brown tabby tom

PASHA—very dark tabby tom

SKYCLAN

LEADER

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

DEPUTY

SHARPCLAW—dark ginger tom

MEDICINE CAT

ECHOSONG—silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

CHERRYTAIL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

WASPWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

APPRENTICE, DUSKPAW

EBONYCLAW—striking black she-cat (daylight warrior)

APPRENTICE, HAWKPAW

BILLYSTORM—ginger-and-white tom

APPRENTICE, PEBBLEPAW

HARVEYMOON—white tom (daylight warrior)

MACGYVER—black-and-white tom (daylight warrior)

BOUNCFIRE—ginger tom

APPRENTICE, BLOSSOMPAW

TINYCLOUD—small white she-cat

NETTLESLASH—pale brown tom

RABBITLEAP—brown tom

APPRENTICE, PARSLEYPAW

PLUMWILLOW—dark gray she-cat

APPRENTICE, CLOUDPAW

FIREFERN—ginger she-cat

APPRENTICES (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

DUSKPAW—ginger tabby tom

HAWKPAW—dark gray tom with yellow eyes

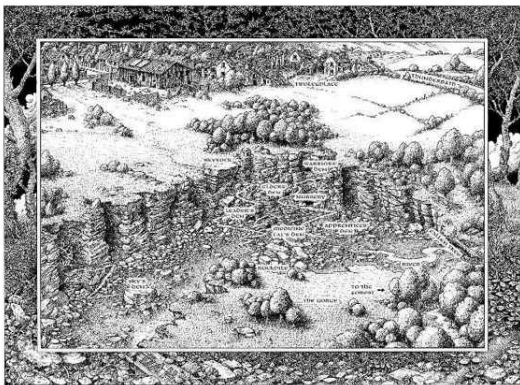
BLOSSOMPAW—ginger-and-white she-cat

CLOUDPAW—white she-cat

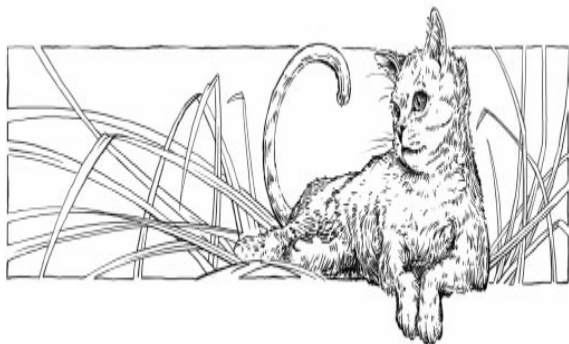
PEBBLEPAW—brown-speckled white she-cat with green eyes

PARSLEYPAW—dark brown tabby tom

MAPS







CHAPTER ONE



“Faster, Ravenpaw! Keep up!” Graypaw glanced over his shoulder before he plunged into a clump of ferns.

Ravenpaw dug his claws into the ground and picked up speed. He saw Graypaw’s striped pelt vanish into the bracken, just behind the orange flash of Firepaw’s fur. Ravenpaw burst through the ferns and raced after his Clanmates. They were running much faster now, so quickly that the colors of the forest were a blur of green, brown, and pale gold.

They whisked through the undergrowth, following paths that grew narrower and narrower, but even the densest clump of brambles didn’t slow them down. Smooth gray shapes loomed up and vanished in a heartbeat. *I didn’t know we were heading toward Snakerocks*, Ravenpaw thought in surprise. Then they were pelting next to the Thunderpath, monsters roaring alongside them, but the apprentices were too quick; they were leaving the howling yellow-eyed monsters behind.

Now they were beside the river, brown and churning and flecked with foam. The trail along the bank was little more than the thickness of a reed, slippery with wet green moss, but the cats didn’t falter, not even when stiff green stalks lashed against their fur.

I wish we could run like this forever! thought Ravenpaw. His legs weren't tired at all, his paws were lighter than dried leaves, and he was breathing as easily as if he were lying in his nest.

In front of him, Firepaw had reached the base of Sunningrocks, the vast mound of stones that stood beside the river. Firepaw swarmed up the rocks without slowing down. Graypaw and Ravenpaw reached the top only a moment behind him, and all three cats stood side by side, looking out across the trees.

"There is no better place than ThunderClan!" Firepaw declared.

"ThunderClan!" Graypaw echoed.

Ravenpaw opened his mouth to join in, but a raindrop splashed onto his muzzle, making him jump. The sky was still blue and cloudless, and the sun blazed on his black fur, but out of nowhere rain was falling, heavier and heavier.

"You're getting wet!" grumbled a voice close to Ravenpaw's ear. A paw jabbed him in his flank, and he rolled over to see Barley standing over him. Behind his friend's head he could see pale gray sky through a crack in the barn roof. Another trickle of raindrops landed on the back of his neck, and Ravenpaw jumped out of his nest with a hiss.

"I thought you checked the roof before we made our nests last night," he muttered. His dream still tugged at the edges of his mind, and he was convinced he could smell the scent of his old friends close by.

"Don't be such a grouch," Barley teased. "Do you want

me to go climbing over the whole roof every night before you go to sleep, just to make sure you won't get wet? Come over here where it's dry."

He patted the hay where he was lying. Ravenpaw stayed where he was for a moment, halted by a sharp stabbing pain in his belly.

Barley pricked his ears. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Ravenpaw mewed. "It's probably that mouse you caught two sunrises ago. I told you it didn't look right."

Barley squinted up at the gap in the roof. "I don't think this rain is going to last," he meowed. "Would you like to go to the forest today? Once the weather turns, it won't be so easy to get there, and we haven't been there in moons."

Ravenpaw tasted the air. He could smell leaf-bare approaching, cold and crisp like stone. "Yes, I'd like that," he mewed. He stretched out his front legs and arched his back, curling his tail until it brushed his ears. The pain in his belly had subsided to a dull ache, and Ravenpaw hoped that a walk to the forest would get rid of it completely.

They sprang down the stacked hay to where Barley had hidden the remains of the pigeon he had caught the day before. Ravenpaw wasn't hungry—his belly felt strangely full—but he picked at a wing when he felt Barley's gaze boring into his pelt. When Barley had finished cleaning his whiskers, they slipped through a hole in the wall and padded through the long grass that grew beside the barn. The rain had stopped, and the clouds were thinning to reveal slender strips of blue.

Barley paused at the edge of a stretch of pale stone. Faint barks were coming from one of the fields beyond the Twoleg den, suggesting that the dogs were far away, so the cats trotted across the stone and plunged into the hedge. Barley led the way, his big paws leaving prints in the damp earth. Ravenpaw tried to put his feet into the same imprints, but Barley's legs were longer than his. He had to trot to keep up.

A few cows lifted their heads and watched as the cats crossed the field. Ravenpaw had been scared of the huge black-and-white creatures at first, but now he regarded them with a sort of affection. He was so used to seeing them around, they almost felt like his Clanmates.

For a moment he was back in his dream, standing on top of Sunningrocks and looking down over the forest where he had been born. *I wonder where Firestar and Graystripe are now?* It had been a long, long time since they were apprentices together. When Ravenpaw had first left ThunderClan, they had visited him sometimes, but then Firestar had led all four Clans out of the forest when the giant Thunderpath came. Graystripe had disappeared before that, stolen by Twolegs. After the Clans had gone, Ravenpaw had seen Graystripe once, escaped from the Twolegs and looking for ThunderClan, and he'd pointed him in the direction they had gone. He hoped Graystripe had found them.

Ravenpaw shivered. *Wherever you are, I hope you are safe, well fed, and at peace. May StarClan light your paths,*

always.

“Come on!” Barley bounded back to him. “Let’s check that the tunnel isn’t flooded.”

The Thunderpath was much broader than it had been when Ravenpaw had first crossed it as an apprentice. The hill on the far side had been gouged out, leaving huge scars in the earth. Even this close to dawn, the Thunderpath teemed like a river of gleaming fish, with monsters growling up and down. It was too wide for cats to cross, so instead Barley and Ravenpaw used a narrow tunnel that ran underneath. It was dark and damp, and just big enough for a badger to squeeze through; mercifully Ravenpaw hadn’t come face-to-face with one of those in the narrow space.

The tunnel did sometimes fill with water after heavy rain, but today there was nothing more than a muddy trickle running along the bottom. Taking a deep breath, Barley plunged in. Ravenpaw gritted his teeth and followed, hating the way the tunnel wrapped around him. The air thrummed with the noise of the monsters overhead, and it was impossible to think of anything but pressing forward to the cold, clean air on the other side.

Ravenpaw burst out at a run and almost crashed into Barley. They were at the edge of a wall of dense brambles. There was no way through; instead they had to creep along the edge, following the land as it rose steeply above the Thunderpath. The earth had been ripped away here to make way for the new stone path, and the broad sweep of moor had become a sheer cliff that echoed with the roar of

monsters.

Ears flattened against his head, Ravenpaw set off up the slope. The noise faded a little as he scrambled to the top of the cliff, where a strip of short, windblown grass led down to the trees. The breeze was stronger up here, tugging at Ravenpaw's black fur. Familiar scents filled his mouth, bringing memories tumbling into his mind: the ravine, Gatherings, the scent of the medicine cat's den, training with Tigerclaw . . .

Ravenpaw shook himself. There was a reason he had left the forest.

He padded to the edge of a shallow dip surrounded by gorse and small boulders. Ravenpaw had a feeling this used to be the WindClan camp, but the images in his mind were hazy, and there was no trace of cats here now. Behind him, Barley growled as a gust of wind almost knocked him off his paws.

"Let's get into the shelter of the trees," he called. He ran across the stretch of grass, his black-and-white fur distinct against the green. Ravenpaw glanced into the dip once more before following. Had WindClan survived the journey? Had any of the Clans?

The bracken under the trees felt still and quiet after the open moor. Ravenpaw paused to catch his breath, listening to the tiny rustles of unseen prey. Above his head, tangled branches hid the sky. The cats pushed their way through the brittle fronds until new sounds assailed their ears: the rumble of monsters moving more slowly, as well as the

shouts of Twolegs.

Ravenpaw reached the edge of the trees and looked down. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had stood here and seen four huge oaks in moonlight. The hollow had vanished, flattened out to make room for squat, silver dens and a broad expanse of black stone filled with rows of silent monsters. The air was thick with fumes and the stench of something hot and almost prey-like but unappealing, and Ravenpaw's stomach curdled.

Barley started pushing his way into the bracken along the top of the slope. Ravenpaw knew he was following an ancient path that had once led around the top of the hollow and down through the trees to the ThunderClan border. When the Clans had been here, Barley wouldn't have dreamed of walking confidently through this territory. Now that the Twolegs had taken it over, there were no borders left, no patrols for a loner to fear.

They left the silver dens behind and pushed deeper into the trees. The paths once used by ThunderClan were faint and overgrown. A huge mound of brambles covered pale gray boulders that jolted Ravenpaw back to his dream: This must be Snakerocks, though the snakes seemed long gone as well. A few pine trees began to appear among the oaks and beeches, and something about the curve of the almost invisible path felt achingly familiar beneath Ravenpaw's feet.

"Watch out!" yowled Barley, springing forward and blocking Ravenpaw with his shoulder. Ravenpaw blinked and looked down. The ground gave way a mouse-length in

front of him, plunging into a narrow hollow filled with thorns and half-grown trees.

“It’s the ravine,” Ravenpaw whispered. “The place where I was born!”



CHAPTER TWO



“Do you think we can get down?” mewed Barley. He started to push his way under the brambles.

“Wait,” Ravenpaw ordered. “There should be a path.” He trotted along the slope until he found a tiny gap between two bushes. “Here it is.” He hesitated for a heartbeat, wondering what memories might be waiting for him below. *The past can’t hurt me now.* He ducked and squeezed into the space, tucking in his tail to avoid catching it on brambles. He could hear Barley following.

The slope beneath Ravenpaw’s paws felt instantly familiar. There was the half-buried flint with a sharp edge; here was the narrow trench worn by the flow of rainwater. *The ravine!* In all his visits to the forest since the Clans had left, Ravenpaw had never come back to this spot before. The noise of the monsters was so faint he could barely hear it, and for a moment Ravenpaw wondered why Firestar had abandoned his home. There was still room for ThunderClan to live here!

But Firestar had wanted to save all four Clans. *One Clan alone will always struggle*, he had told Ravenpaw in a quiet moment in the barn. Something in his words had made Ravenpaw question him; it was as if Firestar knew exactly how difficult it was for a single Clan to survive on its own.

And that had led to one of the most extraordinary stories Ravenpaw had ever heard: about a vision that had sent Firestar and Sandstorm on a journey to save a long-forgotten fifth Clan. Ravenpaw wondered if SkyClan had survived without the protection of other Clans around it. In his mind's eye he could almost picture the sandy gorge as Firestar had described it all those moons ago.

Barley jolted Ravenpaw back to the present. The black-and-white tom had pushed ahead as they picked their way through the remains of a long-dead gorse bush—*I think this was the entrance*, Ravenpaw recalled with a thrill—and now he was standing in a tiny space, not much bigger than their combined nests.

“Was this your camp?” Barley asked in astonishment.

Ravenpaw looked at the densely packed brambles, the brittle ferns that surrounded a small gray boulder, and the larger rock that was half swallowed by ivy. “Yes,” he breathed. “Yes, this was our home.”

He spun around, the brambles disappearing in his mind, uncovering the expanse of the clearing fringed by tidy dens and the lush green ferns that led to Yellowfang's store of herbs. He saw Bluestar spring to the top of the Highrock, her blue-gray fur thick and lustrous in the sun, her voice clear and steady as she summoned the Clan.

“Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here for a Clan meeting!”

“What did you say?” Barley half turned from where he was sniffing at a blackberry-studded thicket. Ravenpaw

thought that might have been the nursery, but he couldn't be sure.

"I was just remembering," he meowed. To his relief, nothing about the camp reminded him of the troubles that had driven him out of the forest. Instead he felt excited, full of barely contained energy, the way he had felt when he had first been made an apprentice. "Did I tell you about my first hunting session? I tracked a scent all the way to Sunningrocks, but it turned out to be a Twoleg and his dog! Dustpaw dared me to attack them, but Graypaw said Tigerclaw would be furious if I filled the fresh-kill pile with my first-ever catch!"

Ravenpaw rolled a piece of moss under his paw as more memories surged inside him like leaves unfurling. "Once, I was cleaning out the elders' nests and I picked up a tick on my muzzle. Graypaw had to sit on me while Spottedleaf put mouse bile on it! That stuff was disgusting!"

He paused when he noticed that Barley was looking at him strangely. "What's wrong?"

Barley flicked the tip of his tail. "I'm happy that you have some good memories from your time with the Clan. But . . . but don't forget why you left. Tigerclaw would have murdered you if you'd stayed. He knew you had seen him killing Redtail."

Ravenpaw was startled by the emotion in Barley's voice. He ran over and pressed his shoulder against Barley's warm flank. "Don't ever think that I regret leaving the forest!" he hissed. "Firestar and Graystripe saved my life when they

brought me to you. Since then, I've never wanted to be anywhere but by your side. It's just . . . I never expected to be able to come back and remember the good things about being in ThunderClan. If it helps block out some of the bad memories, then I'll be glad."

Barley licked the top of his head. "I'll be glad too. Where do you want to go next?"

"I don't know. Let's see where we end up!"

Ravenpaw cast one glance back at the Highrock, then scrambled back up the steep slope. A spatter of rain penetrated the branches, so he decided to stay under the trees rather than follow the trail that led out of the forest to Sunningrocks. Part of him didn't want to see if it had been swallowed up by greenery like the rest of the familiar landmarks; he preferred to remember it as it had been in his dream: a perfect, clear viewing point for the whole of the territory.

They trotted side by side along a path marked by deer hooves and the occasional sweep of a fox's tail. Pine trees took over the woods, and through the tidy lines of their trunks Ravenpaw glimpsed the pale swath of wooden fence that marked the boundary with Twolegplace. As they drew closer, pungent scents of Twoleg dens, monster fumes, and kittypets washed over them.

"They still don't come very far into the forest," Ravenpaw commented as he paused by a tree stump to sniff a kittypet mark.

Barley glanced over his shoulder at the dense tangle of

trees. "I can't imagine it looks more inviting now than it did when the Clans were here. Kittypets have everything they want from their Twolegs, don't they? Food, shelter, company, all without having to make any effort."

Ravenpaw looked sideways at his friend. "Kind of like us, then," he teased.

Barley bristled. "At least we catch our own prey!"

Ravenpaw purred, though another jab of pain in his belly reminded him that he needed to be more careful about what he ate. The barn provided good hunting, but he couldn't assume that every catch would make good fresh-kill.

They padded side by side through the long grass at the base of the wooden fence. It felt cool and welcoming under Ravenpaw's feet, and he reflected that it had been a long time since he had walked this far. Life on the farm had made him soft!

Suddenly there was a hiss above their heads.

"Oi! You down there! What are you doing?"

Ravenpaw and Barley looked up. A ragged-furred brown tabby was crouched on top of the fence, glaring down at them. A scar across his muzzle and notches in his ears suggested that he wasn't afraid of a fight.

"We're just passing through," Barley called. "Don't worry."

In a flash the tabby tom sprang down from the fence and blocked their path. His tail lashed. "I'll decide what I worry about, thank you," he growled. He stretched out his neck and sniffed. "You're not from around here. You don't smell

like kittypets, but you don't smell like the woods, either. Who are you?"

"We live on a farm," Barley began, but Ravenpaw cut him off.

"Calm down. We're not doing anyone any harm," he meowed.

The tabby curled his lip. "I don't like the look of you," he snarled. "This is my home"—he nodded to the Twoleg den on the other side of the fence—"and I claim all hunting rights in this part of the woods. You're not welcome."

And you're ridiculous, thought Ravenpaw. But he was tired and his belly hurt, and a fight was the last thing he wanted. "Come on," he muttered to Barley. "Let's go."

They started to walk around the kittypet, but he sprang after them, claws unsheathed. "You don't think you're getting away that easily, do you?" He let out a yowl, and in a heartbeat more faces popped up along the fence.

Ravenpaw scanned them in alarm. Kittypets, yes, but also one or two who looked too mean and scrawny to share Twoleg dens.

"I think we should get out of here," he whispered to Barley, who nodded.

"No need for a fight," Barley announced. "We're leaving."

Ravenpaw and Barley set off again, but the wooden fence rattled behind them as several cats jumped down into the forest.

"Run!" screeched Ravenpaw, and without looking back,

he and Barley pelted along the edge of the trees. Ravenpaw felt his chest start to burn, and the ache in his belly sharpened with every footstep. From the noises behind them he could tell that some of the cats had given up, but enough stayed in pursuit to keep Ravenpaw in flight. His fighting days were long gone; all he wanted to do was get out of this place, back to the safety of the barn.

They followed the long curve of the fence until the woods fell away and the ground dropped down beside them to the vast, stench-filled Thunderpath. They were running along a narrow strip of earth now, trapped by the high fence on one side and a cliff on the other. The barn lay in the other direction, and Ravenpaw started to wonder if they would ever find their way back.

Ravenpaw felt his legs start to slow. Beside him, Barley slowed too. "Keep going, Ravenpaw!" he panted. There was a joyful yowl behind them, as if the tabby tom could tell his prey was weakening.

"What is going on?" The air was split with a shriek from the top of the fence, and an orange shape slammed onto the ground at Ravenpaw's heels. He stumbled to a halt and spun around to see a she-cat arching her back and hissing, her eyes furious slits. *Oh, great. Another angry kittypet.*

"Violet!" Barley gasped.

Ravenpaw blinked. *It's Barley's sister!*

"Barley!" cried the orange cat. In a heartbeat, she whipped around to face the cats in pursuit. "Stop right there, Madric!" she ordered.

To Ravenpaw's surprise, the brown tabby skidded to a stop. The two cats behind almost crashed into him. "Go away, Violet," he snarled. "These cats were trespassing!"

"Nonsense!" spat Violet. "This is my brother, Barley, and his friend Ravenpaw. They are welcome anywhere, do you understand?" She flattened her ears at the tabby tom. "*Anywhere.*"

The tabby hissed, but he flicked his tail at the cats who had kept pace with him. "Come on," he growled. "I don't think they'll bother us again." He narrowed his eyes at Ravenpaw. "You're way out of your depth here, old cat," he jeered. "Go back to your nest."

Violet stepped in front of him. "Enough," she snapped. With a final growl, the hostile cats turned and trotted away. Violet tipped her head to one side, studying Barley and Ravenpaw. "Well, you two looked better the last time I saw you."

Barley shrugged. "Our bones are getting a little old for this kind of thing," he admitted. His eyes brightened, and he rubbed his head against Violet's cheek. "It's been too long, sister! How are you?"

"I'm well!" she declared. "And I have something to show you!" She led the way to a hole at the foot of the fence. Before squeezing through, she glanced back at Ravenpaw. "Are you okay? Did one of those cats injure you?"

Ravenpaw shook his head, still breathless.

They ducked through the fence and emerged into an enclosed space of smooth green grass edged with strong-

smelling bushes. Ravenpaw felt his skin prickle. A Twoleg den was the last place he wanted to be.

"It's okay," Violet mewed as if she sensed his hesitation. "We're not going inside, and my housefolk aren't home anyway."

She bounded across the grass and jumped onto a wooden platform that stretched along the side of the red stone den. There was a bundle of soft, brightly colored pelts at one side. As Ravenpaw drew nearer, he saw the pelts quiver, and he picked up a scent he hadn't smelled in a long, long time . . .

"I'm back, poppets!" Violet called.

Several tiny faces burrowed out of the pelts. *Kits!* Ravenpaw was whisked back to memories of the nursery: the smell of milk clinging to his fur, the looming, gentle shape of his mother.

"Oh, wow," breathed Barley as sturdy little bodies swarmed around him, mewling and purring and tugging at his fur with tiny sharp teeth.

"This is my brother, Barley," Violet announced. "And his friend Ravenpaw. Be gentle, Bella!" she pleaded as a pale orange she-kit reached up and fastened her claws into Ravenpaw's ear.

Ravenpaw used his front paw to pry her off and placed her back on the ground. Huge green eyes stared up at him curiously. *She looks just like Firestar!*

"Do you and Barley have kits?" she mewed.

"Er, no," Ravenpaw answered.

She tipped her head to one side. "Where do you live? What are your housefolk like? Why haven't you come to see us before?"

"So many questions!" chided Violet, sweeping her tail around her daughter. "Ravenpaw, this is Bella. She started talking before any of the others, and I'm not sure when she'll stop." Her voice was warm and full of love as she gazed down at the little orange cat.

Ravenpaw felt something tugging at his tail. A gray tabby tom clutched the tip between his paws and grappled with it. Ravenpaw flicked his tail and the kit rolled away. He almost fell off the wooden platform, and Violet had to leap to stop him.

"Oh, Riley," she sighed. "Can you try to be a bit less clumsy, please?"

"It was my fault," Ravenpaw mewed quickly. "Good fighting," he commented to Riley, who was tottering back on sturdy legs to have another go at his tail. In his mind, Ravenpaw pictured Graystripe as a kit, almost exactly the same color, except that his eyes had been amber while Riley's were a clear, piercing blue.

Barley was trying to remove a pair of kits from the top of his head.

"Lulu, Patch, get down!" Violet ordered. She shot an exasperated glance at Ravenpaw. "I'm so sorry. I think they're a bit overexcited by your visit."

"We should be going anyway," meowed Barley. "It's a long way back to the farm."

“The farm?” echoed Bella. “What’s that?”

“It’s where we live,” mewed Ravenpaw. “Far away, on the other side of the Thunderpath. It’s a place with sheep and cows, and lots of fields.”

Riley screwed up his face. “What is a sheep and cow? And a field?”

“We’ll visit them one day,” Violet promised, touching the tip of her tail to his dark gray ear. “Now go lie down for your nap.” She herded the kits back to the pile of pelts.

“I’m not even the tiniest bit sleepy,” Ravenpaw heard Bella declare.

Violet shooed them into a huddle of furry bodies, then returned to Barley and Ravenpaw. “It was really good to see you,” she meowed. “Please, come again any time. Or maybe we’ll visit you!”

Barley purred. “You would be very welcome.” He reached out and touched his chin to the top of his sister’s head. “You’re a wonderful mother. I’m so pleased for you.”

“Thank you.” Violet glanced at her kits, squirming and snuffling among the pelts. “They mean the world to me. Now go safely, and try to stay out of Madric’s way. I’d like to say that he’s all snarl and no bite, but I don’t trust him.”

“We won’t go back that way,” Ravenpaw promised. He stroked Violet’s flank with the tip of his tail. “Good-bye, and don’t let those kits wear you out!” Then he turned to Barley. His paws ached with tiredness and his belly was still sore, but the thought of returning to the barn gave him energy. “We’ve had enough adventures for a lifetime today! Let’s go

home.”



CHAPTER THREE



Leaf-bare rattled the last dry leaves from the trees and hedges and covered the fields in a thick pelt of snow. Ravenpaw and Barley peeped out at the dense white flakes tumbling silently from the sky. There were still plenty of mice to eat inside the barn, and as the stock of hay shrank, hunting became easier, with fewer places for prey to hide.

The pain in Ravenpaw's belly became a familiar throb, worse if he ate too much or slept in a cold draft. He could forget about it most of the time. A wrench to his shoulder, from an overzealous game of chase up and down the hay with Barley, was more of a nuisance. Ravenpaw had missed his footing and fallen several fox-lengths onto the stone floor. Barley was beside him in a heartbeat, licking his flank, urging him to keep still.

Ravenpaw flexed each paw in turn and opened his eyes. "I'll live," he grunted. But when he stood up, his shoulder burned, and he could hardly put his paw to the ground. Barley helped him to their nest and curled his body around him, soft and hay-scented and comforting.

Ravenpaw sighed. "I'm getting old."

"Mouse-brain," Barley purred affectionately. "I've seen at least two more leaf-bares than you, and I'm not old!"

Ravenpaw let his eyes close. "Stay with me while I

sleep?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Barley promised, settling his chin more comfortably into Ravenpaw’s black fur.

Neither am I, Ravenpaw thought.

Leaf-bare passed, the snow melted, and the days grew almost imperceptibly longer, bringing the hint of new green leaves along the hedgerows. Ravenpaw’s shoulder healed, and he and Barley started to hunt outside again, prowling the fields at twilight as huge brown-and-white owls swooped over their heads.

One evening, as they were making the most of the first genuinely warm day of sunshine, they were startled by a muffled yowl.

“Barley! Ravenpaw!”

Ravenpaw looked around. The cry seemed to come from farther up the hedgerow. He crouched down and prowled along the edge of the field, mouth open to scent the air. There were cats up ahead, definitely. Soft-furred, with a hint of kittypet . . .

“It’s us!” Two fluffed-up shapes sprang out of the hedge in front of Ravenpaw, one pale ginger and the other a dove-gray tabby.

Ravenpaw blinked in surprise. “Riley? Bella? What are you doing here?”

A taller shape emerged behind them. “They insisted on coming to see you,” Violet explained, sounding weary. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Barley bounded up to touch noses with his sister. "Mind? Of course not! It's great to see you!" He looked at Riley and Bella, who were sniffing a tall blade of grass. "But . . . weren't there more of them last time?"

Violet's eyes clouded. "Lulu and Patch have gone to a new home." She blinked. "But we still see them sometimes, and they are very happy. At least I know they are together."

Bella bounced up to Ravenpaw. She had grown a lot since their first meeting; her head was up to his shoulder. She was taller than her brother, more angular, and her chin tapered to a point that suggested a strong will. Riley still had traces of his fluffy kit pelt, but he had broad shoulders and sturdy legs.

"Can we go to the farm?" Bella pleaded. "It's taken ages to get here, and I want to catch a mouse!"

"I'm so hungry I could die!" Riley mewed.

"Of course you can come to our home," Barley purred. "You're welcome to stay as long as you want. We have plenty of food, and warm places for you to sleep."

Violet's nostrils flared. "It's all right; we won't trouble you for more than a night. I don't want our housefolk to worry about us too much."

They headed to the barn, Riley and Bella racing ahead and stopping every time they saw something new. At the sight of their first cow, their eyes bugged out so much that Ravenpaw had to hide a laugh.

"It's huge!" Bella gasped.

"Are you sure it's friendly?" Riley whispered, gazing at

the animal at the other side of the field.

“Well, it won’t want to talk to you,” meowed Ravenpaw. “But I’m fairly certain they don’t eat cats. What do you think, Barley?”

The black-and-white tom pretended to ponder for a moment. “There was that one time you nearly got your tail bitten off . . .,” he mewed.

“What?” Violet shrieked.

“That sounds amazing!” mewed Bella. “Tell us about it, Ravenpaw! Did you use your warrior moves to fight the cow?”

Violet looked flustered. “I’m sorry, they’re obsessed with stories about the Clans that used to live in the forest. One of the other kittypets talks about them—I think he met you once, actually. His name is Smudge. Black-and-white, thick fur?”

Ravenpaw nodded, memories pooling around him once more. “Yes, he was a friend of Firestar’s from before he joined ThunderClan.”

“We want to join ThunderClan too!” Riley announced. “We’re really brave, and good at fighting, and I can creep so quietly that Bella doesn’t even know I’m there!”

“I do too!” Bella snorted. “You’re as loud as . . . as . . .”

A volley of barking split the air, making all the cats jump.

“As those dogs!” Bella declared.

Violet crouched down, ready to flee, but Barley rested his tail on her shoulder. “It’s all right; they’re tied up. They like the sound of their own voices, that’s all.”

The dogs continued to bark until a Twoleg hollered from inside the red stone den. Then they fell quiet.

“Come on, let’s show you the barn,” meowed Ravenpaw. The kits were quiet and wide-eyed when they first entered the huge wooden den. Nearly all the hay was gone now, and the far end of the barn was thick with shadows.

Violet shuddered. “It’s a bit creepy.”

Barley purred. “Don’t worry; you’re safe with us. Those ferocious mice won’t attack you while we’re here.”

“Ferocious mice?” Bella echoed, looking delighted.

“Not really,” Ravenpaw meowed. “But they can be tough to catch sometimes. Would you like to watch me hunt?”

“Yes, please!” Riley and Bella mewed.

“I’ll show you our nest,” Barley told Violet. “You can rest there while Ravenpaw finds you something to eat.”

Ravenpaw led the kits to the back of the barn, where the shadows were so thick he could almost feel them pressing down on his fur. Both young cats did their best to tread quietly; Bella was very light on her paws, and Riley did better than Ravenpaw was expecting, given his bulkier frame. The scent of mice hung on the air. Ravenpaw picked out a trail that seemed fresh and followed it into a corner.

“Keep still,” he whispered to Riley and Bella as he crept forward. He dropped into a hunter’s crouch and stalked toward the tiny hole where the mouse scent was strongest. His recently injured shoulder twinged, so he shifted his weight onto his other three legs. There was a tiny scrabble at the very edge of his hearing. A pointed nose appeared,

whiskers twitching. Then the mouse shot out of the hole.

Ravenpaw pounced and killed the mouse with a bite to its neck. *I thank StarClan for sending this prey*, he thought.

“What did you say?” Riley called. He was standing on tiptoe, craning his neck to see if Ravenpaw had made the catch.

Ravenpaw straightened up with the mouse at his feet. He hadn’t realized he had spoken out loud. He couldn’t remember the last time he had thanked StarClan for prey. “Nothing,” he meowed. “Would you like to carry it back?”

Bouncing with excitement, Riley and Bella dragged the mouse back to the pile of hay. Violet looked astonished.

“Did you catch that yourself?”

Bella let go of her end of the mouse. “No,” she panted. “But we watched Ravenpaw do it! He was brilliant!”

“He hunts like a real warrior!” Riley declared. Ravenpaw purred with amusement. When had this kittypet ever seen a warrior hunt?

“Good catch,” Barley remarked.

“When I’m a warrior, I’m going to hunt just like Ravenpaw,” Bella vowed.

“Not this again, Bella.” Violet sighed. “There aren’t any warriors now, remember?” She glanced at Ravenpaw. “I know you used to be one, of course, but you aren’t anymore, right?”

Ravenpaw shook his head. “No, no, I’m not a warrior.”

Riley glared. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t be! You could train us, Ravenpaw! We’d work really hard, I

promise!”

Bella nodded. “We’d do everything you said, practice all the battle tactics and the hunting moves. I wouldn’t even mind doing dawn patrols!”

Ravenpaw blinked. “Wow. Smudge has told you a lot.”

“Oh, yes,” mewed Riley. “He said we could be warriors just like Firestar.”

“Except that ThunderClan is gone,” Violet put in. “Smudge has no right to encourage these silly daydreams. I don’t mind you practicing your hunting and fighting with each other, as long as no one gets hurt. But you’re going to find good homes and be kittypets, just like me, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

But there is! Ravenpaw found himself wanting to reply. *Why would any cat want to be a kittypet when they could live outside, hunting for themselves, keeping themselves safe, seeing so much more than the confines of a Twoleg den?*

Barley was tugging pieces of loose hay into piles. “Come on, you should eat while the mouse is still warm. Then you can sleep here with us tonight.”

“We’ll leave at dawn,” Violet meowed firmly. “We need to get home before our housefolk think we’ve gone forever.”

“But we don’t want to go home,” whispered Bella.

“It’s your home, not ours,” Riley muttered. “We want to be warriors!”



CHAPTER FOUR



Ravenpaw and Barley traveled as far as the Thunderpath with Violet and the kits. Riley and Bella dragged their paws, insisting on stopping to sniff every stalk of grass and every rabbit hole. “Come on, you two!” Violet meowed. “If you don’t hurry up, I’ll leave you behind!”

“I wish you would,” Riley muttered.

“Don’t say that,” Ravenpaw chided. “She’s your mother and she loves you very much. Of course she wants you to go home with her.”

The young tom fixed his clear blue gaze on Ravenpaw. “There’s nothing wrong with being a kittypet. But Bella and I were born to be warriors. Please help us, Ravenpaw! You’re the only warrior left in the forest!”

“I’m not a warrior, and I don’t live in the forest,” Ravenpaw mewed. “My home is with Barley now.”

“But you could train us! We could start our own Clan!” Bella pleaded.

Violet bounded over to them and licked the top of Bella’s head. “Stop pestering Ravenpaw. Look, we’ve reached the tunnel. We need to let Ravenpaw and Barley go home now.” She ushered them away.

Bella glanced back at Ravenpaw. “Please!” she begged. “Just think about it!”

Then she ducked into the tunnel and vanished behind her brother. Violet followed, her orange tail whisking out of sight.

“Think about what?” Barley mewed in Ravenpaw’s ear.

“Oh, nothing. Just their crazy idea about becoming warriors. They think I could train them.”

Barley let out a huff of amusement. “Ah, kits. Did we have such mouse-brained ideas at that age?”

“Well, I certainly wanted to be a warrior,” Ravenpaw commented.

“That’s different. You were born in ThunderClan.” Barley pushed his way through the hedge and waited for Ravenpaw to join him. “Should we hunt out here?” He sniffed the air. “I think it’s going to rain later.” Before Ravenpaw could reply, he bounded along the edge of the field, his black-and-white tail sticking up in the air.

Ravenpaw watched him, his head whirling. Was it really such a crazy idea, that he should train Riley and Bella to be warriors? His memories had never seemed more vivid than they were now. Returning to the ravine before leaf-bare had brought back so much of his former life: hunting techniques, the best way to tackle an enemy in battle, how to mark out a territory. And last night he had found himself thanking StarClan after catching that mouse. Were his warrior ancestors watching over him even now? Surely they would have followed the four Clans to their new home.

Ravenpaw shivered, suddenly feeling very alone. His Clanmates had vanished, and he wasn’t a warrior anymore.

Yet he remembered so much about hunting and fighting and going on patrol. He was happy with Barley—happier than he had ever been in the forest—but he didn't regret being Clanborn for a moment. Who was he to tell Riley and Bella that they shouldn't dream of becoming warriors?

Ravenpaw slept badly that night. His belly hurt, and he had only just dropped off when he was woken by an owl hooting. He wriggled deeper into the hay, burying his muzzle in Barley's soft fur. But sleep seemed far out of reach, and instead his mind spun with thoughts of Riley and Bella. From what he had seen, Ravenpaw thought that any Clan would be fortunate to have them. They were brave, quick, and eager to learn. He wished he could send them to ThunderClan, but he had no idea where his former Clanmates were.

"You're right," breathed a voice in his ear. "They are too far away now."

Ravenpaw sat bolt upright. "Who's there?"

A sweet, slightly watery scent wreathed around him. "Don't be alarmed. It's Silverstream."

"Silverstream?" Ravenpaw whipped his head around. A silver tabby she-cat sat beside him, her tail curled neatly over her paws. Her blue eyes gleamed in the half-light. "From RiverClan?"

"Yes, a long time ago," came the reply.

Ravenpaw glanced down at Barley. He was still sleeping, his flank rising and falling evenly.

“You are dreaming. We won’t disturb him.”

Ravenpaw strained to see the she-cat more clearly, but her pelt shimmered against the hay behind her, and he felt that if he tried to touch her, his paw would slip right through. “Why are you in my dream?” he asked.

“Because StarClan has not forgotten you. Not all of us left the forest. I have been watching you with Riley and Bella, and I can see that they would make good warriors. But they need your help, Ravenpaw.”

“You really think so?”

The she-cat blinked at him, her eyes like shining blue moons. “Of course. You changed the course of your life once. There is no better cat to help Riley and Bella follow their hearts. Every cat deserves to choose their own path.”

“But what can I do? There are no Clans left in the forest.”

Silverstream paused and stared into the shadows at the edge of the barn. “There is another Clan close by. Do you remember Firestar telling you about it?”

“SkyClan!” Ravenpaw nodded. “He and Sandstorm went there after the battle with BloodClan. But I don’t know where it is, only that they followed the river past Highstones. I don’t even know if SkyClan has survived this long.”

“They have survived, and they can help these young cats find their destiny. Go with them, Ravenpaw. Show them that they can become warriors.”

“What if SkyClan doesn’t want any more warriors?” Ravenpaw argued. “What if we get lost? I’m not the right cat

for something like this.”

“A true warrior will do anything for his Clanmates.” Silverstream was growing fainter now, little more than a wash of glittering light against the shadows.

“I’m not a warrior!” Ravenpaw protested. But it was too late. Silverstream had vanished.

Barley stirred. “Wha’s wrong?” he mumbled.

“Go back to sleep,” Ravenpaw whispered, stroking his paw along Barley’s flank. “All is well.” He lay down and closed his eyes. “I am not a warrior,” he repeated under his breath.

The newleaf sun was so strong the following morning that the barn felt hot and stuffy. The cats made their way outside to a sheltered spot on top of a stack of logs. Barley stretched out flat on his side, the tip of his tail twitching as a fly buzzed around him.

Ravenpaw couldn’t settle. His mind was too full of his dream, of Riley and Bella, of the possibility of finding SkyClan somewhere upriver.

“Stop fidgeting!” Barley grunted. “Or go do something useful and fetch me a thrush. I’m bored of eating mice.”

Ravenpaw ran his paw over a piece of bark. “I want to take Riley and Bella to SkyClan.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Do you remember me telling you about the Clan that Firestar and Sandstorm found upriver? It was driven out of the forest a long time ago, but StarClan sent them to restore

it and teach the cats how to live like warriors again.”

“SkyClan. I remember.”

“Well, I think that’s Riley’s and Bella’s best chance of becoming warriors.”

Barley sat up. “But you’ve never been to SkyClan.”

“I know where it is,” Ravenpaw argued. “Roughly. And there’s something else about SkyClan. Firestar told me that they have warriors who are also kittypets, who spend half their time in a Twolegplace. Don’t you think that might make them more welcoming to Riley and Bella?”

Barley stared at him. “Have you got dandelion fluff in your brain? You want to go on a journey who-knows-where because my sister’s kits have decided they don’t want to be kittypets? You’re joking, right?”

Ravenpaw felt his heart beat faster. “I’m not joking. I . . . I have to do this. For Riley and Bella, and for myself. I owe it to ThunderClan.”

Barley flattened his ears. “You owe ThunderClan nothing. ThunderClan has nothing to do with Riley and Bella! Anyway, Violet will never agree to it.”

“I don’t think it’s Violet’s decision to make,” Ravenpaw meowed.

“Good luck changing her mind,” Barley grunted. “Look, I like those youngsters as much as you do. But they’re not forestborn; they’re kittypets. It’s not fair to encourage them in these crazy ideas.”

“It’s not a crazy idea.”

Barley stood up and narrowed his eyes. “It’s far too

dangerous. Riley and Bella know nothing about surviving outside their Twoleg den. And your shoulder has only just healed!”

“My shoulder is fine,” Ravenpaw hissed.

“But I thought you were happy here,” Barley whispered.

The hurt in his old friend’s eyes was too much for Ravenpaw to bear. He looked away. “I am happy. I have been since the moment I first arrived. But by taking me in, you gave me the chance to make a choice, don’t you see? Riley and Bella want to choose their own paths, too. I am the only cat who can help them. I . . . I hoped you’d come with us.”

Barley walked to the edge of the woodpile. “I think you’re a fool,” he growled. “You’re putting all three of you in danger because of some stupid kits’ dreams. I won’t come with you, and I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

He jumped down into the long grass, leaving Ravenpaw staring after him in dismay.

“We’re going to be warriors!” Bella squeaked. “Thank you, Ravenpaw!” She flung herself at him, almost knocking him off the wooden platform. Riley bounced on his paws, purring loudly.

Behind them, Violet’s eyes were wide with horror. “What do you mean, you know of a Clan that will take them? I thought you didn’t know where the Clans had gone.”

“This is a different Clan,” Ravenpaw explained. “One that’s much closer, and friendlier to kittypets.” His pelt burned under the force of Violet’s gaze. “It will be up to

SkyClan to decide if they want to train Riley and Bella as warriors. If they don't, then I'll bring them home again."

It sounded so simple, but Ravenpaw couldn't help wondering if Barley was right and his brain had turned to fluff. He winced when he thought of his old friend. They had hardly spoken since their quarrel on the woodpile, and at night Barley had even made a separate nest to sleep in. Ravenpaw hadn't imagined he could feel so much pain without being physically wounded.

He dragged his thoughts back to Violet. He had to convince her that this was the best thing for her kits. Silverstream would never have visited him if she didn't believe it, too.

"You and Barley have lived in the wild," Ravenpaw reminded her. "There is a part of you that knows what it is to be free, to hunt for yourself, to find your own shelter. Why shouldn't Bella and Riley know that too?"

"Because I want to keep them safe!"

"Wait!" Ravenpaw and Violet turned to see Bella staring at them, her green eyes huge. "Riley and I will never be happy as kittypets. You know that. Please, let us go."

Riley nodded. "It's what we want."

Violet's tail drooped. "Oh, my precious kits," she murmured. She rested her chin on Bella's head and met Ravenpaw's gaze. "You're right. I chose to be a kittypet having known the alternative. How can I deny the same choice to my kits?"

"You mean we can go?" Bella gasped.

Violet nodded. "I will think of you every day, my loves. Be the best warriors you can. And if you ever come by this way again, please remember me."

"We'll never forget you!" Bella's voice trembled. "You're the best mother a cat could ever have! I . . . I don't want to go if I'll never see you again."

Violet stepped back. "Courage, little one!" Ravenpaw saw the sadness in her eyes and marveled at how strong her voice sounded. "Partings are always hard, but endings are just the start of something else!" She looked at Ravenpaw. "I'm not a fool. I have seen how they hunt and play fight. I know that, with training, they could be great warriors. But please, until then, keep them safe."

"I will," Ravenpaw promised. He curled his tail at Riley and Bella. "Come on. We have a long journey ahead of us."

He jumped down onto the short green grass. Bella followed, but Riley paused, looking back at his mother. "I will think of you every day," he meowed.

"And I of you," Violet replied. Her eyes were liquid with sadness. "Go well, my darlings. Make me proud."

"We will!" Bella called.

They trotted across the grass and squeezed through the hole in the fence. A gust of wind struck their faces on the other side, flattening their fur and filling their muzzles with the scent of monsters, trees, and distant hills. For a moment Ravenpaw was tempted to push the kits back through the hole. What was he doing, taking them on a journey to an unknown Clan?

Then Riley raced ahead, shouting, “We’re going to be warriors!” Bella sprinted after him, and Ravenpaw followed. These young cats had chosen their destiny, and he had promised Silverstream he’d help them.



CHAPTER FIVE



“You’re really not coming with us?” Ravenpaw spoke quietly so that he wouldn’t disturb Riley and Bella, who were still sleeping. Tendrils of dawn light pierced the walls of the barn, and the air was already warm.

Barley shook his head. “We’ve been over this already,” he mewed. “I think you’re making a massive mistake.”

“And I thought you trusted me!” Ravenpaw retorted. “I’ll come straight back, as soon as I’ve delivered Riley and Bella to SkyClan. Firestar and Sandstorm made this journey safely. There’s no reason I won’t, too.”

“They were warriors,” Barley hissed. He sounded angry, but Ravenpaw could hear the pain beneath his words. “Is that what this is all about? You want to prove that you’re as good as a Clan cat, even though you were only ever an apprentice?”

Ravenpaw flinched. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t believe you’re doing this for Riley and Bella. I think you’re doing it for yourself, because you want to be in a Clan again.”

“You’re wrong!” Ravenpaw gasped.

“Am I? Ever since we went back to the forest, you haven’t stopped going on about what it was like when you lived there. I bet you wish you’d never left!”

Ravenpaw felt his shoulders sag. “You’re being ridiculous. Is this really how it’s going to end, Barley? With us at each other’s throats?”

“You’re the one who’s leaving,” Barley growled.

“Well, you’re making it easier!”

“Is it time to go?”

Both cats spun around. A small orange face was looking down at them from the top of the stack of hay. Bella was quickly joined by her brother, who had a wisp of dried grass stuck to one ear.

“We’re awake!” Riley announced. He bounced down the hay and landed beside Ravenpaw. “Should we hunt first?”

Barley twitched his ears. “No need,” he meowed gruffly. “I caught extra for you last night.” He moved a pile of hay to reveal two mice and a young pigeon.

Ravenpaw blinked at him. “Thanks.”

“I didn’t do it for you. I did it for them.” Raising his voice, Barley added, “I’m going for a walk. If you’re not here when I get back, well, I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Bella looked up, her cheeks bulging with pigeon. “Aren’t you going to see us off?” she mumbled.

“Ravenpaw knows the way out,” Barley replied. The tip of his tail twitched. “Don’t do anything stupid. Make your mother proud.” He stalked out of the barn with a final sideways glare at Ravenpaw.

“Eat as much as you want,” Ravenpaw told the young cats, forcing himself to sound cheerful. *I can’t believe he*

didn't say good-bye. “But not so much that it’s uncomfortable to walk. We have a long way to go”—the thought struck him yet again that he had no idea how long —“so we’ll be able to stop and hunt on the way.”

His belly was churning too much to leave room for food, but he munched down a few bites of mouse. He wished he could remember the traveling herbs that Spottedleaf had given him before the journey to the Moonstone, but it was too long ago, and he could only remember curling his lip at the bitter taste.

They finished eating and pushed the rest of the prey back under the hay. Ravenpaw looked at the cats in front of him, so similar to his old friends Firestar and Graystripe. *But these cats know nothing about living in the wild,* he reminded himself. *You will have to teach them everything.*

Riley and Bella stared back at him expectantly, pelts groomed, eyes dazzling bright. They had made their choice, and they couldn’t imagine that anything might go wrong.

Ravenpaw lifted his head. “Come on, you two. Let’s go find SkyClan!”

He led them through the fields—one covered in lush grass, the other filled with springy green cornstalks—until they reached the river. It was broad and lazy here, flowing idly toward the gorge at the edge of the moor. Riley and Bella opened their eyes wide when they saw the water.

“We don’t have to swim across, do we?” Bella hissed, fluffing up her orange fur.

Ravenpaw thought for a moment. Firestar had described following the river all the way to the gorge, but had said nothing about crossing it. “No,” he replied.

“Phew,” puffed Bella.

They padded along the path that ran beside the river. It was broad and flat, and full of the scents of Twolegs and dogs. Riley and Bella stopped to sniff every stalk, every paw print, every tiny trail. Even a leaf blowing in the breeze had to be pounced on and shredded.

“How’s my pounce?” Riley called, scraps of beech leaf clinging to his muzzle.

“Keep your weight on your hind legs right until you spring,” Ravenpaw told him. “If you lean on your front paws, you’ll put yourself off balance.” Riley crouched down again, practicing. “But you’ll wear yourself out if you don’t stick to walking for a while,” Ravenpaw added. He noticed Bella staring into a clump of reeds. “We’ll hunt later, I promise,” he told her.

“I’m not hunting. I’m watching that green stone with eyes.”

Ravenpaw padded over to her. “That’s a frog. Not good for prey, unless you’re starving. Or in ShadowClan.”

“Ooh, we’ve heard about ShadowClan!” mewed Riley. “Tell us a story about them!”

Ravenpaw sighed. “If it means you’ll keep walking, okay.” He didn’t want to frighten them with how vicious Clan life could be, so he made up a story about ShadowClan queens teaching their kits how to jump like frogs. It kept

Riley and Bella distracted enough that they covered a decent stretch before Ravenpaw realized it was sunhigh and time to rest. He sank down under the hedgerow at the side of the path and licked his haunches. His legs were aching, and his belly felt as if he had swallowed a stone.

There was a loud scrabbling noise in the scrubby grass behind him. Ravenpaw turned to see Bella stepping proudly through the brittle stalks with a shrew in her jaws. She dropped it in front of him. "Fresh-kill!" she declared with her tail curled high above her back.

"Great catch!" Ravenpaw purred.

There was a crack and a thud on the other side of the hedge, and Riley pushed his head through the branches. "Oops!" he panted. "I was chasing a sparrow, but it got away."

"Don't worry; Bella's caught enough for all of us," Ravenpaw meowed. "And I'm not surprised that sparrow escaped. You sounded like a herd of cows thundering through the hedge!"

Riley scrambled through the hedge and rubbed his muzzle on his sister's head. He had to stretch up to reach her. "You're practically a warrior already!" he mewed.

"There's still a lot to learn," Ravenpaw warned.

At that moment a storm of barking sounded farther along the river. Ravenpaw sprang up, his fur bristling.

"We're used to dogs," Riley boasted. "There was a fluffy white one in the garden next to ours. Bella and I used to scratch its nose whenever it looked under the fence." Huge

paws thundered along the path toward them, and Riley's eyes grew huge. "But it wasn't as big as this dog!" he yowled.

He leaped into the hedge as if he had grown wings. Bella followed, and Ravenpaw scrambled after them, giving Bella's rump a shove with his nose to boost her into the higher branches. They clung to the swaying twigs and looked down at the massive brown beast, which was snuffling up the remains of the shrew. When it finished, it looked up, its long pink tongue lolling, its hot breath stinking of prey.

"Is it going to eat us next?" Bella whimpered.

"Let's hope not," Ravenpaw muttered. He sank his claws into the branch and tried to wriggle deeper into the hedge.

A Twoleg bellowed close by, making all the cats jump. The dog looked around; then its ears drooped and it trotted away. Ravenpaw let out a long breath. *That was way too close.* He waited until the sound of paw steps had faded, then slid down to the ground. Riley landed behind him, but Bella stayed where she was, clinging to a branch at the top of the hedge.

"Come on, Bella!" Ravenpaw meowed. "It's safe now!"

"What if that dog comes back?" Bella squeaked.

"It won't," Ravenpaw replied.

"You don't know that!"

Ravenpaw sighed. "Well, not for sure, but I can't see it along the riverbank, and I can't hear it anymore. We're going in the opposite direction, so we have time to get away."

"I'm scared," Bella mewed in a tiny voice. "I want my

mother.”

Riley crumpled a dead leaf under his paw. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” he mumbled.

For a moment Ravenpaw wanted to agree with him. Then he remembered Silverstream telling him that he was these cats’ only chance of choosing their own path. “All warriors get scared sometimes,” he told them. “It’s the only way to tell if you’re being brave. You kept yourselves safe from that dog, didn’t you? You did well, both of you. Violet would be very proud of you. But we need to keep going, before the dog comes back.”

Above his head there was a faint whimper. Ravenpaw looked up. “You can’t stay up there forever, Bella! A hedge is no place for a cat, kittypet or warrior!”

“Do you promise the dog won’t get me?” Bella mewed.

“I promise.”

There was a crackle of twigs and a few tumbling leaves; then Bella squeezed out from the bottom of the hedge. Her fur was full of scraps, and her eyes were wide with fear. Ravenpaw licked the top of her head. “Well done. You’re doing great.”

He padded onto the path and looked up and down. There was no trace of life, Twoleg or dog, in either direction. “Let’s go!” he called, and set off at a trot. Riley and Bella fell in behind him. Ravenpaw tried not to show that the incident with the dog had rattled him, too.

They had to dodge a few more Twolegs and dogs as they traveled on, but it was easy to spot them from a long

way off and hide in the hedgerow. Bella was unusually quiet, and Riley stayed close to her, giving her encouraging licks. When it started to get too dark to see the edge of the riverbank, Ravenpaw looked for a place to spend the night. He found a squat, angular, gray stone den at the edge of a field just on the other side of the hedge. The floor was damp earth, and it smelled sharply of cows, but there were no other animals in the field and no scents of foxes or badgers.

Ravenpaw led Riley and Bella into the den and waited while they lay down. They looked exhausted, their flanks heaving, and their pelts were dusty and matted. "Stay here and clean yourselves," Ravenpaw told them before hauling his weary legs back outside and heading for the hedgerow. He found a nest of eggs halfway along the field and carried them one at a time under his chin to his companions. Bella made a face at the slimy texture of the eggs, but Riley ate more enthusiastically.

"I'm so hungry, I could eat grass!"

Ravenpaw clawed some moss from a log that lay at the entrance to the den and shaped it into a nest for all of them. Riley and Bella curled up together in a pool of gray and orange fur and fell asleep at once. Ravenpaw lay down beside them, feeling the warmth of their fur against his belly. Moonlight filtered through a small hole in the wall of the den, and Ravenpaw twisted around to look up at the glowing orb. *Is Barley looking up at the moon too?* he wondered. They had hardly spent a night apart since he'd first come to the barn. But in spite of his sadness,

exhaustion dragged Ravenpaw into sleep.

Riley and Bella were still subdued the next day. Bella refused to eat the thrush that Ravenpaw had caught, saying it smelled funny. For a moment Ravenpaw was tempted to snap at her for being ungrateful, but he reminded himself that they were a long way from everything they had ever known and must be missing their mother. He let Riley finish the thrush, then led them back to the riverbank.

They traveled faster now that Riley and Bella were less interested in stopping to sniff every new scent. Ravenpaw stayed in front, keeping watch for dogs or Twolegs. The sun warmed his black fur, and although his legs were still tired, he found himself looking forward to rounding each new corner, seeing the river and fields and hedges roll out before him. His whiskers quivered at every fresh sound or smell, and he felt younger than he had in a while. Even the ache in his belly seemed to have faded. Ravenpaw wished that Barley were with him, sharing the adventure.

A small copse of trees appeared on the bank. Ravenpaw decided to hunt, hopefully for something that Bella would eat.

"We'll stop here for a while," he announced. Riley plunged into the trees, gray tail waving. Bella lay at the edge of the path and scraped at the grass with her paw.

"I'm too tired to hunt," she mewed.

"Then wait here until we come back," Ravenpaw told her, trying not to show his annoyance. He whirled around and

followed Riley into the trees. There were few scents of prey in the copse, but he managed to track down a mouse in a clump of bracken.

Ravenpaw hauled his catch back to where he had left Bella. The patch of grass was empty.

“Bella?” he called softly.

No reply. Then Ravenpaw heard the rumbling voice of a Twoleg farther up the river. He turned to see a full-grown male crouching on the edge of the bank beside a long pole, which hung out over the water. Bella was arching her back and purring in delight as she ate something from the Twoleg’s hairless front paw.

Ravenpaw flung down the mouse and raced along the bank. “What do you think you’re doing?” he screeched. “Get away from there!”

Bella spun around and glared at Ravenpaw. “He’s giving me something to eat!” she hissed. “I was hungry!”

Ravenpaw leaped forward and grabbed her by the scruff of her neck. It was tricky, as Bella was almost as tall as him. He was aware of the Twoleg stumbling away to the far side of the bank, making noises of alarm.

“Come with me!” Ravenpaw ordered through a mouthful of orange fur. He dragged Bella along the bank and into the shelter of the trees.

“What’s going on?” gasped Riley, who was heading through the bushes toward them.

“Bella was taking food from a Twoleg!” Ravenpaw spat.

“What’s wrong with that?” Bella yowled.

"You're supposed to be a wild cat now!" Ravenpaw snarled. "Twolegs are not your friends! And they are never a source of food!" He took a deep breath and tried to make his fur lie flat. "If you're going to be a warrior, then Twolegs must be your enemies."

Bella flattened her ears at him. "That's mouse-brained! He was being friendly and giving me treats!"

"You can't trust Twolegs," Ravenpaw insisted. "They don't like warriors."

Riley flicked his tail. "She didn't do anything wrong, Ravenpaw. She didn't know she wasn't supposed to take his food."

"Look, these are the rules now," Ravenpaw growled. "If you aren't going to listen to me, we may as well turn back." He tipped his head to one side. "Is that what you want?"

Riley and Bella stared at him, frozen.

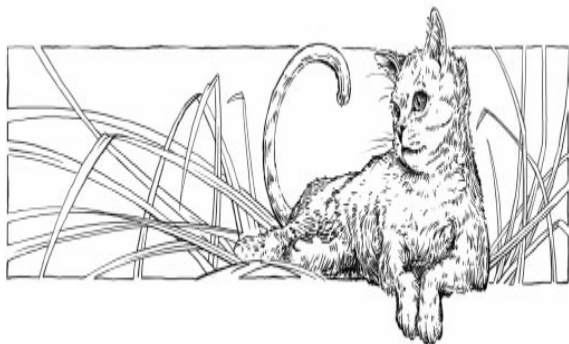
Ravenpaw nodded. "Come on, then. And don't stop for *anything*."

He stomped out of the trees and headed along the riverbank once more. The Twoleg had gone, leaving behind a strong scent that made Ravenpaw's nose twitch. He could hear Riley and Bella trotting behind him, both still bristling at the way he had spoken to them.

That's not my problem, Ravenpaw told himself. *They have to respect their mentor, or SkyClan won't have anything to do with them. I will have to start teaching them the warrior code.* The vastness of his task struck him again.

Do Riley and Bella have any chance of becoming

warriors?



CHAPTER SIX



After another uncomfortable night's sleep, this time under a bush on the riverbank, where they were disturbed by the sound of voles plopping into the river, Ravenpaw woke at dawn and managed to catch a fat young pigeon. Riley and Bella tucked in, Bella with her eyes narrowed as if she was making a point of showing Ravenpaw that she understood the rules about food.

Watching the young cats eat, Ravenpaw felt a pang of compassion. They were so far from home, and they were being very brave considering they were barely out of kithhood. Perhaps there was a way he could get the day off to a good start.

"Would you like to learn a few battle moves before we set off?" *I hope I can remember a few!*

Both cats' eyes lit up. "Yes, please!" mewed Bella, jumping to her paws.

"Real warrior moves?" Riley asked, and he purred when Ravenpaw nodded.

The path was wide and flat enough to make a good training ground.

"We'll start with the hunter's crouch," Ravenpaw explained. He dropped to his belly, keeping his hind paws tucked under him.

“We know about that already,” Riley meowed. “That’s what we do when we’re going to pounce on something.”

Ravenpaw looked up at him. “That something doesn’t have to be prey, does it? It can be a useful way to attack an enemy, especially if you’re lying in wait. Find your balance, breathe out, then go!” He sprang forward and landed almost on top of Bella.

“Awesome!” purred Riley.

“Now you try,” Ravenpaw puffed, trying to ignore the stabbing pain in his belly.

The young cats settled down onto their haunches and leaped forward one by one. Bella nearly fell over and Riley didn’t cover much distance, but it was a decent start. Ravenpaw dragged a stick out of the hedge.

“Pretend that this is your enemy,” he panted. “I want you to land with your front paws on the back of its neck, here.” He indicated a lump on the stick.

Bella did well this time, dropping down with her paws lightly on her imaginary enemy’s neck. Riley stumbled as he took off and ended up breaking the stick in two.

“Well, at least you wounded your enemy,” Ravenpaw commented, looking down at the splintered wood.

“Teach us something else!” Bella pleaded.

“Just one more; then we need to set off. Let’s try a front-paw blow.” Ravenpaw beckoned to Riley with the tip of his tail. “Imagine we’re face-to-face in battle. I’ll reach up with my front paw like this, fast as I can, and bring it down straight on top of your head. If I can’t reach, I can rear up on

my hind legs, but see how this leaves my belly exposed? You have to be quick for this move!”

Bella took Ravenpaw’s place and lightly patted her brother’s head. “Too slow,” Ravenpaw warned. “He would have known exactly what you were going to do. Riley, you can use the duck-and-twist move to get out of Bella’s reach. Drop sideways, tuck your legs under you, and roll out of the way. Excellent!” he praised as Riley folded himself into a ball and tumbled to the edge of the path. “But don’t fall in the river,” Ravenpaw added.

Riley and Bella took turns practicing the front-paw blow and duck-and-twist. Bella had good reach with her long legs, but Riley’s broad shoulders gave him more power, and he was surprisingly fast given his sturdy build.

“We’ll make warriors of you yet!” Ravenpaw exclaimed. “Good work!”

Riley looked at him, his flanks heaving. “That was fun!”

“I can’t wait for our first battle!” Bella mewed.

Ravenpaw shook his head. “Never wish yourself into a fight,” he murmured. “It will come soon enough.” For a moment he thought of Violet, how terrified she would be to know that her kits were preparing for danger. *It’s better to be prepared*, Ravenpaw told himself. “Come on, you two. Let’s keep going.” He flicked his tail, and the two cats fell in behind him.

Farther along the river, they reached an abandoned Twoleg den made from crumbling red stones. There was no trace of Twoleg scent in the air, and the den was completely

silent. Ravenpaw glanced at his companions.

“Want to explore?” he suggested.

“Yes, please!” Riley meowed.

Ravenpaw followed them inside. The floor was strewn with broken stones and dotted with large Twoleg relics. A jagged wooden slope led up to another level, and above that Ravenpaw could see glimpses of sky through holes in the roof.

“Watch this!” yowled Riley. He sprang onto the nearest Twoleg relic, then bounced onto the wooden slope. It creaked under his weight, so he leaped down onto the floor, sending up a puff of dust. “That was fun!” he gasped.

“I’ll chase you!” Bella mewed, bounding toward him. Riley skidded around and set off at a sprint, hurtling past Ravenpaw so fast that his fur was flattened.

Ravenpaw started to worry that something would overhear them. He opened his mouth to warn them to be quiet, when a shadow filled the doorway behind him. Ravenpaw whirled around, claws out, ready to fight. He stared in astonishment.

“Barley!”

Ravenpaw’s first thought was to fling himself at his old friend and cover him with joyous licks. But he held back, remembering their bitter words the last time they had seen each other.

Barley spoke first. “I’m so sorry,” he blurted out. “I should never have tried to stop you from helping Violet’s kits. You are brave, and generous, and I don’t deserve you. .

..”

Ravenpaw bounded forward and pressed his muzzle against Barley’s cheek. “Don’t be such a mouse-brain. You were right to be concerned. It’s been hard, but we’re okay.” He felt a lump in his throat. “Even better now that you’re here.”

Barley nuzzled the top of his head. “I left not long after you did. I thought that the barn was my home, but my home is wherever you are.” He took a step back and blinked at Ravenpaw. “I . . . I thought you were leaving because you didn’t want to be with me anymore.”

“That will never happen!” Ravenpaw meowed. “I’m sorry I left without you. I’ve missed you every step of the way.”

“Whoa! It’s Barley!” Bella came tearing down the wooden slope. Her brother’s paw steps thudded overhead, and Ravenpaw glanced nervously at the trembling ceiling.

With a clatter, Riley rushed down to join them. “Are you going to come with us to SkyClan?”

Barley nodded. “I couldn’t let you have this great adventure without me, could I?”

“It’s been amazing!” Bella mewed, to Ravenpaw’s surprise. “There was this really fierce dog, and we had to hide in the hedge!”

Barley looked alarmed.

“It’s okay,” Riley put in. “We stayed super quiet until the dog went away. Ravenpaw made sure we didn’t come out till it was safe.”

“And he’s taught us great battle moves!” Bella

exclaimed. "We can do the hunter's crouch, the front-paw blow, and the duck-and-twist!"

Barley glanced at Ravenpaw. "I'm glad to hear he's been looking after you," he purred.

Bella nodded. "Yes, but he's *really* bossy," she added.

"As he should be!" Barley meowed. "He knows all about living in a Clan, so you must listen to everything he says." He looked around the abandoned den. "Now, are you planning to make a camp here, or should we keep going?"

"Let's go!" yowled Riley, racing out the door with Bella on his heels.

Ravenpaw blinked affectionately at Barley. "You certainly know how to motivate them!"

The black-and-white tom ran his tail over Ravenpaw's flank. "I'm so proud of you for doing this. You're right; they deserve to choose the life they lead. Just as we did, a long time ago."

Side by side, they padded into the sunshine. Ravenpaw forgot the tiredness in his legs as he trotted beside Barley. Riley and Bella took the lead, calling back to let the older cats know about every new scent, every ripple in the river, every crushed leaf.

"They're certainly observant," Barley commented as they all stopped to look at a dragonfly that Bella had spotted on a reed.

As dusk fell, they reached a shallow pool fed by a low waterfall. Ravenpaw and Barley settled onto warm, flat boulders and basked in the final rays of the sun while the

young cats played at the edge of the water, chasing rainbows in the spray. Riley ventured too far from the shore with one leap and vanished into the pool with a splash. Bella squeaked in horror, but a moment later her brother emerged, scattering drops of water, with a wriggling fish in his jaws. He scrambled out and dropped it triumphantly beside Ravenpaw and Barley.

“Look what I caught!” he announced.

“Caught? Or did it land in your mouth when you fell?” Barley teased.

“Whatever happened, it’s the best fresh-kill we’ve had in a while,” Ravenpaw purred. “Well done, Riley!”

The gray tabby shook his fur, making Bella spring away with a yelp as water splattered her pelt. Ravenpaw let them start eating first. He was conscious of Barley standing very close to him as they watched the young cats tuck in.

“I can’t believe how well they’ve settled into living wild,” Barley murmured. “You’ve done a great job.”

“They’ve been very brave,” Ravenpaw replied. “I’m proud of them.”

Barley leaned against him, smelling warm and soft and familiar. “You should be,” he whispered.



CHAPTER SEVEN



They slept in the long grass beside the waterfall, lulled by the soft splash of water, and woke as the first rays of sun crested the trees. Barley caught a squirrel, and Ravenpaw was relieved to see Bella eating as eagerly as her brother once more.

The river grew steadily narrower and shallower beside them until it was tumbling between steep sandy banks, with barely enough room for the cats to squeeze through beside the water. They walked in single file, Ravenpaw in the lead and Barley bringing up the rear. Riley and Bella were full of chatter, competing to spot minnows beneath the glittering surface. Ravenpaw only listened with half an ear; he knew they were approaching the end of the river, and that meant they could cross SkyClan's boundary at any moment.

"I'm as hot as a fox on fire!" Barley panted. "Can we find somewhere shady to stop?"

Ravenpaw narrowed his eyes. There seemed to be nothing but the stream and its sandy banks ahead of them. There were trees at the top of the banks, but he doubted they could scramble up the sheer slope. Then Riley squeezed past him.

"I'll take a look!" The gray tom ran a short distance along the bank to some gorse bushes. He paused to sniff

them, then vanished from sight.

When the others caught up to him, Riley was peeking smugly from a small cave sheltered by the gorse. It was cozy but shallow, with just enough room for the four cats to lie down.

“I’m hungry,” Bella mewed.

“We’ll rest here for a moment, then find somewhere to hunt,” Ravenpaw promised. His paws were sore from the scorching sand, and his belly was aching. As the others settled around him, he closed his eyes.

Suddenly his nose filled with powerfully familiar scents. He heard soft whispers, not from his companions but from two other cats. These were voices he hadn’t heard in a long time, and Ravenpaw’s heart leaped. Although he couldn’t make out the words, he knew he was listening to Firestar and Sandstorm. He could feel them all around him, nervous and excited. They had sheltered here too, knowing that their journey was close to its end.

I’ve done it! Ravenpaw thought. I have followed their paw steps to SkyClan!

He opened his eyes to see Bella standing at the entrance to the little cave, gazing out.

“I think I heard something!” she mewed. “Another cat!”

Ravenpaw took a deep breath. “We are close to SkyClan territory now,” he meowed. Three pairs of eyes stared at him in the dim light. “I don’t think we’ve crossed their border, but we must tread carefully from now on. No Clan welcomes trespassers.”

Riley licked his chest. "What if they don't like us?" he muttered.

"What if they think we're just dumb kittypets?" Bella added.

Barley rested his tail on her flank. "If you're not welcome, we'll take you home. We won't abandon you, I promise."

Ravenpaw met his friend's gaze over the heads of the young cats and nodded.

They crept out of the cave and padded quietly along the stream. There was no sign of the cat that Bella thought she had seen, but Ravenpaw kept his mouth open to taste the air. The gorge widened, and the banks sloped downward until they were walking through trees beside the sparkling stream. Barley caught a young rabbit, and they ate quickly, with the older cats keeping a wary eye out for signs of the Clan.

The sky had filled with clouds, bringing an early dusk. Ravenpaw decided that they should spend the night here and enter SkyClan in the morning. Barley found a heap of dry leaves under a hazel tree, which would make a decent enough nest. Riley and Bella settled down obediently; they were much quieter than usual, as if they knew that the real adventure was about to begin. Ravenpaw asked Barley to stay with them while he scouted around the immediate area.

"We don't want SkyClan to find us sleeping a mouse-length from their border!" he pointed out, and Barley nodded.

Ravenpaw left the stream and slipped through the trees, pausing every few steps to sniff bushes and taste the air. There was a strong smell of cats here, though he hadn't found any border marks yet. There were tangs of kittypet scent too, sometimes almost hidden beneath the wild-cat traces, at other times clear and sharp and unexpected so far from any Twoleg dens. Ravenpaw hadn't been anticipating such a mix of scents, even knowing that SkyClan had some warriors who lived as kittypets part of the time.

He returned to the hazel bush and lay down. Barley was fast asleep, snoring, but Riley and Bella were still awake.

"We're not sleepy!" Bella whispered.

"Tell us some more about the warrior code!" Riley begged.

Ravenpaw sighed. "Okay, but after that you must go to sleep. Who can remember the rules we've talked about so far?"

"You must be ready to die for your Clan," Riley began. "And you can't be friends with cats from other Clans."

"Don't trespass on another Clan's territory," Bella mewed. She put her head to one side. "But if SkyClan is the only Clan around here, that doesn't matter, does it?"

Ravenpaw flicked his ears. "There could be loners in the woods who won't welcome visitors. Go on."

"Elders and kits must eat first," Riley meowed. "And you only kill something if you're going to eat it."

"That's two rules!" Bella protested.

"You're both doing very well," Ravenpaw told them.

“Right, here are some more.” For a moment he was back in the training hollow, listening to Whitestorm addressing all the new apprentices. Kind, patient Whitestorm, who had tried so hard to make Ravenpaw’s apprenticeship bearable. “A new warrior keeps vigil for the whole Clan on their first night. A warrior must mentor at least one apprentice before they can become deputy.” Ravenpaw paused, racking his brain. “When the Clan leader dies, the deputy takes over.”

He stopped. Riley and Bella were very quiet, and their flanks rose and fell steadily. They had drifted off already. Ravenpaw curled up and tucked his chin into Barley’s belly fur. Riley and Bella were trying so hard to learn about the life of a warrior; he just hoped SkyClan would give them a chance to try it for real.

“Ooh, what do we have here? Four little warriors lost in the woods?”

A shrill voice and a blast of hot breath jolted Ravenpaw awake. In a heartbeat he sprang to his feet, growling. Five cats circled the nest, eyes narrowed and ears flat back. These weren’t warriors, though; they had the stench of kittypet about them, cloying and unwelcome among the leaves. Their fur was sleek and glossy, and they looked plump and overfed rather than well muscled. But their eyes were mean, and there was no mistaking the challenge in the first cat’s voice.

“Swallowed your tongue?” he jeered. He was a dark tabby, almost black, with piercing green eyes. “I didn’t think

patrols were allowed to go to sleep!"

Ravenpaw heard the other cats stir beside him. "Leave us alone," he snarled. "We're doing no harm." He was confident that these weren't SkyClan warriors. They were too scornful of patrols, for a start. He took a step forward and let his fur rise along his spine.

"You're so scary," gasped the tabby, pretending to fall back. Then he leaned forward. "I'm joking. I don't like the look of you. You don't smell like those SkyClan fools, but you're scrawny enough to be wild. Go back to where you came from!"

"You'll have to make us," rumbled Barley, stepping up alongside Ravenpaw.

For a moment the tabby looked less certain. Barley was broad-shouldered and tall, and there was menace in his growl.

"You heard what Pasha said," meowed another kittypet. Her pelt was ginger and white. "Go away." The other three cats took a pace forward so that they were looming over the nest.

Bella squeezed in between Barley and Ravenpaw. "And you heard what we said. We're not going unless you make us! We're warriors, so we know how to fight!"

"Warriors?" spat Pasha. "Ha, they don't scare us." He twitched his ears at Ravenpaw. "Run along, squirrel-breath."

Slam!

Quick as lightning, Ravenpaw raised his front leg and clouted the tabby between his ears. The kittypet staggered

backward with a yowl.

"You'll regret that!" he hissed. He stalked toward Ravenpaw, his thick tail lashing.

One of his companions, a she-cat with silver and black patches, interrupted. "This is boring, Pasha. I'm getting cold. Can't we run through the gorge like we did last night? That was way more fun."

"This bunch of weasels will be too easy to fight," agreed the ginger-and-white she-cat.

Pasha glared once more at Ravenpaw. "If I see you again, you'll regret it," he snarled. Then he whirled around and bounded into the trees. "Come on! Let's give SkyClan another surprise!"

Ravenpaw watched them vanish into the shadows. His heart was pounding, and his paw throbbed where he had struck the tabby.

"Well, they weren't very nice!" Bella exclaimed.

"It sounds like they're not that nice to SkyClan, either," Barley commented. He arched an eyebrow at Ravenpaw. "Do you think they're going to invade the camp?"

Ravenpaw shrugged. "I think they're more hot air than action," he meowed. "Otherwise they'd have shredded us while we were asleep. But I don't think they'll trouble us again tonight. Their Twolegs will expect them home before dawn."

He lay down again and licked his sore paw. The others settled around him.

"I'll stay awake to make sure they don't come back,"

Barley murmured in Ravenpaw's ear.

Ravenpaw nodded his thanks. They must be close to the border with SkyClan, judging by what those cats had said. Tomorrow Riley and Bella would see their new home for the first time.

If SkyClan will have them.



CHAPTER EIGHT



Ravenpaw didn't expect to go back to sleep after the excitement of their night visitors, but he woke to find himself alone in the nest with sunbeams reaching under the edge of the branches.

"Barley?" he meowed.

"Right here," came the reply, and Barley's black-and-white rump appeared, dragging a squirrel through the leaves. "We caught you something to eat," he announced.

Riley and Bella's faces appeared at the edge of the bush. "We climbed a tree and chased it down to Barley!" Riley meowed.

"Wow," mewed Ravenpaw, impressed. He recalled Firestar telling him about SkyClan's unusual skill in hunting above the ground. Perhaps Riley and Bella would fit in even better than he had imagined.

They shared the squirrel and buried the remains a little way from the bush. Then Riley found the way back to the stream, and they carried on, all of them alert to noises and scents from the trees around them.

Even so, Ravenpaw jumped when there was a blur of movement from behind a holly tree and three cats leaped out to block their path. All were she-cats: A long-legged ginger warrior was flanked by a gray warrior and a smaller white cat

who looked like an apprentice, judging by her trembling paws and huge eyes.

“What are you doing here?” growled the ginger cat. “This is SkyClan territory!”

Ravenpaw caught a strong scent from the holly bush, and he realized they were less than a fox-length from a border mark.

“You’re not welcome here!” hissed the gray warrior.

“Yeah! You should make like a tree and *leave!*” chimed the little white cat. The gray cat looked down at her in surprise.

“But we’ve come a long way,” Riley began.

“Then you’ll have a long walk home,” snarled the ginger cat.

“Wait,” Ravenpaw pleaded, stepping forward alongside Riley. “We come in peace. I am a friend of Firestar, who saved your Clan. Do you know him?”

The three cats looked blankly at him. Ravenpaw felt his heart sink. He hadn’t anticipated that SkyClan might have forgotten all about the ThunderClan cats who helped them moons ago.

Then the ginger cat stirred. “My mother has talked about a cat of that name. What do you want? Is he here?”

Ravenpaw shook his head. “No, but he was once my closest friend, and I hoped that his friends in SkyClan would be prepared to speak to me.”

The ginger she-cat looked him up and down. “You don’t smell like a Clan cat,” she commented. “You smell of cows.”

"I'm not a Clan cat," Ravenpaw admitted. "At least, not anymore. Look, is Leafstar still your leader? Please, may we speak with her? Tell her . . . tell her that Firestar's friend Ravenpaw is here."

The warrior studied him for another heartbeat, then turned to the small white cat. "Cloudpaw, fetch my mother." Cloudpaw nodded and scampered off.

Barley came up to join Ravenpaw. "I'm Barley," he announced, dipping his head. "And these are Riley and Bella."

The ginger she-cat twitched her tail. "I'm Firefern, and this is Plumwillow."

"Er . . . nice territory," Ravenpaw stammered, trying to break the strained silence.

"How would you know? You haven't seen it," Plumwillow pointed out.

Barley caught Ravenpaw's eye and shook his head. It looked as if they weren't going to make friends with these warriors today.

Riley and Bella were just starting to fidget when Ravenpaw heard the sound of paw steps. Cloudpaw raced back along the stream, followed by a brown-and-cream tabby. She was not young, but she moved gracefully and her amber eyes were bright. She stood beside Firefern and studied the visitors.

"I am Leafstar, leader of SkyClan." Her gaze met Ravenpaw's. "I remember Firestar talking about you. You left ThunderClan, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," Ravenpaw admitted. "I live with Barley now"—the black-and-white cat bowed—"and we have come here with Barley's kin Riley and Bella."

"Do you still live near the Clans?" Leafstar asked. Ravenpaw nodded and was about to explain that the Clans had moved away when Leafstar went on. "Then you have come a long way. It must be important, whatever it is."

Ravenpaw felt suddenly unprepared. How could he ask this cool, powerful leader if two complete strangers could join her Clan?

He hesitated for too long. Barley lifted his head and blurted out, "My sister Violet's kits want to become warriors. Please, could they join SkyClan? They've already started their training, and they're really good."

Leafstar's eyes opened very wide. Beside her, Firefern and Plumwillow bristled. Cloudpaw leaned forward and sniffed Bella's fur. "That one smells funny," she mewed, recoiling. "She can't be a warrior!"

"Do we look like we take in strays?" Firefern growled.

"I'm not a stray!" puffed Riley.

"Hush!" Leafstar ordered, raising her tail. "SkyClan is honored by your request. I appreciate that you have traveled a long way. But it's not that simple. SkyClan is strong and thriving as it is. We don't need to recruit warriors from outside, as we have done in the past. We have enough loyal warriors already."

Ravenpaw felt as if the ground were opening under his paws. *She didn't even give Riley and Bella a chance!* He

had imagined Leafstar being reluctant, of course, but he had hoped he'd be able to persuade her when she saw how determined the young cats were, and how much they had learned so far.

"Is it because we used to be kittypets?" Bella meowed. "Because Ravenpaw told us that some of your warriors are still kittypets. We'd be warriors all the time, I promise!"

Leafstar blinked. "It's true that SkyClan has daylight warriors, but they have trained with us for many seasons, and I trust their loyalty to their Clanmates."

"We could train too!" Riley argued; Barley hushed him with a sweep of his tail across the young cat's muzzle.

"I cannot fault their enthusiasm," Leafstar commented to Ravenpaw. She tipped her head to one side. "But why have you come all this way to ask if they can join SkyClan? Why couldn't Firestar take Riley and Bella into ThunderClan?"

Ravenpaw blinked. "Because ThunderClan has gone," he managed to say, feeling grief choke him afresh. "All the Clans have left the forest. The forest was torn up to make room for a Thunderpath, and there was nowhere for the warriors to stay. I watched them leave, but I . . . I don't know where they are now."

Leafstar's eyes clouded. "Poor Firestar and Sandstorm, having to leave their home! I hope that they are safe, wherever they are."

"I believe that they are," Ravenpaw meowed. "StarClan would have told me if something terrible had happened, I think." He noticed Barley shoot a sideways glance at him,

and Ravenpaw felt a twinge of guilt. He rarely spoke of StarClan to his friend, and perhaps Barley had assumed that his warrior ancestors no longer meant anything to him.

Leafstar sighed. "I have tried to keep the memory of Firestar and Sandstorm alive in my Clan," she murmured. "SkyClan owes everything to them. But many seasons have passed, and not all my warriors were there in the beginning." She drew herself up again. "Any friend of Firestar's is welcome to visit my Clan, but only as our guest. We will always be grateful for what Firestar and Sandstorm did. But we cannot accept unknown cats to train as warriors. I am sorry."

She turned to leave, making it clear that her welcome to Firestar's friends began and ended at the border to her Clan. The other cats followed, except for Plumwillow, who paused to hiss, "Don't steal any of our prey!" before trotting after her Clanmates.

Ravenpaw stared at the disappearing warriors in dismay.

"They were *mean*!" Bella growled.

"They didn't even give us a chance to show off our battle moves!" Riley muttered.

"I'm sorry," Ravenpaw mewed. "I didn't think she'd be like that."

"Let's go back to that cave in the gorge," Barley suggested. "I don't think we should hang around too close to the border." He padded over to Bella, whose tail was drooping. "I'm still very proud of you," he told her. "And you, Riley. You've learned so much on this journey! You're

brave and strong and smart. You'd be great warriors. Wouldn't they, Ravenpaw?"

"Yes, of course." Ravenpaw started to walk back down the stream. His pelt burned. Why had he raised the hopes of these young cats, all for nothing but sore paws and travel-stained fur? A sharp pain jabbed in his belly, and he stumbled.

In a heartbeat Barley was beside him, propping him up. "Are you okay?"

"Just tired," Ravenpaw rasped. "I'll be okay once we get to the cave."

Barley stayed beside him, fussing, until he was settled on the dusty orange floor. Riley and Bella slumped down beside him with their chins on their paws.

"I'll go hunt," Barley meowed. "You stay here and rest."

Ravenpaw slept deeply until something prodded him in his side, sending a spasm through his belly. Riley and Bella were standing in the cave beside him, their eyes huge. It was dark—Ravenpaw had slept for longer than he thought—and Barley was curled at his back.

"Something's happening!" Bella squeaked.

Ravenpaw pricked his ears. Faint yowls and shrieks echoed along the banks of the gorge.

"Do you think SkyClan is being attacked?" whispered Riley.

"I don't know. Whatever it is, it doesn't sound good." Ravenpaw stood up and walked to the mouth of the cave.

"Where are you going?" Barley rumbled, sitting up.

"To see what's going on."

"Not without me," meowed Barley.

"Or us!" Riley and Bella put in.

Ravenpaw sighed. "Okay. But you'll have to be quiet."

"We'll be quiet as mice," Riley promised.

Bella put her head to one side. "Actually, mice are noisy. Always squeaking and rustling around."

"Quieter than dead mice, then!" her brother hissed.

They padded along the stream to where the banks flattened out among the trees. The sounds of cats in distress grew louder. Ravenpaw passed the holly bush with the border mark and glanced back at the others, nodding to show that they should follow. Now they were inside SkyClan's territory. Ravenpaw felt his fur stand on end, but he kept going, still treading quietly even though any noise they might make would be drowned out by the screeches coming from in front of them.

He reached the edge of the trees and paused. In the starlight, Ravenpaw made out a huge, dark shape looming over the stream. A rock, perhaps? Beyond it, cats flashed back and forth between sandy cliffs, shrieking in alarm and fury. Ravenpaw twitched his tail to get the others' attention, then raced to the nearest cliff, which sloped up gently at first, then more steeply, to a huge expanse of scrubby grass. On the far side, bright yellow lights twinkled; that must be a Twolegplace, Ravenpaw guessed.

He padded to the edge of the cliff and looked down. He

felt very exposed, but none of the cats in the gorge below noticed him. Barley, Riley, and Bella crept up beside him and stared in horror. Amid the crisscrossing paths that lined the valley, cats were charging back and forth, yowling in anger. A heap of soft, dark shapes went flying; from the scents that drifted up to the top of the cliff, Ravenpaw guessed that the fresh-kill pile had been scattered.

As Ravenpaw's eyes grew used to the starlight, he realized that five or six cats were chasing the others, rousting them with shrieks and hisses. More and more cats spilled from dens in the side of the cliff, including some tiny kits who looked barely able to walk.

"Get them back to the nursery!" screeched a she-cat.

"Poor little kits, too small to be away from their mother," jeered a familiar voice.

Ravenpaw looked at Barley. That was Pasha! He peered into the gorge again and made out the shapes of the other cats who had terrorized them the previous night. Were they taking on the whole of SkyClan?

"Warriors, to me!" yowled Leafstar, her cream patches glowing in the half-light. At last a more or less orderly line of cats formed up, and they charged at the intruders, hissing and spitting. With a chorus of mocking screeches, the kittypets whirled around and scrambled back up the cliff.

"We'll be back!" Pasha yowled, so close to Ravenpaw that he almost stepped on him.

Ravenpaw and his companions crouched in the grass without breathing until the kittypets had thundered away.

Below, the SkyClan camp fell silent apart from the whimpering of kits as they were ushered back to their nest, and the angry muttering from elders who had been disturbed from sleep.

“Three nights in a row!” hissed one of them.

Leafstar spoke soothingly. “We’ll find a way to stop them, I promise. Go back to your dens and get some rest.”

“Whoa!” breathed Bella. “Those kittypets are giving SkyClan a lot of trouble!”

Ravenpaw backed away from the edge of the cliff. His pelt smelled strongly of SkyClan, and he realized he had been lying on top of a border mark.

“Imagine having to put up with that every night!” Barley remarked.

They started to walk back down the slope to the stream.

“I don’t understand why they let those kittypets get into their camp,” Riley mewed. “SkyClan cats are warriors! They should be able to defend themselves!”

Ravenpaw shook his head. “I don’t think the kittypets were there for any real purpose. They just wanted to wake everyone up and cause trouble.”

“Thankfully, it’s their trouble, not ours,” meowed Barley. “Look, here’s the cave. Come on, you two, get some sleep. We’ll start for home tomorrow. Leafstar has made it clear that there’s nothing to keep us here.” He shooed Riley and Bella inside and curled around them.

Ravenpaw lay down near the entrance, his chin on his paws. Barley was right; if Leafstar wanted them to go, there

was no reason to stay here any longer. But he couldn't forget the image of the warriors shrieking in dismay as their camp was invaded. Surely there was something SkyClan could do to stop it?



CHAPTER NINE



Ravenpaw opened his eyes to find that he was lying on smooth stone beside a still, star-filled pool. He sat up and looked around. Behind him, a pock-marked slope spiraled up to the top of the hollow. The stone beneath him was cool, but his fur felt warm. He padded to the edge of the pool and drank, feeling the water surge through him like light. He became aware of a cat standing beside him with her tail resting lightly on his back.

“Come sit with me, Ravenpaw,” Silverstream purred. She positioned herself neatly on the rock with her tail folded over her paws and waited while Ravenpaw settled himself more slowly, wincing at the ache in his belly.

Ravenpaw noticed her watching him with concern. “I’m getting old!” he joked.

Silverstream just looked at him with huge blue eyes.

Ravenpaw felt a chill creep over his pelt. “I . . . I’m not going to see my home again, am I?”

“No,” Silverstream admitted. “But you must not be afraid of dying somewhere else.” There was a catch in her voice. “All that matters is that you are not alone, and that you know you are loved.”

Ravenpaw felt a painful lump rise in his throat. “I’m afraid for Barley,” he whispered.

“Barley knows that you don’t want to leave him. He understands, and he will not love you less if he cannot see you.”

Two more cats approached the edge of the pool: one dark gray tom with glowing blue eyes, the other a broad-shouldered tom with gray-and-white fur. Silverstream stood up and nodded to them, then padded away up the spiraling path.

The dark gray tom spoke first. “My name is Skywatcher,” he meowed. “I was the last of the SkyClan warriors, until Firestar and Sandstorm came to save my Clan. There is a place for Riley and Bella in SkyClan, I promise. Be patient and you will help them find it.”

“And I am Cloudstar, leader of SkyClan when we first came to the gorge,” rasped the gray and white cat. “And before, when we lived in the forest with the other Clans.”

Ravenpaw dipped his head. “I am honored to meet you both.”

“I made the same journey as Firestar and Sandstorm, and now you and your friends,” Cloudstar meowed. “I am grateful to you for bringing new warriors to my Clan.”

“But they don’t want them!” Ravenpaw burst out. “Leafstar wouldn’t even let us cross the border!”

“Give them a chance to see what these cats can bring to the Clan,” Cloudstar countered. “SkyClan needs your help. You saw that tonight.”

Ravenpaw lashed his tail. “But SkyClan has its own strong warriors! Leafstar was quick to make that clear. What

can we do that they can't?"

Without speaking, Skywatcher moved to the edge of the pool and flicked a pebble into the water. It landed with a splash and sent starry ripples out in circles, rolling all the way to the sides of the hollow.

"Look," Skywatcher ordered. "The stone reaches much farther than you might expect. Do you see?"

Ravenpaw watched the trembling waves and pictured SkyClan, scared and defensive inside the gorge, waiting for the kittypets to storm across the empty ground and invade their camp again. His mind cleared and he nodded. "I see," he replied.

Cloudstar rested his muzzle on top of Ravenpaw's head. "Please help us," he murmured. "In the name of the Clans, and the warrior code."

"I will," Ravenpaw promised.

He woke as the first gray light of dawn spilled into the cave. Outside, the air was cool and scented with leaves. Ravenpaw nudged Barley. "Wake up!"

"Is it time to go home?" Bella mewed sleepily. Beside her, Riley yawned.

"We're not going home," Ravenpaw announced. "We're going back to SkyClan."

Barley stopped mid-stretch. "What? They wouldn't even let us across the border yesterday." He narrowed his eyes. "And you need to get back to the barn for some rest."

"I'm okay," Ravenpaw told him. "I dreamed of StarClan

last night, and I saw something that can help deal with the kittypets.”

“Let’s go!” mewed Riley, running to the mouth of the cave. “Those fox-brained kittypets need to respect SkyClan!”

Ravenpaw felt a flash of pride at Riley’s loyalty to a Clan that had treated him like a trespasser.

Bella nodded. “If there’s anything we can do to help, then we have to go back.”

Barley sighed. “I can see I’m outnumbered,” he mewed. He brushed the tip of his tail along Ravenpaw’s spine. “But if you need to stop and rest, tell me, okay? I know something’s hurting you.”

“I will.”

Ravenpaw led them up the stream once more. They paused among the trees to hunt; Barley made Ravenpaw lie on some comfy moss while he and the young cats cornered a pigeon that was pecking at the foot of a beech tree. As soon as they had eaten and cleaned their muzzles, they continued to the edge of the woods.

In daylight, Ravenpaw could clearly see the huge, gray-brown boulder that hung over the stream. The water vanished beneath the rock, and sun-dappled ripples cast patterns of light onto the bottom of the stone. They had hardly gone past the holly bush when several figures appeared, running toward them. Plumwillow was in the lead.

“We told you to stay away!” she growled.

A ginger tom bounded beside her, his hackles raised.

“Get out of here!”

“Plumwillow, Bouncefire, wait!” A silver tabby she-cat with clear green eyes sprang down from a path near the foot of the cliff and blocked their way. “Enough! These cats mean no harm.”

“We don’t know that,” Bouncefire muttered, but he stayed where he was and watched as the silver-gray cat approached Ravenpaw and his companions. Ravenpaw picked up the clean scent of herbs on her pelt and spotted a scrap of cobweb clinging to her ear.

“My name is Echosong,” she meowed. “I am SkyClan’s medicine cat. Leafstar told me about you.”

Her voice was gentle, and Ravenpaw let the fur on his spine relax. “I need to speak with Leafstar. Please, it’s important.”

Echosong studied him for a moment, then turned, her fluffy silver tail straight up. “Follow me.” She led them past Plumwillow and Bouncefire, who hissed under his breath, and up one of the narrow paths. She paused and looked back. “I’m sorry,” she mewed. “There isn’t much room in Leafstar’s den. I can take Ravenpaw to her, but would the rest of you mind staying down here?”

Barley glanced at the warriors who had started to emerge from dens and behind rocks at the bottom of the valley.

“Don’t worry, you’re quite safe,” Echosong told him. “Hawkpaw will look after you.”

A sturdy little cat with sleek gray fur and piercing yellow eyes who had just come out of a den nodded. “Absolutely,”

he promised.

“Thank you,” Echosong meowed. “Let me know if Ebonyclaw arrives and needs you to do something else.” She went on to Ravenpaw, “Ebonyclaw is a daylight warrior, so she’s not here yet. Hawkpaw is her apprentice.”

“He seems very committed,” Ravenpaw remarked.

Echosong nodded. “He is. As long as we keep him away from Billystorm’s apprentice, Pebblepaw. The two of them do not get along!”

They left Barley, Riley, and Bella standing rather awkwardly with the gray apprentice and continued up the path. It led past several small caves—warrior dens, Ravenpaw guessed from the scents that wafted out—to a ledge where three cats sat: Leafstar, a ginger-and-white tom with a broad, handsome face, and a dark ginger tom whose gaze raked Ravenpaw’s pelt as he approached.

Leafstar dipped her head. “Ravenpaw. I wasn’t expecting to see you again.” She indicated the cats beside her, the scowling dark ginger tom first. “This is Sharpclaw, my deputy. And this is Billystorm. Whatever you have to tell me, you can say in front of them.”

Ravenpaw took a deep breath and hoped the warriors couldn’t hear his heart pounding. “I want to help you with the kittypet, er . . . problem. We saw what happened last night, and I think there’s a way you could stop it.”

Sharpclaw stood up, hackles raised. “So you were trespassing?” he growled.

“We were on the cliff top, on the other side of your

border marks,” Ravenpaw replied, trying not to let his paws shake.

“Sit down, Sharpclaw,” Leafstar mewed.

The ginger tom slowly folded his hind legs beneath him. “Those kittypets are a nuisance, nothing more,” he rasped. “We’re not afraid of them.”

“But they must be taught to respect your boundaries,” Ravenpaw meowed. “You cannot let them come into the heart of your camp!”

“We’re hardly welcoming them in!” Billystorm pointed out.

Leafstar raised one paw. “Do you think you know a way to keep them out of the camp, Ravenpaw?” Her tone was light, as if she was prepared to listen to him out of politeness.

Ravenpaw stood up and unsheathed his front claws to mark a shape on the sandy ledge. With a few swift lines he made a circle with ripples spreading outward, just like the pattern in the moonlit pool in his dream.

“This is your camp,” he explained, pointing to the circle in the center. “But the boundaries need to be much farther out, to keep trespassers at a safe distance.” He rested his paw on the outermost ripple. “This is the point that you need to defend, halfway across the empty ground between your camp and the Twoleg dens. If you make that your boundary, and prove to the kittypets that you will not let them cross, then your home will be safe.”

“Who are you to tell us about boundaries?” Sharpclaw

huffed. "You're not even a Clan cat."

But Leafstar nodded, staring down at the marks in the sand. "You mean we should move our boundary back from the edge of the gorge? Yes, I can see there is sense in that. It will be harder to patrol because there are so few points to place markers out there, but it would certainly protect the gorge." She looked up at Ravenpaw. "How would you teach the kittypets to stay away from the new boundary?"

Ravenpaw gulped. Memories of his time in ThunderClan whirled in his head: patrols, checking border marks, training with Tigerclaw . . . "Constant patrols along the new border, all night, until the kittypets learn exactly where it lies," he meowed. "Your warriors will need to rest during the day, but perhaps the daylight cats can take over duties then? You might only need a constant patrol for one night, if you fight hard enough."

"We always fight hard enough!" Sharpclaw snarled.

Ravenpaw blinked. "Before sunhigh today, you must set markers along the new boundary. Build places to mark, if you must, from branches or piles of stones. Then rest until dusk, when every warrior and apprentice must take their place along the border. The kittypets must not be allowed to set one paw across the line." He stopped, panting. His belly was gripped by a spasm, and he tried hard not to curl into a ball to ease it.

Leafstar studied Ravenpaw with a thoughtful gleam in her eyes. "Once again, ThunderClan comes to help us," she mewed.

“Oh, I’m not ThunderClan anymore,” Ravenpaw replied.

Leafstar didn’t say anything. Instead she stood up and padded down the path to the bottom of the gorge, then leaped gracefully onto the boulder. “SkyClan, gather here!” she yowled.

Ravenpaw limped down behind Sharpclaw and Billystorm to join Barley. The black-and-white cat regarded him with concern, but Ravenpaw just nodded toward Leafstar, who was explaining the plan to expand the Clan’s boundaries. Her Clanmates listened in silence, with frequent glances at the visitors. When Leafstar had finished, she beckoned to Ravenpaw with her tail. Ravenpaw gulped.

“Go on!” Bella squeaked, bouncing on her paws with excitement.

Ravenpaw stayed where he was—he didn’t think he could jump anywhere with this pain in his belly—and turned to face the crowd of cats. “You are stronger than you realize,” he began, raising his voice in spite of the throbbing inside him.

There were a few indignant murmurs.

“You know nothing about how strong we are!”

“Come here and fight if you think we’re so weak!”

Ravenpaw carried on. “Unlike kittypets, you have your warrior ancestors on your side, and your faith in the warrior code to keep you strong. You have to make an invisible boundary visible—and *painful*—to the kittypets who show you no respect.” He drew another breath. “They are not warriors! They will not win!”

"They are not warriors! They will not win!" echoed the cats, and Ravenpaw sagged with relief. Leafstar met his gaze and nodded.

Sharpclaw bounded onto the rock and began dividing the cats into patrols to trace out the boundary and create new markers far back from the edge of the cliff. To Ravenpaw's surprise, he paused and growled at Riley and Bella, "I suppose you want to help too?"

The young cats nodded so hard their ears flapped.

Sharpclaw flicked his tail at Riley. "You go with Cherrytail, Waspwhisker, and Dustpaw to pile up stones for the new markers." Riley ran over to join the patrol. Sharpclaw gestured to Bella. "You can help Bouncefire and Blossompaw fetch sticks from the woods."

"What about the daylight warriors?" Plumwillow called from the middle of the crowd. "Are they going to do all the regular duties so we can rest before the fight?"

A slender black-and-white tom popped his head up. "We'll do all that, *and* stay to fight," he declared. Around him, several cats nodded. "We are SkyClan as much as you are! This is our battle too!"

"Thank you, Macgyver," Sharpclaw meowed.

"I've been invited to join a hunting patrol," Barley murmured in Ravenpaw's ear. "But you need to get some rest."

Ravenpaw opened his mouth to object, but Barley went on. "I can see you're in pain. Don't lie to me, please. Just look after yourself while I help with the fresh-kill pile."

Ravenpaw nodded. "I'll be here when you get back," he promised.

He watched the black-and-white cat trot over to a patrol that included Firefern. The ginger she-cat greeted him frostily, but a brown tom seemed more welcoming and fell in beside Barley as they padded out of the camp.

Echosong appeared beside Ravenpaw. "Are you feeling up to a climb?" she asked. "It's not far, and I promise it will be worth it."

"Of course," Ravenpaw meowed. He followed her along the gorge and up a path that wound back and forth at tight angles until it reached the top of the cliff. Ravenpaw scrambled onto the flat ground with a grunt of relief.

"It gets easier," Echosong told him, hardly out of breath. She pointed with her tail to a rocky slab that jutted out over the gorge. "This is a very special place for SkyClan," she explained. "It's where we gather at the full moon, and where I come to speak with StarClan." She padded onto the rock and gestured to Ravenpaw to lie down beside her.

"I love it up here," Echosong murmured, gazing out at the gorge and the woods beyond. "It's so peaceful, and yet you can see everything that's going on."

Ravenpaw nodded. He could see Barley's black-and-white shape leaping through the trees; farther along the cliff, Riley was rolling a stone with his paws. Then he heard footsteps behind him and turned to see three cats approaching. He was faintly aware that Echosong had vanished and he was alone on the rock.

The figures were so familiar that his heart ached and he had to blink to see clearly. Bluestar, Whitestorm, and Lionheart stepped onto the rock and stood in front of him, each one dipping their head in respect.

"We are honored to see you again," Bluestar mewed. "Don't stand up," she added as Ravenpaw struggled to get his hind legs under him.

"I am the one who is honored," Ravenpaw purred.

"We have never forgotten you," Whitestorm told him. "We have watched over you, and rejoiced in the happiness you have found with Barley." He dropped his head. "I am only sorry we could not spare you the pain you suffered in ThunderClan."

"I wouldn't change a thing," Ravenpaw promised. "If anything had been different, I might not have had my life with Barley. I have been happier than I ever imagined a cat could be."

Lionheart gazed at him, and Ravenpaw felt his pelt glow with warmth. "We have come to do something we should have done a long time ago," the golden tabby explained. "We would like to give you your warrior name. You have more than earned it, with the courage, fairness, and loyalty you have shown to these cats, and to every cat who has crossed your path."

Ravenpaw took a deep breath. How often he had dreamed of this moment when he had been an apprentice, wondering what his warrior name would be! But he was no longer an apprentice, no longer part of ThunderClan or the

forest. He looked at the noble cats in front of him.

“Thank you,” he purred. “But I already have a name. I am proud to have been Ravenpaw all my life, and I see no reason to change it now.”

Bluestar nodded. “I thought you might feel that way.” She traced her paw across the stone. “You know that your time is drawing to an end, I think. Would you like to join us in StarClan? You would be very welcome.”

Ravenpaw turned and looked down at the gorge. He could see Barley standing at the edge of the woods, looking up at him. The black-and-white cat kinked his tail in greeting, and Ravenpaw waved his tail in reply. Then he turned back to the StarClan cats.

“I cannot join you,” he mewed softly. “There is someone I need to wait for. I hope there is a place where we can be together, even though he is not a Clan cat.”

Lionheart nodded. “We understand. And rest assured, there is a place waiting for you both. But you are welcome to visit us in StarClan whenever you wish. You will find a way, I promise.”

He reached forward and rested his muzzle on Ravenpaw’s head. Ravenpaw felt his soft breath against his fur, and slipped gratefully into painless sleep.



CHAPTER TEN



When Ravenpaw woke, Echosong was sitting beside him, her tail twitching.

“Ah, you’re awake,” she mewed.

The sun was sliding behind the trees, and dusky shadows were gathering in the gorge. The bare, scrubby grass that led to the Twolegplace was empty and quiet, but Ravenpaw scented fresh border marks drifting on the breeze. Cats circled restlessly in the SkyClan camp below.

“The new boundary is in place,” Echosong told him as they made their way down the cliff. “My Clanmates are ready to defend it with their lives.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” Ravenpaw meowed with a stir of alarm.

Riley and Bella bounded up to him as he approached the boulder. “We’ve had such a great day!” Riley announced. “I was totally the best at pushing stones. Cherrytail told me!”

“And I found the longest stick!” Bella mewed. “Blossompaw helped me carry it.”

A brown tom called to them.

“That’s Rabbitleap,” Riley explained. “We’re in his patrol tonight. See you later, Ravenpaw!”

The young cats whirled around and raced off.

Barley padded up to Ravenpaw, the scent of fresh-kill

clinging to his pelt. "They've made friends already," he observed.

"There are some good cats in SkyClan," Ravenpaw agreed. "How was the hunting?"

"Not bad at all. I caught two mice and a squirrel, which silenced a few comments." There was a note of amusement in Barley's voice. "Have you eaten yet?"

Ravenpaw's stomach churned at the thought of food. A spasm of pain racked his body, and shadows swam behind his eyes. He felt Barley press against him, holding him up.

"You need to lie down," his friend told him. He steered Ravenpaw to a soft patch of sand at the edge of the gorge. Ravenpaw sank down with a hiss of pain.

"You can't fight tonight," Barley mewed. His eyes were huge with alarm. "You're not strong enough."

Ravenpaw gazed at his friend. "Oh, Barley. You know me so well. Better than any cat ever has." He nudged Barley's cheek with his nose. "But there is a secret that I have kept from you without meaning to: I have always been a warrior. I have a loyalty to these cats, and I must fight alongside them, whatever happens."

Barley's eyes filled with water. "You're so stubborn," he murmured. "I really can't stop you, can I?"

"No. But you can be at my side," Ravenpaw replied. "Please."

Barley leaned his head against Ravenpaw's. "Always."

Ravenpaw stood up with effort, and they joined the other cats as they trekked in silence up the gorge and onto

the plain of rustling grass. Sharpclaw signaled with his tail to send them out along the new border, the marks fresh and pungent on newly built heaps of stones and sticks. *They've worked hard today*, Ravenpaw thought.

On either side of him, the SkyClan warriors moved quickly and efficiently. It was impossible to tell which cats were the daylight warriors, apart from the faintest hint of a different scent on their fur. It was clear that, no matter where SkyClan found its warriors, this was a well-trained and deeply loyal Clan.

Ravenpaw and Barley crouched down in the grass alongside Billystorm and his apprentice, Pebblepaw. Her white fur was dusted with brown speckles, which kept her well hidden among the moonlit grass. Ravenpaw had lost sight of Riley and Bella farther along the line. He hoped they remembered everything he had taught them. *StarClan, keep them safe!*

Sharpclaw's quiet hiss traveled along the row of cats in the still air: "At my signal, *fight!*"

It seemed as if a whole moon passed before they heard paws thudding over the ground toward them. Ravenpaw tensed. There were more kittypets this time, and they were already shrieking with excitement. *They have no idea we are waiting for them!*

Beside Ravenpaw, Billystorm unsheathed his claws and gathered his haunches under him, ready to spring. Closer, closer, closer the kittypets thundered . . .

"Fight!" yowled Sharpclaw, and the SkyClan cats leaped

forward in a single, hissing wave.

The kittypets scrambled to a halt, yowling in terror. They were vastly outnumbered but still put up a fight, taking on two or three SkyClan warriors each in a whirling fury of teeth and claws. All at once Ravenpaw was an apprentice again, remembering everything Tigerclaw had taught him. He leaped and dodged and lashed out with his claws. At his side, Barley fought like his shadow, matching him step for step, the equal of any warrior.

In the half-light, Ravenpaw found himself crashing into a she-cat with distinctive silver-and-black fur. It was one of the kittypets who had tormented them on their first night.

"You're still here?" she spat.

"We're more welcome here than you are!" puffed Barley, slamming into her flank.

The she-cat sprang away and launched herself at them, claws out. Ravenpaw folded his legs and ducked out of the way; as the she-cat skidded past, he reared up and brought his front paws down on her haunches. She dropped to the ground with a snarl, then gathered her hind legs and kicked straight back into Ravenpaw's exposed belly.

A white-hot pain seared through him. He was aware of Barley charging at the kittypet, raking his claws down her back and sending her shrieking across the grass. Ravenpaw fell backward and lay still, panting, waiting for the spasm to ease. He heard Barley thudding after the kittypet. The ground thrummed with the sound of fleeing paws, the kittypets being chased away by gleeful, hissing warriors.

Gradually silence fell over the plain. Cats came padding back, a few of them limping. Ravenpaw heard a cheer: "We won! They're gone!"

The warriors started to move more quickly, running back to the gorge, to the camp they had kept safe, in order to celebrate.

Barley's face loomed over Ravenpaw. "Are you all right? Have you been injured?"

Ravenpaw shook his head and heaved himself up. Barley started to fuss, but Ravenpaw shot him a glare. There would be time for that later; now he wanted to share in SkyClan's victory. He stumbled back down to the gorge, leaning heavily on Barley's shoulder. Leafstar was standing on top of the rock, her cream patches of fur glowing in the moonlight.

"Ravenpaw, there you are!" she called. "SkyClan thanks you for helping us tonight! Without you, those kittypets might never have respected our borders."

The cats around the rock turned to look at Ravenpaw, their eyes gleaming like tiny stars, and yowled in triumph. Ravenpaw closed his eyes in relief. *We did it!*

There was a stir beside him, and Riley and Bella appeared from the throng. Their pelts were ruffled, and Bella had a claw mark on one ear, but they were quivering with excitement.

"Oh, wow!" Riley gasped. "That was amazing!"

"We did everything you showed us!" Bella mewed. "I did a front-paw blow that made a kittypet fall over!"

“Well done,” Ravenpaw purred, trying not to show his pain. “I’m so proud of you!”

“We both are,” Barley meowed.

“Riley, Bella, are you there?” Leafstar called from the rock. “I have something important to ask you.”

The young cats glanced at each other, then pushed their way to the front of the cats. “We’re here!” Bella mewed.

Leafstar beckoned to them with her tail. “Come, join me.”

Riley and Bella scrambled up the boulder and stood on top. Leafstar faced them. “You fought well tonight,” she praised. “As bravely as any of my Clanmates, in fact. I was wrong to think that I needed to know a cat from kithood before I could trust them. You have proved that you belong here.”

Bella let out a tiny squeak.

Leafstar dipped her head. “Riley, Bella, will you do SkyClan the honor of joining us?”

Ravenpaw felt his heart flip over. Beside him, Barley purred so loudly his whiskers trembled.

The SkyClan leader nodded to two of her warriors. “Tynycloud, Nettlesplash, will you be their mentors?”

“With pleasure,” meowed Tynycloud, a slight-framed white she-cat. Beside her, a sturdy brown tom nodded.

“Rileypaw, Bellapaw, StarClan welcomes you to SkyClan as apprentices.” Leafstar began the ceremony, and Ravenpaw was plunged back to the clearing at the bottom of the ravine, listening to Bluestar announce his apprentice name for the first time.

"You need to rest," Barley whispered in his ear. Without arguing, Ravenpaw allowed his friend to usher him along the path that led to Echosong's den. His head was buzzing, but he could hear the SkyClan cats cheering, "Rileypaw! Bellapaw!" behind him.

A pale silver shape met them on the path. *Silverstream?* Ravenpaw wondered blurrily.

"Ah, Ravenpaw," murmured Echosong. "Come with me."

She turned to go into her den, but Ravenpaw hesitated. "Not inside, please," he rasped. "I'd rather be under the trees."

Echosong nodded, and she nudged him gently around until they were padding toward the woods.

"Wait!" Barley mewed, trotting alongside. "He's very sick! Shouldn't you take him to your den and treat him?"

"It is too late for that, Barley," Echosong murmured. "We must do what Ravenpaw wishes now."

They reached the rustling trees, and Ravenpaw sank down onto a patch of soft, cool grass. He felt shadows gathering around him, tugging at his limbs. He wasn't afraid; he knew it was time. Rileypaw and Bellapaw would live as warriors now, thanks to him. But Barley . . .

His old friend curled around him, just as he had always done when they slept. Ravenpaw could feel him trembling, and he wished there were something he could do to comfort him.

"It's all right," Barley whispered, his voice breaking. "I know you have to leave me. I will never forget you, I

promise.”

Ravenpaw gasped for one more breath. “I will wait for you. Wherever you are, I will find you.” He let his head fall onto Barley’s front paw. Everything was starting to feel very far away.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard cats approaching.

“We will give him a warrior’s farewell,” Leafstar meowed. “He may be far from home, but SkyClan will be honored to sit vigil for him.”

There was a gulp from Barley.

I’m sorry, my friend, Ravenpaw thought. He let the shadows fill his mind. Around him, the trees shimmered with starlight, and his legs felt young and strong again. The pain in his belly had gone. Ravenpaw stood up and looked down at Barley. *I will always watch over you,* he vowed. Then he turned and walked into the woods. His heart cried out to stay with his friend, but he knew he had to keep walking. The shadows closed around him, but somewhere ahead there was warm sunshine creeping through the trees, and the scent of prey.

Farewell, Barley. I will see you again one day.

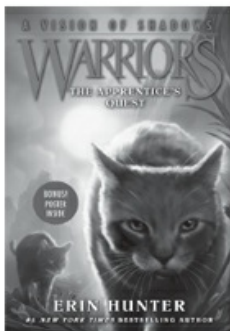
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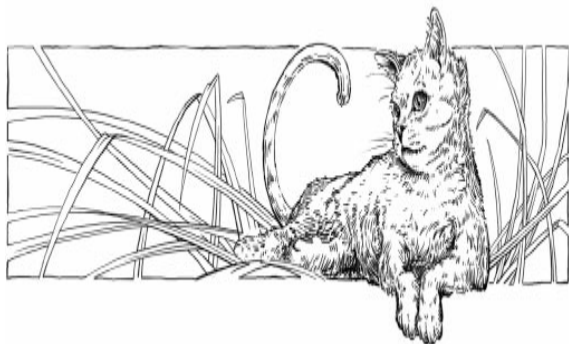
A VISION OF SHADOWS

WARRIORS

BOOK ONE:
THE APPRENTICE'S
QUEST



For many moons, the warrior cats have lived in peace in their territories around the lake. But a dark shadow looms on the horizon, and the time has come for Alderpaw—son of the ThunderClan leader, Bramblestar, and his deputy, Squirrelflight—to shape his destiny . . . and the fate of all the warrior Clans.



CHAPTER 1



Alderkit stood in front of the nursery, nervously shifting his weight. He unsheathed his claws, digging them into the beaten earth of the stone hollow, then sheathed them again and shook dust from his paws.

Now what happens? he asked himself, his belly churning as he thought about his apprentice ceremony that was only moments away. *What if there's some sort of an assessment before I can be an apprentice?*

Alderkit thought he had heard something about an assessment once. Perhaps it had been a few moons ago when Hollytuft, Fernsong, and Sorrelstripe were made warriors. *But I can't really remember . . . I was so little then.*

His heart started to pound faster and faster. He tried to convince himself that some cat would have told him if he was supposed to prove that he was ready. *Because I'm not sure that I am ready to become an apprentice. Not sure at all. What if I can't do it?*

Deep in his own thoughts, Alderkit jumped in surprise as some cat nudged him hard from behind. Spinning around, he saw his sister Sparkkit, her orange tabby fur bushing out in all directions.

"Aren't you excited?" she asked with an enthusiastic bounce. "Don't you want to know who your mentor will be?"

I hope I get someone *fun*! Not a bossy cat like Berrynose, or one like Whitewing. She sticks so close to the rules I think she must recite the warrior code in her sleep!”

“That’s enough.” The kits’ mother, Squirrelflight, emerged from the nursery in time to hear Sparkkit’s last words. “You’re not supposed to *have fun* with your mentor,” she added, licking one paw and smoothing it over Sparkkit’s pelt. “You’re supposed to *learn* from them. Berrynose and Whitewing are both fine warriors. You’d be very lucky to have either of them as your mentor.”

Though Squirrelflight’s voice was sharp, her green gaze shone with love for her kits. Alderkit knew how much his mother adored him and his sister. He was only a kit, but he knew that Squirrelflight was old to have her first litter, and he remembered their shared grief for his lost littermates: Juniperkit, who had barely taken a breath before he died, and Dandelionkit, who had never been strong and who had slowly weakened until she also died two moons later.

Sparkkit and I have to be the best cats we can be for Squirrelflight and Bramblestar.

Sparkkit, meanwhile, wasn’t at all cowed by her mother’s scolding. She twitched her tail and cheerfully shook her pelt until her fur fluffed up again.

Alderkit wished he had her confidence. He hadn’t wondered until now who his mentor would be, and he gazed around the clearing at the other cats with new and curious eyes. *Ivypool would be an okay mentor*, he thought, spotting the silver-and-white tabby she-cat returning from a

hunting patrol with Lionblaze and Blossomfall. *She's friendly and a good hunter. Lionblaze is a bit scary, though.* Alderkit suppressed a shiver at the sight of the muscles rippling beneath the golden warrior's pelt. *And it won't be Blossomfall, because she was just mentor for Hollytuft. Or Brackenfur or Rosepetal, because they mentored Sorrelstripe and Fernsong.*

Lost in thought, Alderkit watched Thornclaw, who had paused in the middle of the clearing to give himself a good scratch behind one ear. *He'd probably be okay, though he's sort of short-tempered. . . .*

"Hey, wake up!" Sparkkit trod down hard on Alderkit's paw. "It's starting!"

Alderkit realized that Bramblestar had appeared on the Highledge outside his den, way above their heads on the wall of the stone hollow.

"Let every cat old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!" Bramblestar yowled.

Alderkit gazed at his father admiringly as all the cats in the clearing turned their attention to him and began to gather together. *He's so confident and strong. I'm so lucky to be the son of such an amazing cat.*

Bramblestar ran lightly down the tumbled rocks and took his place in the center of the ragged circle of cats that was forming at the foot of the rock wall. Squirrelflight gently nudged her two kits forward until they too stood in the circle.

Alderkit's belly began to churn even harder, and he tightened all his muscles to stop himself from trembling. *I can't do this!* he thought, struggling not to panic.

Then he caught sight of his father's gaze on him: such a warm, proud look that Alderkit instantly felt comforted. He took a few deep breaths, forcing himself to relax.

"Cats of ThunderClan," Bramblestar began, "this is a good day for us, because it's time to make two new apprentices. Sparkkit, come here, please."

Instantly Sparkkit bounced into the center of the circle, her tail standing straight up and her fur bristling with excitement. She gazed confidently at her leader.

"From this day forward," Bramblestar meowed, touching Sparkkit on her shoulder with his tail-tip, "this apprentice will be known as Sparkpaw. Cherryfall, you will be her mentor. I trust that you will pass on to her your dedication to your Clan, your quick mind, and your excellent hunting skills."

Sparkpaw dashed across the circle to Cherryfall, bouncing with happiness, and the ginger she-cat bent her head to touch noses with her.

"Sparkpaw! Sparkpaw!" the Clan began to yowl.

Sparkpaw gave a pleased little hop as her Clanmates chanted her new name, her eyes shining as she stood beside her mentor.

Alderkit joined in the acclamation, pleased to see how happy his sister looked. *Thank StarClan! There wasn't any kind of test to prove that she was ready.*

As the yowling died away, Bramblestar beckoned to Alderkit with his tail. "Your turn," he meowed, his gaze encouraging Alderkit on.

Alderkit's legs suddenly felt wobbly as he staggered into the center of the circle. His chest felt tight, as if he couldn't breathe properly. But as he halted in front of Bramblestar, his father gave him a slight nod to steady him, and he stood with his head raised as Bramblestar rested the tip of his tail on his shoulder.

"From this day forward, this apprentice will be known as Alderpaw," Bramblestar announced. "Molewhisker, you will be his mentor. You are loyal, determined, and brave, and I know that you will do your best to pass on these qualities to your apprentice."

As he padded across the clearing to join his mentor, Alderpaw wasn't sure how he felt. He knew that Molewhisker was Cherryfall's littermate, but the big cream-and-brown tom was much quieter than his sister, and had never shown much interest in the kits. His gaze was solemn as he bent to touch noses with Alderpaw.

I hope I can make you proud of me, Alderpaw thought. I'm going to try my hardest!

"Alderpaw! Alderpaw!"

Alderpaw ducked his head and gave his chest fur a few embarrassed licks as he heard his Clan caterwauling his name. At the same time, he thought he would burst with happiness.

At last the chanting died away and the crowd of cats

began to disperse, heading toward their dens or the fresh-kill pile. Squirrelflight and Bramblestar padded over to join their kits.

“Well done,” Bramblestar meowed. “It wasn’t so scary, was it?”

“It was great!” Sparkpaw responded, her tail waving in the air. “I can’t wait to go hunting!”

“We’re so proud of both of you,” Squirrelflight purred, giving Sparkpaw and then Alderpaw a lick around their ears. “I’m sure you’ll both be wonderful warriors one day.”

Bramblestar dipped his head in agreement. “I know you both have so much to give your Clan.” He stepped back as he finished speaking, and waved his tail to draw Molewhisker and Cherryfall closer. “Listen to your mentors,” he told the two new apprentices. “I’m looking forward to hearing good things about your progress.”

With an affectionate nuzzle he turned away and headed toward his den. Squirrelflight too gave her kits a quick cuddle, and then followed him. Alderpaw and Sparkpaw were left alone with Molewhisker and Cherryfall.

Molewhisker faced Alderpaw, blinking solemnly. “It’s a big responsibility, being an apprentice,” he meowed. “You must pay close attention to everything you’re taught, because one day your Clan may depend on your fighting or hunting skills.”

Alderpaw nodded; his anxiety was returning. A hard lump of worry was lodged in his throat like an indigestible piece of fresh-kill.

"You'll have to work hard to prove you have what it takes to be a proper warrior," Molewhisker went on.

His head held high, Alderpaw tried to look worthy, but was afraid he wasn't making a very good job of it. Hearing Cherryfall talking to Sparkpaw just behind him didn't help at all.

". . . and we'll have such fun exploring the territory!" the ginger she-cat mewed enthusiastically. "And now you'll get to go to Gatherings."

Alderpaw couldn't help wishing that his own mentor was a little more like his littermate's, instead of being so serious.

"Can we start learning to hunt now?" Sparkpaw asked eagerly.

It was Molewhisker who replied. "Not right now. As well as learning to be warriors, apprentices have special duties for the well-being of the whole Clan."

"What do we have to do?" Alderpaw asked, hoping to impress his mentor and show that he was ready for anything.

There was a guilty look on Cherryfall's face as she meowed, "Today you're going to make the elders more comfortable by getting rid of their ticks."

Molewhisker waved his tail in the direction of the medicine cats' den. "Go and ask Leafpool or Jayfeather for some mouse bile. They'll tell you how to use it."

"Mouse bile!" Sparkpaw wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Yuck!"

Alderpaw's heart sank still further. *If this is being an*

apprentice, I'm not sure I'm going to like it.

Sunlight shone into the den beneath the hazel bushes where the elders lived. Alderpaw wished that he could curl up in the warmth and take a nap. Instead, he combed his claws painstakingly through Graystripe's long pelt, searching for ticks. Sparkpaw was doing the same for Purdy, while Sandstorm and Millie looked on, patiently waiting their turn.

"Wow, there's a massive tick here!" Sparkpaw exclaimed. "Hold still, Purdy, and I'll get it off."

With clenched teeth she picked up the twig Jayfeather had given her, a ball of moss soaked in mouse bile stuck on one end, and awkwardly maneuvered it until she could dab the moss onto Purdy's tick.

The old tabby shook his pelt and sighed with relief as the tick fell off. "That's much better, young 'un," he purred.

"But this stuff smells *horrible!*" Sparkpaw mumbled around the twig. "I don't know how you elders can stand it." Suppressing a sigh, she began parting Purdy's matted, untidy fur in search of more ticks.

"Now you listen to me, youngster," Purdy meowed. "There's not a cat in ThunderClan who wasn't an apprentice once, takin' off ticks, just like you."

"Even Bramblestar?" Alderpaw asked, pausing with one paw sunk deep in Graystripe's pelt.

"Even *Firestar*," Graystripe responded. "He and I were apprentices together, and I've lost count of the number of

ticks we shifted. Hey!” he added, giving Alderpaw a prod. “Watch what you’re doing. Your claws are digging into my shoulder!”

“Sorry!” Alderpaw replied.

In spite of being scolded, he felt quite content. Cleaning off ticks was a messy job, but there were worse things than sitting in the sun and listening to the elders. He looked up briefly to see Sandstorm’s green gaze resting lovingly on him and his sister as she settled herself more comfortably in the bracken of her nest.

“I remember when your mother was first made an apprentice,” she mewed. “Dustpelt was her mentor. You won’t remember him—he died in the Great Storm—but he was one of our best warriors, and he didn’t put up with any nonsense. Even so, Squirrelflight was a match for him!”

“What did she do?” Alderpaw asked, intrigued to think of his serious, businesslike mother as a difficult young apprentice. “Go on, tell us!”

Sandstorm sighed. “What *didn’t* she do? Slipping out of camp to hunt on her own . . . getting stuck in bushes or falling into streams . . . I remember Dustpelt said to me once, ‘If that kit of yours doesn’t shape up, I’m going to claw her pelt off and hang it on a bush to frighten the foxes!’”

Sparkpaw stared at Sandstorm with her mouth gaping. “He wouldn’t!”

“No, of course he wouldn’t,” Sandstorm responded, her green eyes alight with amusement. “But Dustpelt had to be tough with her. He saw how much she had to offer her Clan,

but he knew she wouldn't live up to her potential unless she learned discipline."

"She sure did that," Alderpaw meowed.

"Hey!" Graystripe gave Alderpaw another prod. "What about my ticks, huh?"

"And ours," Millie put in, with a glance at Sandstorm. "We've been waiting *moons!*"

"Sorry . . ."

Alderpaw began rapidly searching through Graystripe's fur, and almost at once came across a huge swollen tick. *That must be making Graystripe really uncomfortable.*

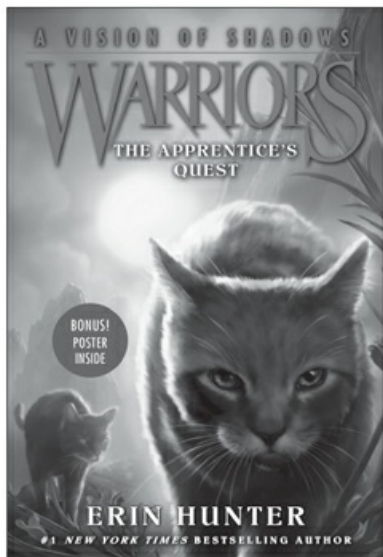
Picking up his stick with the bile-soaked moss, he dabbed at the tick. At the same moment, he happened to glance up, and spotted Leafpool and Jayfeather talking intently to each other just outside the medicine cats' den.

As Alderpaw wondered vaguely what was so important, both medicine cats turned toward him. Suddenly he felt trapped by Jayfeather's blind gaze and Leafpool's searching one.

A worm of uneasiness began to gnaw at Alderpaw's belly. *Great StarClan! Are they talking about me? Have I messed something up already?*

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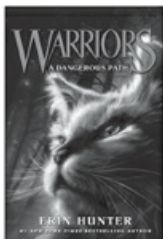
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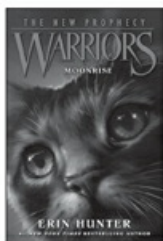
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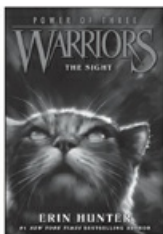
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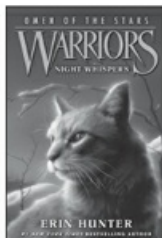
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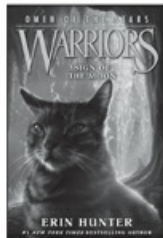
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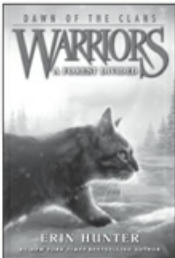
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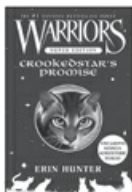
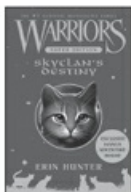
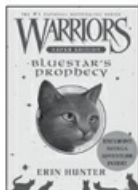
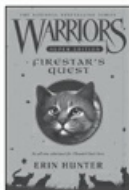
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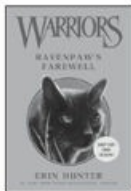
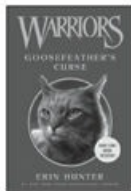
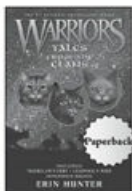
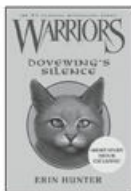
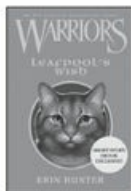
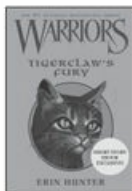
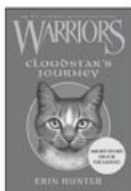
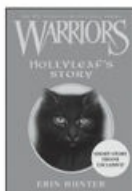
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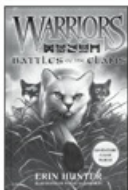
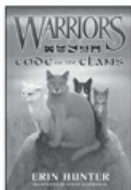
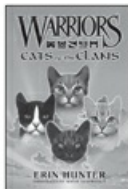
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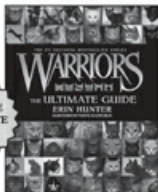
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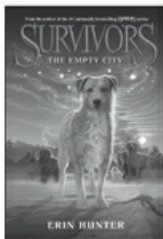
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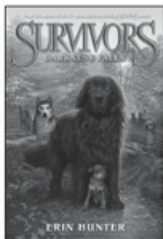
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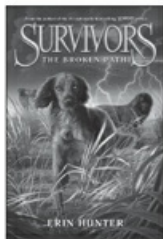
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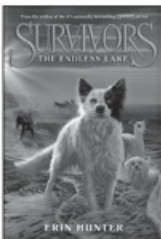
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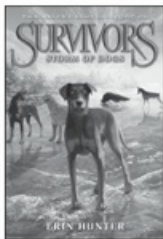
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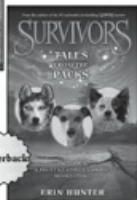
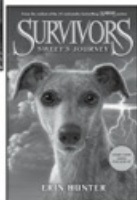
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich, mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling *Survivors and Seekers* series.

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