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WARLIORS
TIGERSTAR & SASHA

RETURN TO THE CLANS

ERIN HUNTER 3
WARRIORS
TIGERSTAR & SASHA
#3: RETURN TO THE CLANS
Hello again!

When Sasha returns to the forest with her kits, she is terrified that they’ll be seized by a ShadowClan patrol until an unexpected friend brings startling news: Tigerstar is dead. When we watched Tigerstar lose his nine lives in *The Darkest Hour*, I wanted us to feel something much more complicated than straightforward relief that Firestar’s number one enemy had been vanquished. Instead, I wanted us to share Firestar’s shock and even grief that a brave, skillful warrior had been killed just when the Clans needed all their best fighters.

Sasha is going to have a similar response to news of Tigerstar’s demise. Her kits may be safe from being snatched by the cruel, ambitious leader of ShadowClan—but at the same time, they have lost their father, who would have shared Sasha’s pride in them as she watches them grow up. Sasha is smart enough—and forgiving enough—to recognize the strength in the way the Clans live. She’s a truly remarkable cat, one who has experienced life as a kittypet, a Clan cat, and now a loner, and been able to see the value in each of these. I think we know where Sasha has been happiest, but what about her kits? Which life will she choose for them?

Walk this way, to a windswept forest, and find out. . . .

Best wishes always,
Erin Hunter
FOR A LITTLE WHILE... JUST A FEW MOMENTS, REALLY... L I FE SEEMS PERF ECT.

I WISH IT COULD STAY THAT WAY.

BUT MY LITTLE ONES NEED A LOT OF MILK, AND IF I'M GOING TO PROVIDE IT FOR THEM, I HAVE TO BE STRONG.

WHICH MEANS I HAVE TO HUNT. EVERY DAY.

AND PREY IS GETTING SCARCE AND SCARCE.
These kits are my whole life now, but... have I done the right thing? I'm so cold, and tired...

I've named them well, I think.

Hawk...

...his sister moth...

...and the oldest, tadpole.

As soon as they're old enough, I'm taking them as far from ShadowClan's borders as possible.

Tigerstar will never see them. He won't be a part of their lives at all. I'll make sure of that.
BUT I STILL WISH THEY COULD SEE HOW STRONG THEIR FATHER IS... HOW COMMANDING...

...HOW WONDERFUL HE CAN BE.
I WON'T SEE HIM, NOT EVER AGAIN, NOT WHEN I'M AWAKE, BUT, MORE NIGHTS THAN NOT...

...I SEE HIM IN MY DREAMS.

EVEN THERE, I CAN'T BEAR TO TALK TO HIM. NOT AFTER WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT HIM, ABOUT HIS TRUE NATURE.

I KNOW IT'S ONLY A DREAM... BUT IT STILL HURTS.
THE KITS STAY IN THE DEN, OF COURSE, WHILE I HUNT. AND AS SCRAWNY AND WEAK AS I'VE GOTTEN...

...MOST DAYS IT'S A RELIEF THAT THEY CAN'T SEE ME. I'D BE SO EMBARRASSED.

I NEVER GIVE UP, THOUGH. NEVER EVEN CONSIDER IT. AND IF WHAT I FINALLY BRING HOME IS A PITIFUL LITTLE MOUSE...

...WELL, THAT'S JUST FINE.
THE SUN RISES AND SETS, RISES AND SETS...AND FINALLY...TOWARD THE END OF LEAF-BARE...

...I GET MY STRENGTH BACK.

C'MERE, YOU BUSHY-TAILED MORS...!

NO POINT IN RUNNING...

...YOU'RE JUST DELAYING THE INEVIT-
OH NO. OH NO NO NO, I'M IN SHADOWCLAN TERRITORY! I DIDN'T REALIZE I'D CROSSED THE BORDER!

I THINK THIS MUST BE THE WORST BLOODCLAN SPY I'VE EVER SEEN. JUST THREW HERSELF RIGHT INTO OUR PAWS.

SEND HER BACK TO BLOODCLAN IN LITTLE PIECES.

LET'S MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF HER.

NO.

OUR LEADER SHOULD BE THE ONE TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH SPIES. DON'T YOU AGREE, Russetfur?
No...no! I can't face Tigerstar! And that ginger cat—Russetfur.

She knows me! She's going to tell everyone who I am!

I can't believe it! She's helping me! I'm going to get out of this alive after all...!

Wait, wait, wait.

I smell milk on her.

She must have kits close by!
OH, PLEASE, NO, DONT...IF THEY FIND MY KITS, THEY'LL STEAL THEM, AND FORCE THEM TO BE SHADOWCLAN WARRIORS!

ESPECIALLY IF TIGERSTAR FINDS OUT THEY'RE HIS...!

I...I DID, I DID HAVE KITS. THE COLD WAS...TOO MUCH FOR THEM.

YOU POOR THING. LISTEN...YOU CAN GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM.

HOW HORRIBLE...

GO ON, NOW.

THEM ALL DIED.
I CAN BARELY BREATHE, MY HEART'S BEATING SO FAST, BUT I TRY NOT TO LET IT SHOW.

AT LEAST NOT SO THE KITS CAN SEE.

MY CLOSE CALL MAKES ME FEEL A BIT GENEROUS. I DECIDE TO LET MY KITTENS COME OUT AND PLAY...

...A TREAT THEY DON'T GET OFTEN ENOUGH.

ARE YOU SURE IT'S SAFE, TADPOLE? WHAT ABOUT...

...WHAT ABOUT FOXES?

DON'T WORRY, MOTH! I WON'T LET ANY STUPID FOXES HURT YOU!

OKAY! I'LL FOLLOW YOU! ...UH, WHERE ARE WE GOING?

WE'RE終於 OUT OF THE DEN! COME ON, COME ON!
C’MON, FOLLOW ME!

RIGHT BEHIND YOU! I—RAOW!

OH! HAWK, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

YEAH, I’M OKAY. I JUST CAN’T CLIMB LIKE TADPOLE CAN! NOT YET, ANYWAY.

THMP

COME ON, LITTLE BROTHER! YOU CAN DO IT!

JUST TRY AGAIN!
Ooooh—look at that bush over there!
Let's go see if we can climb it!

Hey...did you hear something? Sounded like something moving...in the woods...

And coming closer!

Everything's fine! Don't be scared.

Well, there's no time to run now. We'll just have to face it!

It is coming closer! It's coming straight at us!

Look out!

Mrraaowww!
TADPOLE! HAWK! MOTH!
TIME TO COME IN!
YOU SHOULD’VE SEEN IT, MAMA! IT WAS HUGE!
IT WAS GIANT-SIZE HUGE! AND WE WEREN’T SCARED AT ALL!
NOT AT ALL! WE COULDN’T CAUGHT IT, EASY.
YEAH! IT JUST, UH, SURPRISED US.
They really enjoyed themselves today, but now I worry.

What if their scent drifted all the way to ShadowClan? What would I do then?

Tell us a story, Mama! Please?

Do you want to hear about the first time I came to the forest?

Yeah! Yeah!

All right...well... I was six moons old, and I snuck away from my housefolk during Greenleaf.

I walked all the way to the edge of the woods, and I saw my first rabbit...

I ended up hiding down a hole... but then Ken, one of my housefolk, came looking for me.

But then I got chased by a fox. I think now it was just a cub, but I was very small, and the fox was scary!

He found me with his walking-stick and he carried me safely back home.
What happened to Ken?

I don't know.

One day he was there. The next day he was gone.

I never found out where he went, or why.

Don't be sad, Mama.

I can't let myself think about Ken too much. I have my own kits to look after now.

And they need me just as much as I needed Ken and Jean, maybe even more.

I'll take good care of them, no matter what. They're all I have.

And Tigerstar will never get his paws on them. No matter how often he invades my dreams.
THE NEXT DAY, I CAN'T SHAKE THE FEELING THAT SOMEHOW TIGERSTAR KNOWS ABOUT HIS KITS. I'M SCARED TO LEAVE THEM.

AWWW, MAMA, CAN'T WE JUST GO OUT FOR A LITTLE WHILE?

BUT IT'S NOT FAIR TO KEEP THEM COOPED UP, EITHER. WELL... FOR A LITTLE WHILE, YES. BUT STAY CLOSE.

WE WILL! WE WILL! WE PROMISE!

AND THEN... ALMOST THE VERY INSTANT THE KITS GET OUT OF EARSHOT...

...MY WORST NIGHTMARE COMES TRUE.
A SHADOWCLAN CAT! RIGHT HERE IN BROAD DAYLIGHT, WATCHING MY KITS!

I DON'T KNOW WHETHER TO RUN OR FIGHT OR JUST SCREAM.

WELL, ARE THEY TIGERSTARS?

MY HEART ALMOST STOPS.

Y-YES.

I THOUGHT SO.

THE TOMS LOOK LIKE HIM.

PLEASE, RUSSETFUR, PLEASE DON'T TELL TIGERSTAR ABOUT THEM!

DON'T TELL-YOU MEAN, YOU DON'T KNOW? OH, SASHA... TIGERSTAR IS DEAD.

KILLED IN BATTLE WITH BLOODCLAN, BY THAT TWOLEGPLACE CAT HE MADE THE DEAL WITH IN THE FIRST PLACE.

HE DIED, AND THEN THE CLAN CATS DROVE BLOODCLAN OUT OF THE FOREST.
He's... Dead...?

Well...

At least now the forest has a chance of peace.

Anyway... here. Take this.

I wouldn't stay around, if I were you. Any other ShadowClan cat who finds out these kits are Tigerstar's... they'll want the kits as warriors.
DON'T WORRY.

AS SOON AS THEY'RE STRONG ENOUGH TO TRAVEL, WE'RE ALL LEAVING THIS PART OF THE FOREST FOR GOOD.

ALL RIGHT.

I SHOULD GO.

YOU HAVE A LOVELY FAMILY, SASHA.

I HOPE THEY GROW UP STRONG AND HEALTHY.

I'M SADDER THAN I EXPECTED TO BE, WATCHING RUSSETFUR WALK AWAY. I WISH WE COULD'VE KNOWN EACH OTHER...

...IN BETTER TIMES.
TIGERSTAR'S DEATH HURTS ME. IT FEELS AS IF A PART OF ME JUST DIED WITH HIM, AND YET... I'M RELIEVED, TOO.

I DON'T HAVE TO LIE TO MYSELF ANYMORE. PRETEND I DIDN'T LOVE HIM WITH ALL MY HEART. THAT WAS SO HARD...

AND NOW I CAN JUST REMEMBER.

REMEMBER HOW KIND AND BRAVE HE WAS, AND HOW MUCH HE TAUGHT ME.

OH, TIGERSTAR...

...I'LL MISS YOU.

ALWAYS.
THAT NIGHT, WHEN I FINALLY SLEEP, I TRY TO SPEAK TO TIGERSTAR IN MY DREAM...

...BUT HE LEAVES ME.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS.

...I WISH HE'D STAY.
The kits don't know anything about their father, of course.

I think about telling them. Constantly I think about it.

But the time never seems right.

Instead I content myself with watching them grow.

They're so perfect.
I try my best not to let them know how hard things are right now.

It can't be helped, though. I have to keep as much distance as possible between me and ShadowClan...

Food is scarce during leafbare, and half the time when I finally find some, I have to fight for it.

It seems as if I have to go farther and farther away from the den each time I go hunting, too.

...and that puts a huge section of the forest off-limits.
At least I know I have a warm den to come home to, and three precious little--

--My old collar? No one's supposed to see this--I can't let anyone know I used to be a kittpet.

The kits know better than to take it out of the den...though I have to wonder, why bother?

I've told you all before. Don't take this out of the den.

That's fine. It's fine. Just...don't do it anymore.

We're sorry...we didn't mean to--

All right?

Even with my kits here...sometimes I feel so alone...so old and helpless.

I want Tigerstar back. I want Ken back.

But the best I can hope for is just to make it through each day.
Wow...Mama looked so sad last night. I've never seen her like that.

Neither have I. I don't want her to be sad.

Specially not because of us.

I don't think Mama was sad because of us. I just think she feels bad...

'Cause she hates living in the woods, and she misses her old housefolk from when she lived in Twolegplace.

We've gotta do something.

But what? What could we do?

I know! Next time she goes out to hunt...

...we could go and find Ken!
OKAY... SHE'S GOING... SHE JUST LOOKED BACK, LIKE SHE ALWAYS DOES... ANNNND...

...SHE'S IN THE TREES!

LET'S GO!
TADPOLE?

I'VE NEVER BEEN THIS FAR INTO THE WOODS BEFORE.

JUST STAY CLOSE TO ME. I'LL PROTECT YOU.

YOU...YOU KNOW WHAT'S MAKING THAT NOISE OVER THERE, RIGHT?

BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE IT COULD BE BIG...

I'M SURE IT'S NOTHING, MOTH.

JUST KEEP MOVING! BOTH OF YOU! WE'LL GO AROUND IT.

LOOK AT THAT DOG! IT'S HUGE!

IT COULD EAT US ALL IN ONE BITE!

GO! GO! KEEP GOING!

THESE... BRAMBLES... ARE AWFULLY SHARP...

ARE YOU SURE THIS IS THE RIGHT WAY, TADPOLE?
Yeah... we're getting closer to TwoLegPlace.

I think I can smell it.

Kitties!

Look out!

Honk!

Honk

Run! Run!

Before that thing comes back!
YOU WERE RIGHT, TADPOLE...

...IT'S TWOLEGPLACE!

IT'S JUST LIKE MAMA SAID IT WAS! LOOK AT ALL THOSE TWOLEG DENS!–

–RRRAOWRR!

WHAT'RE THOSE THINGS??
They're called "cars," but don't worry, they stay on those big paths. Most of the time, anyway.

Listen, you look a little lost. Why don't you come over here, where it's safe? There's plenty of room in my yard.

He seems nice. Maybe he knows where Ken is?

Wait, wait, hold on! Didn't Mama tell us never ever talk to strangers?

What's a yard? Let's go see!

Well... yeah...

Thanks, but we know exactly where we're going.

Right, so we don't need your yard.

"We have important places to go."
NAPTIME'S OVER, KITLINGS. MAMA'S GOT A NICE BIRD FOR Y-

NO SHADOWCLAN.

NO FOX. NO BADGER. NO DOG.

OH, PLEASE, PLEASE PLEASE, LET THEM BE OKAY.
PLEASE.

PLEASE.
SASHA? IS THAT YOU?

SHNUKY! YOU STARTLED ME!

I DIDN'T THINK YOU WERE COMING BACK! WEREN'T YOU DONE WITH THIS PLACE?

I AM, BUT... IT'S MY KITS. THEY RAN OFF THIS MORNING. I'M ON THEIR TRAIL, AND IT LEADS HERE.

OOGH... ALL RIGHT, THAT MAKES A LITTLE MORE SENSE NOW. I DID SEE THREE KITS HERE EARLIER.

THEY SAID THEY HAD IMPORTANT PLACES TO GO, AND RAN OFF!

"IMPORTANT PLACES..." THEY'LL BE LUCKY IF THEY DON'T RUN IN FRONT OF A CAR...

WOULD YOU, MAYBE, LIKE SOME HELP LOOKING FOR YOUR LITTLE ONES?
COME ON, YOU TWO. I THINK IT'S THIS WAY.

TADPOLE,
THIS IS HOPELESS!
WE DON'T EVEN
KNOW WHICH OF
THOSE dens HE
LIVED IN!

CAN WE GO HOME
SOON? I THINK
IT'S GONNA RAIN.

LOOK, WE'VE ALL HEARD
MAMA TALK ABOUT THE
PLACE SHE USED TO
LIVE. I'M SURE WE'LL
KNOW IT WHEN WE-

WHERE DO YOU
LITTLE SCRAPS
THINK YOU'RE GOIN'?

AND...IS THAT...
FOREST I SMELL
ON YOU?

THREE LITTLE
SCRAPS, STRAIGHT
FROM THE WOODS...

STRANGERS AREN'T
WELCOME AROUND
HERE!

YOU BETTER TELL
ME WHAT YOU'RE
DOING HERE, ALL
THREE OF YOU, AND
MAKE IT QUICK!
WELL, SIR, YOU SEE... WE, THAT IS, THE THREE OF US WERE...

LOOK AT THIS. LITTLE CAT SKINS, JUST WALKING AROUND LIKE THEY HAD GOOD SENSE.

GET AN EYEFUL OF THAT FUR.

THAT'D MAKE A NICE COLLAR, WOULDN'T IT?

...UM...

MMROOOOWW!

THEY WANNA MAKE US COLLARS!

MORE DOGS!

RUN! KEEP RUNNING! RUN!
ARE THEY STILL AFTER US?

I DON'T KNOW. I DON'T THINK SO.

BUT WE'D BETTER HIDE FOR A WHILE.

HEY, LOOK AT THAT!

I BET THEY WON'T THINK TO LOOK FOR US IN THERE! PLUS... WHAT'S THAT I SMELL?

Ooh! Tadpole! Is it mouse? I smell mouse. Is it mouse?

THIS IS PERFECT. SEE? WE HIDE FROM THOSE ROGUES, AND WE GET SOMETHING TO EAT AT THE SAME TIME!

COME ON!
WHAT IS THIS PLACE?
WHAT'RE ALL THOSE THINGS?

IT'S ALL TWOLEG STUFF.
IT'S GONNA BE.

C'MON, WE CAN EXPLORE AND HUNT! IT'LL BE AN ADVENTURE!

SEE? THERE'S OUR DINNER! GET IT!

WAIT FOR ME, TADPOLE! I'M COMING TOO!
"TADPOLE?"

Yeah?

I'm sorry we didn't catch the mouse.

It's all right. I don't think we're going to get anything to eat in here, though. It's probably safe to leave by now.

Hey! That thing we came through—it's shut!

How're we gonna get out of here?

Don't worry. Don't worry. I'll take a look at it.

It's stuck. I can't... can't seem to get it... to move.

What do we do?

We're trapped in here!
KITS? KITS!

TADPOOOLE! HAWK! MOTH! CAN YOU HEAR ME?

SHUT UP. YOU STUPID CATS!

ARE WE ON THE RIGHT TRACK? IT'S HARD FOR ME TO TELL.

I THINK WE ARE...

smff smff

...BUT I'M GOING TO TALK TO THOSE TWO. THEY MIGHT'VE SEEN SOMETHING.
SASHA—ARE YOU CRAZY? THOSE TWO LOOK LIKE KILLERS! LET'S JUST GO!

RELAX.

JUST LEAVE THIS TO ME.

Hey, you two. Did you see three kits come through here?

RRRHH... WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, TALKING TO US LIKE THAT?

This is our territory, and—

TH-TH-THEY HEADED THAT WAY! INTO THE YARD WITH ALL THE W-W-WEEDS.

WE COOPERATED! DON'T TELL YOUR CLANMATES ABOUT US, OKAY?

Hey, she smells like forest.

That's right. I'm a clan cat. One of the ones that drove you and the rest of your filthy kind out.

My clanmates are anxious to take revenge for the death of Tigerstar. Now they'll know just where to look!
WELL, LOOK, SEE? IT'S RAINING NOW.

MAYBE IT'S GOOD THAT WE'RE IN HERE. THIS WAY AT LEAST WE WON'T GET WET.

HEY...DO YOU HEAR SOMETHING?

YEAH—I THINK IT'S COMING FROM THAT LONG METAL THING OVER THERE.

SWSHH.

SWSHH.

SWSSSH.

WHAT IS IT?

TADPOLE?

CLANK

WOOSSSSHH
I don't understand. The trail ends here.

Maybe the rain's washing it away?

No, it hasn't been raining long enough for that.

Maybe they...
CLIMB! CLIMB! YOU CAN DO IT!

Hawk, get up onto the sill! Moth, keep going! You can make it, I know you can!

Tadpole, I— I can't! It's too hard!

I'll help you! Just hang on! Hang on, I'll be right there!

That's it, Moth! Come up here beside me!

Cough! Tadpole, can you...

There—Linh—there!

Tadpole!
CHILDREN! COME ON, GET OUT OF THERE!

MAMA! IT'S TADPOLE! HE'S STILL IN THERE!

HELP HIM, MAMA! HELP HIM, PLEASE, PLEASE!

TADPOLE, GRAB MY PAW!

LOOK AT ME AND GRAB MY PAW, SON! YOU HAVE TO REACH...

...YOU HAVE TO...
THIS HAS TO BE A DREAM.

LET ME GO! HE NEEDS ME! I HAVE TO GO BACK!

I HAVE TO... HAVE T...

HE’S GONE, HAWK. TADPOLE’S GONE.

MY WORDS COME OUT FLAT. HOLLOW. IT CAN’T BE REAL. IT CAN’T BE REAL.

TADPOLE... NOO, TADPOLE...!

I DON’T UNDERSTAND. MY BEAUTIFUL, SWEET, BRAVE LITTLE KITTEN...

NOOO!

...IS DEAD?
Suddenly I'm not sure...exactly...where I am.

Home, have to get...Home, take my kits...

Sasha, I am...I am so sorry. I don't know what to say...would you like to come back with me?

My housefolk would, uh...probably like to meet you...get the kittens some good food...

No, thank you, but no. We have a home. In the woods. Have to go home...
I CAN'T FEEL ANYTHING.
NO PAIN...NO HUNGER...NO GRIEF...NOTHING.

I CAN'T GO OUT TO HUNT... I CAN'T EVEN SPEAK.

NEITHER HAWK NOR MOTH SEEMS TO WANT TO TALK, THOUGH. I KNOW WE SHOULD...

...BUT FOR NOW I'M GRATEFUL FOR THE SILENCE. I JUST DON'T HAVE THE ENERGY.

I FEEL SLEEP COME FOR ME. I DON'T TRY TO RESIST.

AND I GO TO THE PLACE I ALMOST ALWAYS GO. I'M GLAD HE'S THERE THIS TIME.

TIGERSTAR... YOU KNOW ABOUT TADPOLE?

...YES.

IS HE...IS HE HERE WITH YOU?

NO, SASHA.

BUT HE IS SAFE NOW.
In the days after Tadpole's accident, I start to feel close to death myself.

I haven't eaten in so long... and what little I catch, I give to Hawk and Moth. I'm getting weaker and weaker.

How can I feed my kits if I haven't the strength to hunt?

I've failed. I'm a terrible mother.

First Ken... then Tigerstar... and now Tadpole.

It's too much. I can't take it. I just...

...I just don't have room enough for the hurt.
SASHA?

WHUH—WHAT? WHO...?

IT IS YOU! HEY, IT'S GREAT TO SEE YOU!

OH—PINE, YES, HELLO.

I DIDN'T THINK YOU WERE COMING BACK! THIS IS FANTASTIC! SO, DO YOU LIVE HERE? IS THIS YOUR PLACE?

Y—YES, YES, THIS IS... MY PLACE. MINE, AND MY KITS. MY... I HAVE... TWO KITS.

YOU HAVE LITTLE ONES? THAT'S GREAT! SO, WHO'S THE FATHER? DO I KNOW HIM?

OH—NO.

NO, I DON'T THINK SO. I MET HIM WHILE I WAS AWAY.

SO, HOW ARE YOU? HOW HAVE YOU BEEN?
Oh, it's been something, let me tell you! You got out of the forest just in time!

You know about the whole BloodClan thing, how they tried to take over the forest, all of that?

I've a little. I've heard a little bit.

"I was there! Well, I didn't fight, of course. 'Cause, you know, not in a clan, right? But I saw the whole thing!"

"There was this huge battle, cats fighting all over the place..."

"And the leader of the Twolegplace cats, right? Well, this clan leader, this big huge cat, was about to try to kill him..."

"And he jumped... but even though the other cat was little, he had some kind of crazy long claws..."

"And the little one just ripped that big brown clan cat right open! Almost tore him in half!"

That's Tigerstar—he's describing Tigerstar's death!

I can't let Pine know the truth...!!
OH... HEY, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? CAN I GET YOU ANYTHING?

I'M SORRY. I AM FEELING A BIT DRAINED.

IT'S JUST THAT...WELL...I DON'T FEEL RIGHT ABOUT LEAVING MY KITS. YOU KNOW? BECAUSE OF FOXES AND CLAN CATS.

SILENTLY I HOPE PINE DOESN'T SEE HOW CLOSE I AM TO GIVING UP COMPLETELY.

I'VE JUST BEEN HAVING SORT OF A ROUGH TIME LATELY, IS ALL.

I...I REALIZE, OF COURSE, THAT...UM. I KNOW I'M TOO OLD...AND I'M NOT THAT GREAT AT HUNTING.

WHAT I'M SAYING IS, I KNOW I COULDN'T TAKE CARE OF YOU AND YOUR KITS MYSELF...
...but I just had the best idea! Listen, there's this farm. I know the cats there. They're really friendly.

And it's on the far side of the river, so you won't have so much trouble finding food!

I can take you there! All of you! What do you say?

It sounds good. Too good? I don't know.

But it sounds like the right thing to do. Get the kits away from here...away from all the memories, all the bad luck.

Are we really going to a farm, Mama?

I don't know. Do you think you can walk that far?

We can, we can, Mama!

We're strong! We're plenty strong! Let's go!

Well, it sounds as if the decision's been made.

Thank you, Pine. I owe you a lot for this.
IT FEELS GOOD TO MOVE AGAIN, AND TO HAVE A PLAN.

PINE AND I ARE BOTH VERY CAREFUL TO MAKE SURE WE GIVE THE CLAN TERRITORIES A WIDE BERTH...

...THOUGH I CAN'T HELP BUT BE CURIOUS ABOUT ONE I'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

WHAT'S OVER THERE, PINE?

HMM? OH—THAT'S THE RIVERCLAN BORDER. THEY'RE BETTER THAN SOME CLAN CATS...BUT THEY'RE STILL CLAN CATS.

IT'S BEAUTIFUL...

I BET I COULD RUN ALL THE WAY ACROSS THE RIVER ON THOSE ROCKS AND NOT GET A BIT WET.
BUT WE LEAVE THE RIVERCLAN TERRITORY BEHIND US... AND EVENTUALLY PINE SPIES OUR DESTINATION AHEAD.

WE'RE ALMOST THERE!

JUST CROSS THIS BRIDGE...

...AND THERE IT IS.

WHAT'D I TELL YOU? HMMM?

ISN'T IT SOMETHING?
HE'S RIGHT. IT IS BEAUTIFUL.

HEY, IT'S PINE!

GOOD TO SEE YOU, PINE!

AND THE CATS DO LOOK VERY HEALTHY HERE.

BUT IMMEDIATELY I GET THE SENSE THAT PINE'S PERFECT FARM IS FAR TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE.

AT LEAST FOR MY KITS AND ME.
AND THIS IS THE BARN,
WHERE PRACTICALLY EVERYBODY
SLEEPS. IT'S NICE AND WARM.

SEE? THERE'S YOUR OWN NICE
LITTLE BED. PERFECT FOR
CURLING UP WITH KITTENS.

ARE YOU SURE
THIS IS A GOOD IDEA?
I'M GETTING THE
FEELING WE MIGHT NOT
BE AS WELCOME HERE
AS YOU'D LIKE.

WHAT'RE YOU TALKING
ABOUT? IT'S GREAT HERE,
YOU'LL LOVE IT!

THANK YOU, PINE. THIS
IS VERY NICE.

WELL, I'M GOING TO GO NOW.
GOT MY OWN LIFE TO GET
BACK TO, Y'KNOW?

I'M JUST REALLY,
TRULY HAPPY FOR YOU AND
THE LITTLE ONES. YOU'RE
GOING TO BE OKAY NOW.

THANKS AGAIN,
PINE. GOOD-
BYE.

OH, I HOPE I'M WRONG, I HOPE
I'M WRONG, I DO... BUT I DON'T
THINK I AM.

LOOK AT THESE CATS! HOW
RAGGED AND DIRTY WE MUST
SEEM!

NO WONDER THEY LOOK
DOWN ON ME.
ALL RIGHT. NOW THAT PINE'S GONE... IT'S TIME TO GET A FEW THINGS STRAIGHT.

LOOK, WE DON'T WANT ANY TROUBLE...

OH, YOU DON'T WANT ANY TROUBLE? WELL, IT'S TOO LATE FOR THAT.

WE RESPECT PINE. WE'VE KNOWN HIM FOR A LONG TIME. BUT YOU AND YOUR FLEABITTEN BROOD?

WE DON'T PUT UP WITH YOUR KIND AROUND HERE. LOOK AT YOU. YOU'RE A DISGRACE. FILTHY, HOMELESS ROGUES.

ASIF WE'D SHARE OUR HUNTING GROUNDS WITH YOU, WE WANT YOU GONE.

AND JUST TO MAKE SURE YOU DON'T COME BACK...

RAOW!! MY EAR!
YOU CUT MY EAR!

MY KITS AND I ARE GOING TO LEAVE AN IMPRESSION FIRST.

SEE. MY KITS ARE STRONG. HEALTHY.

HEY!

TOO BAD YOU WON'T BE STAYING. YOU COULD LEARN A FEW THINGS ABOUT MOTHERHOOD.
IF YOU KNEW... ANYTHING ABOUT MOTHERHOOD...

...YOU'D KNOW BETTER THAN TO HURT MY KITS!

WHAMM

She doesn't even try to defend. It's obvious she's had no training whatsoever.

RRRHHEEEHHRR!

SLATCH

But staring down at her, I realize it just wouldn't be fair.

She hits the ground, and I know I could do it, right now. I could end this worthless excuse for a cat.

There's no need to make our situation any worse than it already is.
BESIDES.

I'VE JUST GIVEN HER A LIFETIME'S WORTH OF HUMILIATION.

YOU'RE... YOU'RE ONE OF THOSE STUPID WARRIORS, AREN'T YOU?

HER QUESTION TAKES ME OFF-GUARD. FOR A FEW HEARTBEATS I'M... I'M NOT SURE.

WARRIORS... AM I A WARRIOR? MY KITS ARE HALFCLAN, BUT... WHAT AM I?

BUT THEN... THEN MY TIME IN SHADOWCLAN COMES BACK TO ME. AND I KNOW.

THAT'S RIGHT.

I AM A WARRIOR.
NO SURPRISES FOLLOW MY CONFRONTATION WITH THAT USELESS BARN CAT. MY KITS AND I GET THROWN OFF THE FARM AT ONCE.

OUR WHOLE PLAN HAS GONE UP IN SMOKE... HAWK AND MOTH ARE TERRIFIED AND MISERABLE... YET I FEEL STRANGELY CALM.

BECAUSE, FOR WHATEVER REASON, IT'S BECOME CLEAR TO ME WHAT WE NEED TO DO, AND WHERE WE NEED TO DO IT.

MAMA! MAMA, ISN'T THIS WHERE THE RIVERCLAN CATS ARE?

WON'T THEY BE MAD AT US FOR SNOOPING, MAMA? I DON'T WANT ANYBODY ELSE MAD AT US, AND HAWK'S EAR HURTS.

IT'S NOT THAT BAD, MOTH.

...IT ONLY HURTS A LITTLE.

THE TWO OF YOU NEED TO BE QUIET NOW, AND LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY.

IT'S TIME TO TELL YOU ABOUT YOUR FATHER.
HIS NAME WAS TIGERSTAR.

"HE WAS A GREAT, STRONG WARRIOR. HE WAS THE LEADER OF SHADOWCLAN..."

...AND HE WAS THE BRAVEST CAT I EVER MET.

HE ONCE FOUGHT OFF TWO VICIOUS FOXES, BY HIMSELF, TO SAVE MY LIFE.

HEARING ABOUT THEIR FATHER IS HELPING THEM. THAT MUCH IS OBVIOUS.

I JUST HOPE THEY'RE BRAVE ENOUGH TO FACE WHAT'S COMING NEXT.

ALL BY HIMSELF?

WOW...
NOW LISTEN... THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT.

WHERE WE'RE GOING, YOU MIGHT HEAR STORIES ABOUT HIM ONE DAY. BUT ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT I LOVED HIM.

AND I KNOW HE WOULD BE VERY PROUD OF YOU.

WHAT STORIES? CAN WE-ARE WE GOING TO SEE TIGERSTAR NOW?

NO...NO. TIGERSTAR IS DEAD.

AND YOU HAVE TO PROMISE ME—PROMISE ME!—THAT YOU'LL NEVER MENTION HIS NAME TO ANY OTHER CAT.

BUT, MAMA, WHY—

I MEAN IT. THIS IS OUR SECRET. DO YOU PROMISE?

O-KAY, MAMA.

WE PROMISE.
UH...MAMA?

I AM LEOPARDSTAR, LEADER OF RIVERCLAN. YOU ARE TRESPASSING ON RIVERCLAN TERRITORY.

I'M NOT CRAZY ABOUT THIS WHOLE IDEA... BUT I'LL DO ANYTHING TO PROVIDE A GOOD HOME FOR MY LITTLE ONES.

WHO ARE YOU? AND WHAT DO YOU WANT?

AND SINCE THE FARM IS OUT OF THE QUESTION NOW, IT'S NOT AS IF WE HAVE A LOT OF CHOICES.

MY NAME IS SASHA, THESE ARE MY KITS, HAWK AND MOTH.

I'M A ROGUE FALLEN ON HARD TIMES... I'VE ALREADY LOST ONE STRONG KIT THIS LEAF-BARE. WE HAVE NO HOME.

I OFFER MYSELF AND MY KITS UP TO RIVERCLAN.
OFFER YOURSELVES UP... PFAH! DON'T TRY TO PUT A PRETTY FACE ON IT. YOU JUST WANT THE CLAN'S PROTECTION.

LEOPARDSTAR, WE DON'T NEED ANOTHER DRAIN ON OUR RESOURCES. YOU SHOULD GET RID OF THEM!

I COULDN'T DISAGREE MORE, BLACKCLAW.

HOW CAN WE TURN THIS POOR THING AWAY? ESPECIALLY AFTER LOSING ONE OF HER KITS?

YOU KNOW... THE CLAN NEEDS NEW WARRIORS. THE NURSERY IS NEARLY EMPTY! WE HAVE TO THINK OF THE CLAN HERE.

IT'S GOOD LUCK THAT STARCLAN HAS BROUGHT THESE ROGUES TO US!

HMMM.
YOUR YOUNG ONES MAY BE SKIN AND BONE... AND MORE THAN A LITTLE RAGGED... BUT THEY LOOK STRONG.

IS THIS TRULY WHAT YOU WANT? TO BECOME PART OF RIVERCLAN?

YES, LEOPARDSTAR, VERY MUCH.

THEY'RE NEARLY SIX MOONS, YES? READY TO BE APPRENTICED.

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO FEEL AS WE CROSS OVER THE WATER.

VERY WELL.

FOLLOW US.

IS THAT ISLAND OUR NEW HOME?
...or just another stop?

Even though it doesn’t look the same, this place reminds me so much of ShadowClan.

Is that a good thing? I hope so.

Welcome to RiverClan!

It’s a little like a whirlwind, all the new cats, all the new names.

First is RiverClan’s medicine cat, Mudfur.

Nasty little rip you have there, Hawk.

It doesn’t hurt. I’m tough. I’m not scared!
NEVER THOUGHT YOU WERE SCARED. WE STILL NEED TO GET IT HEALED, THOUGH, IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE A WARRIOR. RIGHT?

KEEP THIS CORNER ON IT...AND I'LL GET YOU ALL SOME POPPY SEEDS TO HELP YOU SLEEP.

NEXT STOP. THE NURSERY. THE ONE STORMFUR TALKED ABOUT BEING NEARLY EMPTY.

MISTYFOOT LOOKS AFTER THE KITS. I LIKE HER RIGHT AWAY.

THERE YOU GO...I BET YOU'RE TIRED, AREN'T YOU? JUST TUCK RIGHT IN.

I THINK I'VE DONE THE RIGHT THING. THE KITS ARE HALFCLAN, AFTER ALL. MAYBE THIS IS WHERE THEY'VE ALWAYS BELONGED.

TIGERSTAR ISN'T THERE IN MY DREAM THAT NIGHT. THERE'S ONLY THE TINIEST TRACE OF HIS SCENT.

I MISS HIM...I MISS HIM SO MUCH SOMETIMES.
...AND IN THE MORNING, MY HEART IS SO
HEAVY WITH GRIEF AND LONELINESS, IT
FEELS LIKE A STONE IN MY CHEST.

I DON'T HAVE TIME TO DWELL
ON IT, THOUGH. I LEARN THAT
LEOPARDSTAR HAS CALLED A CLAN
MEETING.

AND THEY SHEPHERD US RIGHT
UP ONTO THE ROCK NEXT TO
LEOPARDSTAR.

TODAY WE WELCOME
THREE NEW ADDITIONS TO
RIVERCLAN!

HAWK AND MOTH
ARE STILL TOO YOUNG,
BUT ACCORDING TO OUR
TRADITIONS...

BEFORE I EVEN REALIZE WHAT'S
HAPPENING, MISTYFOOT BRINGS
HAWK AND MOTH TO ME...

...SASHA, YOU NOW HAVE
THE CHANCE TO GAIN YOUR
OWN WARRIOR NAME.

I SAY I'M NOT READY, BUT
IT'S A LIE. I CANNOT TAKE A
WARRIOR NAME.

WELL.

WELL, YES, THAT'S QUITE
ALL RIGHT. THERE'LL BE
PLENTY OF TIME FOR SUCH
THINGS.
IT'S PAINFULLY OBVIOUS THAT MY DECISION ISN'T A POPULAR ONE.

AND AS IF THE LOOKS I GET AREN'T ENOUGH...

...SOME OF THEM WHISPER LOUDLY ENOUGH FOR ME TO HEAR THE WORDS.

...OUTSIDERS...HOW DO WE KNOW THEY'LL BE LOYAL?

THEY COULD BE BLOODCLAN SPIES!

LUCKILY FOR US, THE SUSPICION ONLY LASTS A LITTLE WHILE. SOON WE START TO SETTLE IN...

...AND IT'S NOT LONG BEFORE I'M INVITED TO GO HUNTING.
AND ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER THAT, LEOPARDSTAR MAKES THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE CLAN:

HAWK AND MOOTH ARE BECOMING APPRENTICE WARRIORS.

IT'S EXACTLY WHAT I WANTED FOR THEM.

UNTIL YOUR APPRENTICESHIP ENDS, YOU WILL BE CALLED BY YOUR NEW CLAN NAMES.

MOTHPAW...

...AND HAWKPAAW.
HERE...LIKE THIS. WATCH YOUR POSTURE!

THEIR TRAINING BEGINS AT ONCE. LEARNING HOW TO FIGHT...

...HOW TO HUNT...

...AND HOW TO WATCH AND MAINTAIN THE BORDER OF RIVERCLAN TERRITORY.

THEY EVEN SWIM WELL... WHICH IS CRUCIAL... SINCE SO MUCH OF RIVERCLAN'S DIET IS FISH.

I LIKE TO THINK THE SLEEK FUR THEY GOT FROM ME HELPS A BIT.
BUT THEY HARDLY GET STARTED IN THEIR APPRENTICESHIP BEFORE THINGS HIT A SERIOUS SNAG.

RRRRAAARR! I'M TIGERSTAR! I'M GONNA TAKE OVER THE FOREST AND KILL EVERYBODY!

NUH-Uh! WE'RE GONNA STOP YOU!

GET HIM!

RRRROW! OH NO, I'VE BEEN GUTTED! LIKE A FISH!

TAKE THAT! AND THAT! AND THAT!

THAT KIT... HE'S PRETENDING TO BE OUR FATHER...?

WHY'D HE SAY THAT ABOUT KILLIN' EVERYBODY?

WHY'D HE SAY THAT?
CALM DOWN, BOTH OF YOU.

BUT, BUT, MAMA... SSST! YOU HAVE TO CALM DOWN!

BUT THEY WERE ACTING LIKE TIGERSTAR WAS BAD, AND MEAN, AND...

HE WASN'T REALLY BAD AND MEAN, WAS HE, MAMA? WAS HE?

NOW, YOU BOTH PROMISED ME YOU'D NEVER SAY ANYTHING ABOUT HIM TO ANYBODY, DIDN'T YOU?

THEY SAY NASTY THINGS ABOUT HIM, YES.

WELL, PROMISE ME AGAIN. DO YOU PROMISE THAT THIS WILL STAY OUR SECRET? PROMISE ME.

...YES...

WE PROMISE.

THEY JUST DIDN'T KNOW HIM LIKE I DID.
MY POOR KITS... TO HAVE TO HEAR THE OTHER LITTLE ONES SAY THINGS LIKE THAT...

SASHA! I'D LIKE TO SPEAK WITH YOU FOR A MOMENT.

YES, LEOPARDSTAR?

I THINK IT'S TIME WE GAVE YOU YOUR WARRIOR NAME.

THE GATHERING IS COMING UP SOON, WHEN ALL FOUR CLANS GATHER AT FOURTREES, WE COULD DO IT THEN.

BUT YOU'RE A CONTRIBUTING MEMBER OF RIVERCLAN NOW, SASHA. ...YOU SHOULD HAVE A WARRIOR'S NAME.

WHAT DO I DO NOW? I'D ALL BUT FORGOTTEN ABOUT THIS NAMING.

AND IF I GO TO A GATHERING, SHADOWCLAN WILL RECOGNIZE ME. THEY'LL TELL EVERYONE... AND MY KITS WILL BE IN DANGER!
DAYS GO BY, AND MY INSIDES TWIST UP TIGHTER AND TIGHTER...AND THEN ONE MORNING IT ALL GETS EVEN WORSE.

HEY—LOOK AT THIS!

WHAT? WHAT IS IT?

THAT WAS A GOOD ONE! IT FLIPPED UP HIGH!

I THINK IT'S A BONE. HEY, THERE'S A LOT OF THEM!

OOH, WATCH THIS ONE ROLL!

CAN'T GRAB THIS ONE!

CAN TOO! LEMME HAVE IT!
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT EVERYONE THOUGHT WHEN THEY SAW MY KITS.

YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND—ALL OF YOU—that that area of the camp is abandoned for a reason.

WHAT YOU FOUND, CHILDREN, WERE THE REMNANTS OF TIGERSTAR'S HILL OF BONES.

THAT'S WHERE HE FORCED HALFCLAN CATS TO FIGHT EACH OTHER TO THE DEATH.

LEOPARDSTAR EXPLAINS THINGS TO US FOR A LONG TIME. ABOUT HOW MUCH PAIN AND SUFFERING TIGERSTAR HAD CAUSED THEM.

I HAD NO IDEA HE WAS SO CLOSELY INVOLVED WITH RIVERCLAN.

I'M RELIEVED—AND PROUD—that NEITHER OF MY KITS MAKES A SOUND WHILE LEOPARDSTAR TELLS US THESE THINGS.

I WAS GOING TO FIGURE OUT SOME REASON NOT TO GO TO THE GATHERING.

I THOUGHT I COULD KEEP THE SECRET OF MY KITS' FATHER AS LONG AS I COULD STAY AWAY FROM SHADOWCLAN.

BUT NOW...
NOW I KNOW WE CAN'T STAY HERE. HAWKPaw AND MOTHpAW ARE TOO VULNERABLE.

I DON'T LOOK FORWARD TO TELLING THEM.

I...HAVE TO TELL YOU BOTH SOMETHING...AND IT'S NOT GOING TO BE EASY TO HEAR.

NO! NO! I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE! I WANT TO STAY, AND BE A WARRIOR! MAMA-MAMA, DON'T MAKE ME LEAVE...!

MAMA, I CAN'T LEAVE HAWK. I MADE A PROMISE.

WE CAN'T STAY IN RIVERCLAN. WE HAVE TO LEAVE, AND GO BACK TO LIVING IN THE WOODS. IT'S NOT SAFE HERE ANYMORE.

IF HE STAYS...I NEED TO STAY, TOO.

WE WON'T MENTION TIGERSTAR'S NAME.

AND...IF WE DON'T TELL...HOW ELSE WOULD ANY CAT FIND OUT WHO OUR FATHER WAS?

WE WON'T, EVER!
I START TO TELL THEM WE'VE GOT NO CHOICE, AND THAT WE'RE LEAVING NO MATTER WHAT... WHEN IT HITS ME.

NO ONE WILL EVER KNOW TIGERSTAR IS THEIR FATHER IF I'M NOT AROUND FOR ANYONE TO RECOGNIZE.

ONLY ONE CAT IN THE FOREST KNOWS THE TRUTH, AND I TRUST RUSETTPLUR NOT TO SAY ANYTHING.

AND SO THE SAFEST PLACE... FOR MY KITS TO BE... IS AWAY FROM ME.

I HAVE TO TALK TO LEOPARDSTAR IMMEDIATELY.

WELL, LEOPARDSTAR... YOU SEE... I'M SORRY, THIS IS HARD FOR ME TO SAY. I OWE YOU SO MUCH.

BUT LIVING BY THE WARRIOR CODE ISN'T FOR ME. HAWKP AW AND MOTHPAW WILL STAY.

I DON'T WANT TO loose YOU, SASHA. BUT... I KNOW MY CATS.

WITH ALL THE SUSPICIONS AMONG THEM NOW, I DON'T KNOW THAT YOU'D HAVE EVER BEEN TRULY ACCEPTED.

BUT I THINK IT WOULD BE BEST THAT I GO.

YOU HAVE MY APPROVAL TO LEAVE, AND MY THANKS... FOR LETTING THE TWO LITTLE ONES STAY WITH US.
I HAVE TO GO NOW, MY SWEET KITS.

I’LL MISS YOU BOTH... MORE THAN I CAN SAY... BUT I KNOW YOU’LL GROW UP TO BE GREAT CLAN WARRIORS.

I’LL MAKE YOU PROUD, MAMA. YOU’LL SEE.

I WISH YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO GO, MAMA. I LOVE YOU.

I KNOW YOU WILL.... HAWKPaw.

I’M ALREADY PROUD... VERY PROUD...OF BOTH OF YOU.
There go the two halves of my heart.

It's killing me to leave them behind.

But I know they'll be strong...

...because their father's blood runs in their veins.

And even though he left me in my dreams, at this moment I can feel him...Tigerstar...sitting right behind me.
AND AS I TURN TO GO, HIS VOICE COMES TO ME, WHISPERING IN MY EARS AND IN MY MIND.

“I AM PROUD OF MY CHILDREN.”

“They will make great warriors, and I will watch over them forever.”

“I PROMISE.”

THE END
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 Seekers series.

Visit the Clans online and play Warriors games at www.warriorcats.com.

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Ravenpaw has settled into life on the farm, away from the forest and Tigerstar’s evil eye. He knows that leaving the warrior Clans was the right choice, and he appreciates his quiet days and peaceful nights with his best friend, Barley. But when five rogue cats from Twoleg-place come to the barn seeking shelter, Ravenpaw’s new life is threatened. He and Barley must try to find a way to overpower the rogues—before they lose their home for good.
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DON’T MISS
ERIN HUNTER’S HIT SERIES
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When three young bears from different species—black, polar, and grizzly—are separated from their families, they each face great dangers and terrible tragedies, and situations that will require all their strength to survive.
The secret of Hollyleaf’s, Jayfeather’s, and Lionblaze’s true identities has been revealed, but one shocking question remains unanswered. Now, in the harshest days of leaf-bare, Clanmate turns upon Clanmate, danger lurks behind familiar faces, and one more warrior may be lost forever...
Dead bracken rustled beneath Lionblaze’s paws as he stalked through the forest. Above the leafless trees, the sky was dark and empty. Terror raised the hairs on the young warrior’s neck, and he shivered from ears to tail-tip. *This is a place that has never known the light of StarClan.*

He padded on, skirting clumps of fern and nosing under bushes, but he found no sight or scent of other cats. *I’ve had enough of this,* he thought, tugging his tail free from a trailing bramble. Panic sparked in his mind as he stared at the darkness that stretched away between the trees. *What if I never find my way out of here?*

“Looking for me?”

Lionblaze jumped and spun around. “Tigerstar!”

The massive warrior had appeared around the edge of a bramble thicket. His tabby pelt shone with a strange light that reminded Lionblaze of the sickly glow of fungus on dead trees.

“You’ve missed a lot of training,” Tigerstar meowed, padding forward until he stood a tail-length from the
ThunderClan warrior. “You should have come back sooner.”

“No, I shouldn’t!” Lionblaze blurted out. “I shouldn’t have come here at all, and you never should have trained me. Brambleclaw isn’t my father! You’re not my kin!”

Tigerstar blinked once, but he showed no surprise, not even a flick of his ears. His amber eyes narrowed to slits, and he seemed to be waiting for Lionblaze to say more.

“You . . . you knew!” Lionblaze whispered. The trees seemed to spin around him. *Squirrelflight isn’t the only cat who kept secrets!*

“Of course I knew.” Tigerstar shrugged. “It’s not important. You were willing enough to learn from me, weren’t you?”

“But—”

“Blood isn’t everything,” Tigerstar snarled. His lip curled, showing the glint of sharp fangs. “Just ask Firestar.”

Lionblaze felt his neck fur begin to bristle as fury coursed through him. “Firestar’s a finer warrior than you ever were.”

“Don’t forget that he’s not your kin, either,” Tigerstar hissed softly. “There’s no point defending him now.”

Lionblaze stared at the dusk-lit warrior. *Does he know who my real father is?* “You knew all along that I wasn’t Firestar’s kin,” he growled. “You let me believe a lie!”

Tigerstar twitched one ear. “So?”

Rage and frustration overwhelmed Lionblaze. Leaping
into the air, he threw himself at Tigerstar and tried to push him over. He battered at the tabby warrior’s head and shoulders, his claws unsheathed, tearing out huge clumps of fur. But the red haze of fury that filled his head made him clumsy, unfocused. His blows landed at random, barely scratching Tigerstar’s skin.

The huge tabby tom went limp, letting himself drop to one side and hooking one paw around Lionblaze’s leg to unbalance him. Lionblaze landed among the bracken with a jolt that drove the breath from his body. A heartbeat later he felt a huge paw clamp down on his shoulders, pinning him to the ground.

“I’ve taught you better than that, little warrior,” Tigerstar taunted him. “You’re out of practice.”

Taking a deep breath, Lionblaze heaved himself upward. Tigerstar leaped back and crouched a fox-length away, his amber eyes burning. “I’ll show you who’s out of practice,” Lionblaze panted.

He forced his anger down, summoning a cold determination—all the fighting moves he had ever learned were at the tips of his claws. When Tigerstar sprang at him, he was prepared; he dived forward and hurled himself underneath his opponent’s belly. As soon as Tigerstar’s paws hit the ground, Lionblaze whipped around and landed a couple of blows on the tabby tom’s hindquarters before leaping out of range.

Tigerstar spun to face him. “Better,” he meowed, mockery still in his voice. “I have mentored you well.”
Before Lionblaze could reply, the huge tabby darted toward him, veering aside at the last moment and lashing out with one forepaw as he passed. Lionblaze felt Tigerstar’s claws rake along his side, and blood began trickling out of the scratches. Fear stabbed at him. *What happens if he kills me here? Will I be really dead?*

His mind cleared. Tigerstar was hurtling toward him again. Lionblaze scrambled aside; he aimed a blow, but felt his claws slide harmlessly through the tabby’s pelt.

“Too slow,” Tigerstar spat. “You’ll have to work harder, now you know that prophecy wasn’t meant for you. That was for Firestar’s kin, wasn’t it?” Lionblaze knew that the tabby tom was trying to make him too angry to fight. *I won’t listen! All I need to do is win this battle!*

He sprang at Tigerstar again, twisting in the air as he had been taught during those long nighttime visits, and landed squarely on the massive tabby’s broad shoulders. Digging in with his claws, he stretched forward and sank his teeth into Tigerstar’s neck. Tigerstar tried the same trick of going limp and pulling Lionblaze down with him, but this time Lionblaze was ready.

He wriggled out from underneath the heavy body, battering with his hind paws at Tigerstar’s exposed stomach fur. “I’m not falling for that trick twice!” he hissed.

Tigerstar struggled to get up, but blood was pouring from a gash in his belly; he stumbled down again, rolling onto his back. Lionblaze planted one forepaw on Tigerstar’s chest and held the other, claws extended, against his neck.
The tabby glared up at him; for a heartbeat, fear flashed in his blazing amber eyes. “Do you really think you could kill me?” he growled. “You’d never do it.”

“No.” Lionblaze sheathed his claws and stepped back. “You’re already dead.” He turned and stalked away, his pelt still bristling and all his senses alert in case Tigerstar followed and leaped on him again. But there was no sound from the dark warrior, and soon he was left behind among the endless trees.

Lionblaze’s mind whirled. He had beaten Tigerstar! _Maybe I do have power after all . . . but how can I, if I’m not one of the Three?_ He paused, scarcely seeing the tangling undergrowth and the trees of the dark forest all around him. _Do I want to know who my parents really are?_ he wondered. _Does it even matter?_ Maybe it was best to let his Clanmates accept him for who they thought he was, so he could go on striving to improve his fighting skills. _I’m already the best fighter in ThunderClan. I know I can be a great warrior._

“Ashfur is dead,” he meowed out loud. “And Squirrel-flight won’t reveal her secret to any other cats. It would hurt her Clanmates far too much if they knew she’d been lying to them for so long. Why not let everything stay the same?”

Lionblaze woke to the sun on his face. Most of the cats had already left the den; Lionblaze spotted only the gray-and-white pelt of Mousewhisker, who had kept guard over the camp the night before. Lionblaze’s jaws stretched in a
yawn. “Thank StarClan I wasn’t on the dawn patrol,” he muttered.

When he tried to get up, every muscle in his body shrieked a protest; he felt as if his body was one huge ache, from his head to his paws. Down one side, his golden tabby fur was matted with blood. *I hope no cat has noticed that!* he thought as he bent his head and began cleaning up his pelt with swift, rhythmic licks. The fight with Tigerstar had been a dream, hadn’t it? Lionblaze didn’t understand why he should feel just as much pain and exhaustion as if it had really happened. And he had been cut, as if a living warrior had raked his claws across Lionblaze’s flank. . . . He tried not to think about it. *It doesn’t matter, because I’ll never go back to that place,* he told himself. *It’s over.*

He felt better after his grooming, with his fur fluffed up to hide the gash in his side. When he finished, he could hear the voices of several cats just outside the den, though not close enough for him to make out what they were saying. Curious, he rose to his paws, arched his back in a delicious stretch, and pushed his way through the branches into the clearing.

Thornclaw was standing a couple of fox-lengths away; Spiderleg sat close by, while Cloudtail paced up and down in front of them, the tip of his white tail twitching. Cloudtail’s mate, Brightheart, watched him anxiously from where she sat with Ferncloud, Brackenfur, and Sorreltail. Honeyfern and Berry nose were crouched nearby, their eyes fixed on Thornclaw.
“Ashfur was killed by a WindClan cat!” the golden brown tom was declaring. “It’s the only possible answer.” A few of his listeners nodded in agreement, though Lionblaze saw others exchanging doubtful glances.

“Firestar said he thought that one of us did it,” Honey-fern mewed, sounding nervous to be contradicting a senior warrior.

“Clan leaders have made mistakes before,” Cloudbtail meowed. “Firestar isn’t always right.”

“I’m sure none of us would kill Ashfur,” Ferncloud added more gently. “Why would we want to? Ashfur had no enemies!”

_I wish that was true_, Lionblaze thought.

However much he tried to forget, that night of fire and storm was seared into Lionblaze’s memory. He could hear the roar of the flames on the cliff top, and could see them licking hungrily around him and his littermates as Ashfur blocked the end of the branch they needed to scramble toward safety. Squirrelflight’s confession rang in his ears again: She had told Ashfur that Lionblaze, Hollyleaf, and Jayfeather were not her kits. It was the only way to save their lives, by pretending she did not care what happened to them, but she had handed Ashfur a weapon more terrible than any flaming branch. Lionblaze knew that the gray warrior would have announced the truth to all the Clans at the Gathering; only death had closed his jaws forever and kept the secret safe.

“Lionblaze! Hey, Lionblaze, are you deaf?” Lionblaze
dragged his thoughts back to the hollow to see Spiderleg waving him over with his tail.

“You were Ashfur’s last apprentice,” the black warrior prompted as Lionblaze padded reluctantly up to the group. “Do you know if he’d quarreled with any cat?”

“Especially any WindClan cat?” Thornclaw added, with a meaningful twitch of his whiskers.

Lionblaze shook his head. “Uh . . . no,” he replied awkwardly. He couldn’t lie and say that Ashfur had quarreled with a WindClan cat, even though he wished with every hair on his pelt that it was true. Letting his Clanmates believe such a thing could cause an all-out war between ThunderClan and WindClan. “I hadn’t seen much of Ashfur just before he died,” he added.

To his relief, no other cats questioned him.

“We’d know if Ashfur quarreled with a ThunderClan cat,” Brackenfur insisted. “It’s impossible to keep a secret around here.”

*If only you knew!* Lionblaze thought.

“Brackenfur’s right.” Sorreltail touched her nose to her mate’s ear. “But all the same, we can’t be sure that a WindClan cat—”

“Ashfur died on the WindClan border,” Spiderleg interrupted. “What more do you want?”

Sorreltail turned to face him, her neck fur bristling at his scathing tone. “I want a bit more evidence than where his body was found before I start blaming any cat.”

Honeyfern and Brackenfur murmured agreement, but
Lionblaze could see that most of the cats were convinced that a WindClan warrior was responsible for Ashfur’s death. However much he worried about what that could lead to, he couldn’t bury a guilty sense of relief.

“Are we going to let WindClan get away with this?” Thornclaw demanded, his ears lying flat as he dug his claws into the earth.

“No!” Berrynose leaped to his paws. “We have to show them they can’t mess with ThunderClan.”

Lionblaze’s belly churned as he saw the warriors cluster more closely around Thornclaw. They were behaving as if the golden brown tom was their leader, and seemed ready to follow him into battle to avenge their Clanmate’s murder.

“It would be best to attack by night,” Thornclaw began. “There’ll be enough moonlight to see by, and they won’t be expecting trouble.”

“We’ll see they get it, though.” Spiderleg lashed his tail.

“We’ll head for the WindClan camp,” Thornclaw continued. “It’ll be best to split up: One raiding party can attack from this direction—”

“What?” The low growl came from just behind Lionblaze. Startled, Lionblaze glanced over his shoulder to see Brambleclaw; he, along with all the other cats, had been so intent on what Thornclaw was planning that he hadn’t heard the Clan deputy approach.
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