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DAWN OF THE CLANS

WARRIORS

THE SUN TRAIL



**BONUS
SCENE
INSIDE!**

ERIN HUNTER

DAWN OF THE CLANS

WARRIORS

THE SUN TRAIL

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HARPER

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CATS OF THE MOUNTAINS

TRIBE-HEALER TELLER OF THE POINTED STONES (STONETELLER)—old white she-cat with green eyes

QUIET RAIN—speckled gray she-cat

GRAY WING—sleek, dark gray tom with golden eyes

CLEAR SKY—light gray tom with blue eyes

BRIGHT STREAM—brown-and-white tabby she-cat

SHADED MOSS—black-and-white tom with dark green eyes

TALL SHADOW—black, thick-furred she-cat with green eyes

DAPPLED PELT—delicate tortoiseshell she-cat with golden eyes

RAINSWEPT FLOWER—brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

TURTLE TAIL—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

MOON SHADOW—black tom

DEWY LEAF—tortoiseshell she-cat

TWISTED BRANCH—brown tom

SHATTERED ICE—gray-and-white tom with green eyes

CLOUD SPOTS—long-furred black tom with white ears, white chest, and two white paws

STONE SONG—dark gray tabby tom

HOLLOW TREE—brown tabby she-cat

QUICK WATER—gray-and-white she-cat

HAWK SWOOP—orange tabby she-cat

FALLING FEATHER—young white she-cat

JACKDAW'S CRY—young black tom

SHARP HAIL—dark gray tom

MISTY WATER—very old gray she-cat, with milky blue eyes

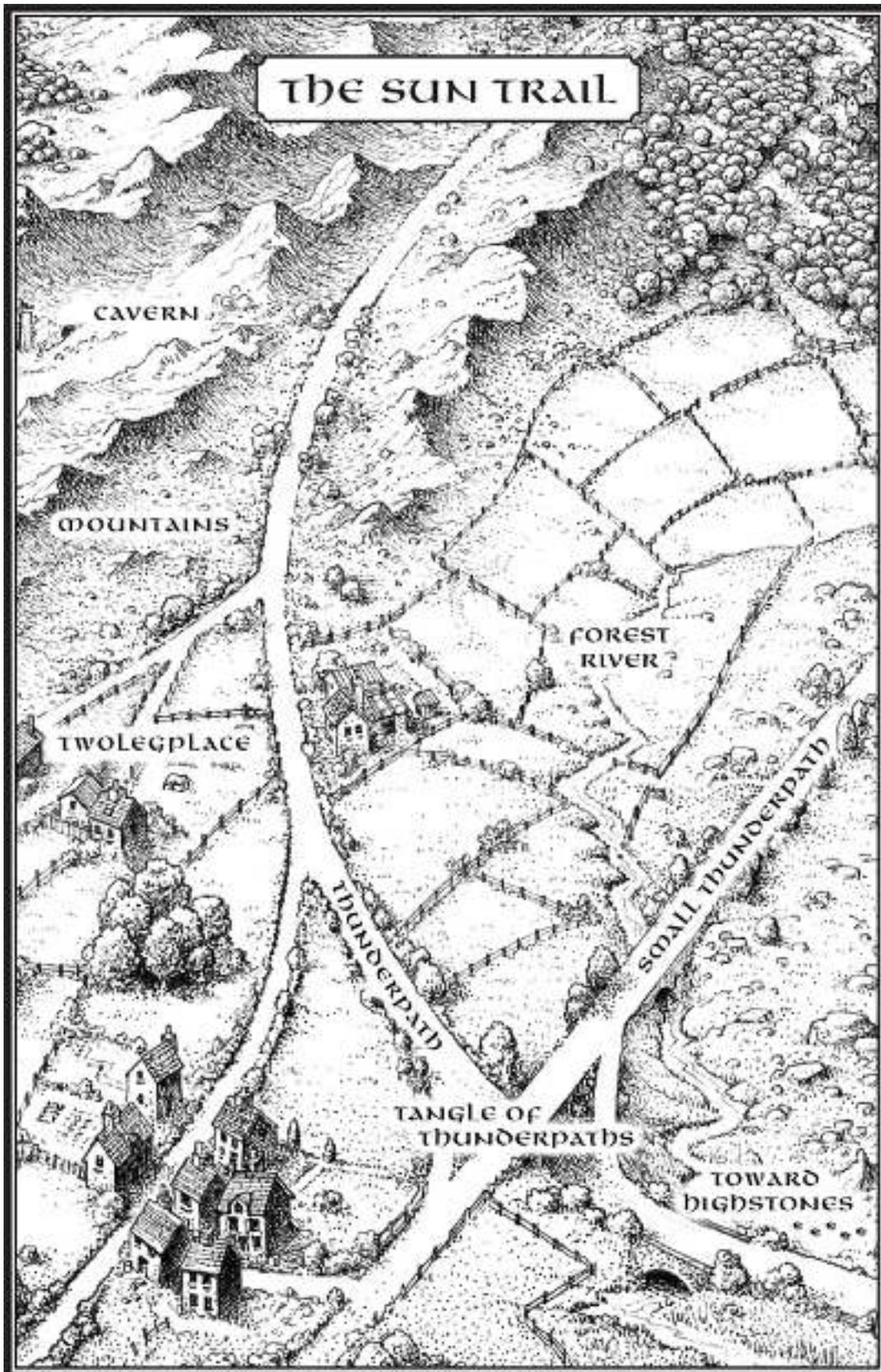
LION'S ROAR—very old golden tabby tom

SILVER FROST—old gray-and-white she-cat

SNOW HARE—old white she-cat

FLUTTERING BIRD—tiny brown she-cat

JAGGED PEAK—gray tabby tom with blue eyes



NEW HUNTING GROUNDS





PROLOGUE



Cold gray light rippled over the floor of a cave so vast that its roof was lost in shadows. An endless screen of water fell across the entrance, its sound echoing from the rocks.

Near the back of the cavern crouched a frail white she-cat. Despite her age, her green eyes were clear and deep with wisdom as her gaze traveled over the skinny cats swarming the cave floor, restlessly pacing in front of the shimmering waterfall: the elders huddled together in the sleeping hollows; the kits mewling desperately, demanding food from their exhausted mothers.

“We can’t go on like this,” the old she-cat whispered to herself.

A few tail-lengths away, several kits squabbled over an eagle carcass. Its flesh had been stripped away the day before as soon as their mothers had caught it. A big ginger kit shouldered a smaller tabby away from the bone she was gnawing at.

“I *need* this!” he announced.

The tabby sprang up and nipped the end of the ginger kit’s tail. “We *all* need it, flea-brain!” she snapped as the ginger tom let out a yowl.

A gray-and-white elder, every one of her ribs showing through her pelt, tottered up to the kits and snatched the bone away.

“Hey!” the ginger kit protested.

The elder glared at him. “I caught prey for season after season,” she snarled. “Don’t you think I deserve one measly bone?” She turned and stalked off, the bone clamped firmly in her jaws.

The ginger kit stared after her for a heartbeat, then scampered, wailing, to his mother, who lay on a rock beside the cave wall. Instead of comforting him, his mother snapped something, angrily flicking her tail.

The old white she-cat was too far away to hear what the mother cat said, but she sighed.

Every cat is coming to the end of what they can bear, she thought.

She watched as the gray-and-white elder padded across the cave and dropped the eagle bone in front of an even older she-cat, who was crouching in a sleeping hollow with her nose resting on her front paws. Her dull gaze was fixed on the far wall of the cave.

“Here, Misty Water.” The gray-and-white elder nudged the bone closer to her with one paw. “Eat. It’s not much, but it might help.”

Misty Water’s indifferent gaze flickered over her friend and away again. “No, thanks, Silver Frost. I have no appetite, not since Broken Feather died.” Her voice throbbed with grief. “He would have lived, if there had been enough prey for him to eat.” She sighed. “Now I’m just waiting to join him.”

“Misty Water, you can’t—”

~~The white she-cat was distracted from the elders’ talk as a group of cats appeared at the entrance~~
the cave, shaking snow off their fur. Several other cats sprang up and ran to meet them.

“Did you catch anything?” one of them called out eagerly.

“Yes, where’s your prey?” another demanded.

The leader of the newcomers shook his head sadly. “Sorry. There wasn’t enough to bring back.”

Hope melted from the cats in the cave like mist under strong sunlight. They glanced at one another then trailed away, their heads drooping and their tails brushing the ground.

The white she-cat watched them, then turned her head as she realized that a cat was padding up to her. Though his muzzle was gray with age and his golden tabby fur thin and patchy, he walked with confidence that showed he had once been a strong and noble cat.

“Half Moon,” he greeted the white she-cat, settling down beside her and wrapping his tail over her paws.

The white she-cat let out a faint *mrrrow* of amusement. “You shouldn’t call me that, Lion’s Roar,” she protested. “I’ve been the Teller of the Pointed Stones for many seasons.”

The golden tabby tom sniffed. “I don’t care how long the others have called you Stoneteller. You’ll always be Half Moon to me.”

Half Moon made no response, except to reach out her tail and rest it on her old friend’s shoulder.

“I was born in this cave,” Lion’s Roar went on. “But my mother, Shy Fawn, told me about the time before we came here—when you lived beside a lake, sheltered beneath trees.”

Half Moon sighed faintly. “I am the only cat left who remembers the lake, and the journey we made to come here. But I have lived three times as many moons here in the mountains than I did beside the lake, and the endless rushing of the waterfall now echoes in my heart.” She paused, blinking, then asked, “Why are you telling me this now?”

Lion’s Roar hesitated before replying. “Hunger might kill us all before the sun shines again, and there’s no more room in the cave.” He stretched out one paw and brushed Half Moon’s shoulder fur. “Something must be done.”

Half Moon’s eyes stretched wide as she gazed at him. “But we can’t leave the mountains!” she protested, her voice breathless with shock. “Jay’s Wing promised; he made me the Teller of the Pointed Stones because this was our destined home.”

Lion’s Roar met her intense green gaze. “Are you sure Jay’s Wing was right?” he asked. “How could he know what was going to happen in the future?”

“He had to be right,” Half Moon murmured.

Her mind flew back to the ceremony, so many seasons before, when Jay’s Wing had made her the Teller of the Pointed Stones. She shivered as she heard his voice again, full of love for her and grief that her destiny meant they could never be together. “Others will come after you, moon upon moon. Choose them well, train them well—trust the future of your Tribe to them.”

He would never have said that if he didn’t mean for us to stay here.

Half Moon let her gaze drift over the other cats: her cats, now thin and hungry. She shook her head sadly. Lion’s Roar was right: Something had to be done if they were to survive.

Gradually she realized that the cold gray light in the cave was brightening to a warm gold, as if the sun were rising beyond the screen of falling water—but Half Moon knew that night was falling.

At her side Lion’s Roar sat calmly washing his ears, while the other cats in the cave took no notice of the deepening golden blaze.

No cat sees it but me! What can it mean?

Bathed in the brilliant light, Half Moon remembered how, when she first became Healer, Jay's Wing had said that her ancestors would guide her in the decisions she must make—that, sometime she would see strange things that meant more than they first appeared. She had never been directly aware of her ancestors, but she had learned to look out for the signs.

Possible meanings rushed through Half Moon's mind, thick as snowflakes in a blizzard. *Maybe the warm weather is going to come early. But how would that help, when there are so many of us?* Then she wondered whether the sun was really shining somewhere else, where there was warmth and protection and shelter. *But how would that help us, up here in the mountains?*

The sunlight grew stronger and stronger, until Half Moon could barely stand to look into the rays. She relaxed as a new idea rose in her mind.

Maybe Lion's Roar is right, and only some of us belong here. Maybe some of us should travel toward the place where the sun rises, to make a new home in the brightest light of all. Somewhere there will be safe, and well fed, with room to nurture generations of kits.

As Half Moon basked in the warmth of sunlight on her fur, she found the certainty she needed within herself. Some of her cats would remain, a small-enough group for the mountains to sustain, and the rest of her Tribe would journey toward the rising sun, to find a new home.

But I won't leave the cave, she thought. I will see out the twilight of my days here, a whole lifetime away from where I was born. And then maybe . . . just maybe . . . I'll find Jay's Wing again.



CHAPTER 1



Gray Wing toiled up the snow-covered slope toward a ridge that bit into the sky like a row of snaggle teeth. He set each paw down carefully, to avoid breaking through the frozen surface and sinking into the powdery drifts underneath. Light flakes were falling, dappling his dark gray pelt. He was so cold that he couldn't feel his pads anymore, and his belly yowled with hunger.

I can't remember the last time I felt warm or full-fed.

In the last sunny season he had still been a kit, playing with his littermate, Clear Sky, around the edge of the pool outside the cave. Now that seemed like a lifetime ago. Gray Wing only had the vaguest memories of green leaves on the stubby mountain trees, and the sunshine bathing the rocks.

Pausing to taste the air for prey, he gazed across the snowbound mountains, peak after peak stretching away into the distance. The heavy gray sky overhead promised yet more snow to come.

But the air carried no scent of his quarry, and Gray Wing plodded on. Clear Sky appeared from behind an outcrop of rock, his pale gray fur barely visible against the snow. His jaws were empty, and as he spotted Gray Wing he shook his head.

"Not a sniff of prey anywhere!" he called. "Why don't we—"

A raucous cry from above cut off his words. A shadow flashed over Gray Wing. Looking up, he saw a hawk swoop low across the slope, its talons hooked and cruel.

As the hawk passed, Clear Sky leaped high into the air, his forepaws outstretched. His claws snagged the bird's feathers and he fell back, dragging it from the sky. It let out another harsh cry as he landed on the snow in a flurry of beating wings.

Gray Wing charged up the slope, his paws throwing up a fine spray of snow. Reaching his brother, he planted both forepaws on one thrashing wing. The hawk glared at him with hatred in its yellow eyes, and Gray Wing had to duck to avoid its slashing talons.

Clear Sky thrust his head forward and sank his teeth into the hawk's neck. It jerked once and went limp, its gaze growing instantly dull as blood seeped from its wound and stained the snow.

Panting, Gray Wing looked at his brother. "That was a great catch!" he exclaimed, warm triumph flooding through him.

Clear Sky shook his head. "But look how scrawny it is. There's nothing in these mountains fit to eat, and won't be until the snow clears."

He crouched beside his prey, ready to take the first bite. Gray Wing settled next to him, his jaws flooding as he thought of sinking his teeth into the hawk.

But then he remembered the starving cats back in the cave, squabbling over scraps. "We should

take this prey back to the others,” he meowed. “They need it to give them strength for their hunting.”

“We need strength too,” Clear Sky mumbled, tearing away a mouthful of the hawk’s flesh.

“We’ll be fine.” Gray Wing gave him a prod in the side. “We’re the best hunters in the Tribe. Nothing escapes us when we hunt together. We can catch something else easier than the others can.”

Clear Sky rolled his eyes as he swallowed the prey. “Why must you always be so unselfish?” he grumbled. “Okay, let’s go.”

Together the two cats dragged the hawk down the slope and over the boulders at the bottom of the narrow gully until they reached the pool where the waterfall roared. Though it wasn’t heavy, the bird was awkward to manage. Its flopping wings and claws caught on every hidden rock and buried thornbush.

“We wouldn’t have to do this if you’d let us eat it,” Clear Sky muttered as he struggled to maneuver the hawk along the path that led behind the waterfall. “I hope the others appreciate this.”

Clear Sky grumbles, Gray Wing thought, but he knows this is the right thing to do.

Yowls of surprise greeted the brothers when they returned to the cave. Several cats ran to meet them, gathering around to gaze at the prey.

“It’s huge!” Turtle Tail exclaimed, her green eyes shining as she bounded up to Gray Wing. “I can’t believe you brought it back for us.”

Gray Wing dipped his head, feeling slightly embarrassed at her enthusiasm. “It won’t feed every cat,” he mewed.

Shattered Ice, a gray-and-white tom, shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. “Which cats are going out to hunt?” he asked. “They should be the first ones to eat.”

Murmurs came from among the assembled cats, broken by a shrill wail: “But I’m hungry! Why can’t I have some? I could go out and hunt.”

Gray Wing recognized the voice as being his younger brother, Jagged Peak’s. Their mother, Quiet Rain, padded up and gently nudged her kit back toward the sleeping hollows. “You’re too young to hunt,” she murmured. “And if the older cats don’t eat, there’ll be no prey for any cat.”

“Not fair!” Jagged Peak muttered as his mother guided him away.

Meanwhile the hunters, including Shattered Ice and Turtle Tail, lined up beside the body of the hawk. Each of them took one mouthful, then stepped back for the next cat to take their turn. By the time they had finished, and filed out along the path behind the waterfall, there was very little meat left.

Clear Sky, watching beside Gray Wing, let out an irritated snort. “I still wish we could have eaten it.”

Privately Gray Wing agreed with him, but he knew there was no point in complaining. *There isn’t enough food. Every cat is weak, hungry—just clinging on until the sun comes back.*

The pattering of paws sounded behind him; he glanced around to see Bright Stream trotting over to Clear Sky. “Is it true that you caught that huge hawk all by yourself?”

Clear Sky hesitated, basking in the pretty tabby she-cat’s admiration. Gray Wing gave him a meaningful purr.

“No,” Clear Sky admitted. “Gray Wing helped.”

Bright Stream gave Gray Wing a nod, but her gaze immediately returned to Clear Sky. Gray Wing took a couple of paces back and left them alone.

“They look good together.” A voice spoke at his shoulder; Gray Wing turned to see the elder Silver Frost standing beside him. “There’ll be kits come the warmest moon.”

Gray Wing nodded. Any cat with half an eye could see how friendly his brother and Bright Stream

had become as they stood with their heads together murmuring to each other.

“More than one litter, maybe,” Silver Frost went on, giving Gray Wing a nudge. “That Turtle Tail is certainly a beautiful cat.”

Hot embarrassment flooded through Gray Wing from ears to tail-tip. He had no idea what to say and was grateful when he saw Stoneteller approaching them. She took a winding path among her cats, pausing to talk to each one. Though Stoneteller’s paws were unsteady because of her great age, Gray Wing could see the depth of experience in her green gaze and the care she felt for every one of her Tribe.

“There’s still a bit of the hawk left,” Gray Wing heard her murmur to Snow Hare, who was stretched out in one of the sleeping hollows, washing her belly. “You should eat something.”

Snow Hare paused in her tongue-strokes. “I’m leaving the food for the young ones,” she replied. “They need their strength for hunting.”

Stoneteller bent her head and touched the elder’s ear with her nose. “You have earned your food many times over.”

“Perhaps the mountains have fed us for long enough.” It was Lion’s Roar who had spoken from where he sat, a tail-length away.

Stoneteller gave him a swift glance, full of meaning.

What’s that all about? Gray Wing asked himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by Quiet Rain, who came to sit beside him. “Have you eaten anything?” she asked.

All we ever talk about is food. Or the lack of it. Trying to curb his impatience, Gray Wing replied. “I’ll have something before I go out again.”

To his relief, his mother didn’t insist. “You did very well to catch that hawk,” she meowed.

“It wasn’t only me,” Gray Wing told her. “Clear Sky made this amazing leap to bring it down.”

“You *both* did well,” Quiet Rain purred. She turned to look at her young kits, who were scuffling together close by. “I hope that Jagged Peak and Fluttering Bird will be just as skillful when they’re old enough to hunt.”

At that moment, Jagged Peak swiped his sister’s paws out from underneath her. Fluttering Bird let out a wail as she fell over, hitting her head on a rock. Instead of getting up again, she lay still, whimpering.

“You’re such a silly kit!” Jagged Peak exclaimed.

As Quiet Rain padded over to give her daughter a comforting lick, Gray Wing noticed how small and fragile Fluttering Bird looked. Her head seemed too big for her body, and when she scrambled with her paws again her legs wobbled. Jagged Peak, on the other hand, was strong and well muscled, his gray tabby fur thick and healthy.

While Quiet Rain took care of his sister, Jagged Peak scampered to Gray Wing. “Tell me about the hawk,” he demanded. “How did you catch it? I bet I could catch one if I was allowed out of this stupid cave!”

Gray Wing purred excitedly. “You should have seen Clear Sky’s leap—”

A loud yowl cut off Gray Wing’s story. “Let all cats be silent! Stoneteller will speak!”

The cat who had made the announcement was Shaded Moss, a black-and-white tom who was one of the strongest and most respected cats of the Tribe. He stood on a boulder at the far end of the cavern with Stoneteller beside him. The old cat looked even more fragile next to his powerful figure.

As he wriggled his way toward the front of the crowd gathered around the boulder, Gray Wing heard murmurs of curiosity from the others.

“Maybe Stoneteller is going to appoint Shaded Moss as her replacement,” Silver Frost suggested.

“It’s time she appointed some cat,” Snow Hare agreed. “It’s what we’ve all been expecting for moons.”

Gray Wing found himself a place to sit next to Clear Sky and Bright Stream, and looked up at Stoneteller and Shaded Moss. Stoneteller rose to her paws and let her gaze travel over her Tribe until the murmuring died away into silence.

“I am grateful to all of you for working so hard to survive here,” she began, her voice so faint that it could scarcely be heard above the sound of the waterfall. “I am proud to be your Healer, but I have to accept that there are things even I cannot put right. Lack of space and lack of food are beyond my control.”

“It’s not your fault!” Silver Frost called out. “Don’t give up!”

Stoneteller dipped her head in acknowledgment of the elder’s support. “Our home cannot support us all,” she continued. “But there is another place for some of us, full of sunlight and warmth and peace for all seasons. I have seen it . . . in my dreams.”

Utter silence greeted her announcement. Gray Wing couldn’t make sense of what the Healer had just said. *Dreams? What’s the point of that? I dreamed I killed a huge eagle and ate it all myself, but I was still hungry when I woke up!*

He noticed that Lion’s Roar sat bolt upright as Stoneteller spoke, and was staring at her, his eyes wide with astonishment.

“I believe in my heart that the other place is waiting for those of you who are brave enough to make the journey,” Stoneteller went on. “Shaded Moss will lead you there, with my blessing.”

The old white cat glanced once more around her Tribe, her gaze full of sadness and pain. Then she slid down from the top of the boulder and vanished into the tunnel at the back of the cave, which led to her own den.

A flood of shocked speculation passed through the rest of the cats. After a couple of heartbeats, Shaded Moss stepped forward and raised his tail for silence.

“This has been my home all my life,” he began when he could make himself heard. His voice was solemn. “I always expected to die here. But if Stoneteller believes that some of us must leave to find the place of her dream, then I will go, and do my best to keep you safe.”

Dappled Pelt sprang to her paws, her golden eyes shining. “I’ll go!”

“So will I!” Tall Shadow added, her sleek black figure tense with excitement.

“Are you flea-brained?” Twisted Branch, a scraggy brown tom, stared incredulously at the two show cats. “Wandering off with no idea where you’re heading?”

Gray Wing remained silent, but he couldn’t help agreeing with Twisted Branch. The mountains were his home: He knew every rock, every bush, every trickling stream. *It would tear my heart in two if I had to leave just because Stoneteller had a dream.*

Turning to Clear Sky, he was amazed to see excitement gleaming in his brother’s eyes. “You’re not seriously considering this?” he asked.

“Why not?” Clear Sky demanded in return. “This could be the answer to all our problems. What’s the point of struggling to feed every mouth if there’s an alternative?” His whiskers quivered eagerly. “It will be an adventure!” He called out to Shaded Moss: “I’ll go!” Glancing at Bright Stream, he added, “You’ll come too, won’t you?”

Bright Stream leaned closer to Clear Sky. “I don’t know . . . would you really go without me?”

Before Clear Sky could reply, little Jagged Peak wormed his way forward between his two older brothers, followed by Fluttering Bird. “I want to go!” he announced loudly.

Fluttering Bird nodded enthusiastically. "Me too!" she squeaked.

Quiet Rain followed them, and drew both kits closer to her with a sweep of her tail. "Certain not!" she meowed. "You two are staying right here."

"You could come with us," Jagged Peak suggested.

His mother shook her head. "This is my home," she said. "We've survived before. When the war season returns, we'll have enough to eat."

Gray Wing dipped his head in agreement. *How can they forget what Quiet Rain told me when I was a kit? This place was promised to us by a cat who led us here from a faraway lake. How can we think of leaving?*

Shaded Moss's powerful voice rose up again over the clamor. "No cat needs to decide yet," he announced. "Give some thought to what you want to do. The half-moon is just past; I will leave at the next full-moon along with any—"

He broke off, his gaze fixed on the far end of the cave. Turning his head, Gray Wing saw the hunting party making their way inside. Their pelts were clotted with snow and their heads drooped.

Not one was carrying prey.

"We're sorry," Shattered Ice called out. "The snow is heavier than ever, and there wasn't a single—"

"We're leaving!" some cat yowled from the crowd around Shaded Moss.

The hunting party stood still for a moment, glancing at one another in confusion and dismay. Then they pelted down the length of the cavern to listen as their Tribemates explained what Stoneteller had told them, and what Shaded Moss intended to do.

Turtle Tail made her way to where Gray Wing was sitting and plopped down beside him, beginning to clean the melting snow from her pelt. "Isn't this great?" she asked between licks. "A warm place where there's plenty of prey, just waiting for us? Are you going, Gray Wing?"

"I am," Clear Sky responded, before Gray Wing could answer. "And so is Bright Stream." The young she-cat gave him an uncertain look, but Clear Sky didn't notice. "It'll be a hard journey, but I think it'll be worth it."

"It'll be *wonderful!*" Turtle Tail blinked happily. "Come on, Gray Wing! How about it?"

Gray Wing couldn't give her the answer she wanted. As he looked around the cave at the cats he had known all his life, he couldn't imagine abandoning them for a place that might only exist in Stoneteller's dreams.



CHAPTER 2



Growling in his belly woke Gray Wing. The pangs of hunger had seemed even sharper since Stoneteller's announcement a few sunrises ago. And the cavern hadn't stopped buzzing with discussions about whether it was a good idea to leave, and what the new place might be like.

Still curled up in his sleeping hollow, Gray Wing could hear excited chatter from cats nearby.

"What do you think we'll get to hunt?" Gray Wing recognized Dappled Pelt's voice. "Maybe different kinds of birds—or those . . . squirrels that the elders put in their stories."

"We'll have to be careful." That was Cloud Spots, sounding thoughtful as usual. "If we eat too much we'll get too fat to hunt, and then where will we be?"

Gray Wing heard a snort of laughter from Snow Hare. "That's a problem I'd *like* to have!"

He lifted his head to see the three cats sitting close together, along with Tall Shadow, who extended her black-furred limbs gracefully as she rose to her paws. "I wonder what new hunting techniques we'll need to learn. It's bound to be different in the new place."

"Well, you've always been good at creeping around," Snow Hare mewed teasingly. "You'll be able to sneak up on your prey while it's asleep."

Tall Shadow gave her chest fur a complacent lick. "I just might do that."

Scrambling out of the sleeping hollow, Gray Wing shook scraps of moss and feather from his pelt and arched his back in a good long stretch. He decided to go and hunt. *There's no point in wondering about prey somewhere else when we need to eat now.*

Sunlight came slanting into the cave, turning the screen of water into a dazzling sparkle. As Gray Wing emerged from the path behind the fall, he saw that the sky was clear blue. Gray Wing's pelt tingled at the beauty of the peaks outlined against it. He took great gulps of the cold, crisp air, relishing the way it felt like water against his fur.

How could I leave all this?

Continuing along the snow-packed ledge, hardened by the paw steps of many cats, Gray Wing heard voices coming from somewhere above.

"Bright Stream, you *have* to come with me."

Looking up, he spotted Clear Sky and Bright Stream at the top of the cliff where the water poured over the lip of the rocks.

"It'll be great," Clear Sky went on, "exploring new places together."

Bright Stream turned her head away. "I don't know. . . . This is my home, and we've survived so far."

“Don’t you want more than just surviving?” Clear Sky asked, curling his tail persuasively around Bright Stream’s shoulders. “I want to go, but it wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Bright Stream’s eyes shone, but she shook her head. “I’ve still got a few days to decide,” she meowed.

Leaving Clear Sky gazing after her, she bounded lightly down the rocks. Despite himself, Gray Wing’s heart quickened as he saw her approaching. *She’s lovely . . . but she’ll be Clear Sky’s mate one day. He’s a lucky tom, that’s for sure.*

“Can I hunt with you?” Bright Stream asked as she leaped off the last rock to stand at Gray Wing’s side. “Just don’t be like Clear Sky and pester me about leaving the mountains with Shaded Moss!”

“I won’t,” Gray Wing promised. “I haven’t made up my own mind yet.”

“For once I wish you poor hunting!” Clear Sky called down from the top of the rocks. “Then you’ll realize that we have to leave.”

Gray Wing gave him a good-humored wave of his tail, and headed for the ridge. Bright Stream scrambled after him. As they drew closer to the summit, icy wind blasted their fur and scoured the snow from the rocks, leaving them bare and gray. Dark, yellowish clouds massed on the horizon, promising more snow to come.

With his back to the gale, Gray Wing gazed around and spotted three more cats farther down the valley—tiny black shapes, too far away for him to distinguish who they were, pursuing a hawk that flew low over the slopes and gradually drew out of sight.

Bright Stream’s voice broke the vast silence of the mountains. “Gray Wing—what do you think about Stoneteller’s dream?”

Gray Wing hesitated before replying. “I don’t know,” he confessed at last. “Can Stoneteller *really* have discovered a new place for us to live, without knowing exactly where it is? Why haven’t any other cats had the same dream?”

“Maybe it’s something only Stoneteller can do,” Bright Stream suggested. She paused, blinking thoughtfully; Gray Wing could see anxiety in her beautiful green eyes. “I love living in the mountains,” she went on. “In spite of the cold and hunger. I always imagined I’d raise my kits here . . . but then, I always imagined their father would be Clear Sky.”

As she finished speaking she turned her head away, giving her shoulder a couple of embarrassed licks. Gray Wing was surprised that she had confessed so much to him; she was always perfectly confident and self-contained. He felt a stab of envy that she had the courage to put aside her own hopes and dreams to travel into the unknown with Clear Sky—and that her bond with his brother was so strong.

Before he could decide what to say, Bright Stream gave her pelt a shake. “You should probably forget I said all that!” she meowed. “And don’t you dare tell Clear Sky! I don’t want him to think I’ve made a decision yet.”

“I won’t say a word,” Gray Wing promised.

I’m being torn in two, he thought. *Clear Sky and I have always done everything together. Now we have to choose between going with him or staying here with the rest of my kin, in this place I’ve always called home.*

A flicker of movement distracted him from his problems. *Snow hare!* Spinning around, he raced across the slope after his prey. Its thick white pelt hid it against the snow, but it stood out clearly when scampering over the rocks of the windblown ridge.

Bright Stream joined the chase, but Gray Wing outpaced her, relishing the feeling of the wind in his whiskers as he sped over the rocks.

With a final mighty leap he flung himself onto his prey; the hare's squeal of panic was cut off as Gray Wing's jaws met in its throat.

"Great catch!" Bright Stream panted. "You're so fast!"

"It's not bad," Gray Wing mewed, prodding his prey with one paw. For once there seemed to be some flesh on its bones. "We can eat and still take some back to the cave."

He and Bright Stream settled down side by side to enjoy the catch. As they feasted, he took in the magnificent peaks and valleys that stretched in front of them.

"You're going to stay, aren't you?" Bright Stream asked, fixing him with her clear green gaze.

Gray Wing took a deep breath. "Yes, I am."

When they had eaten their fill, the two cats picked up the remains of the hare and headed back toward the cave. Triumph flooded through Gray Wing at the thought of feeding his Tribemates.

When the waterfall came in sight, he spotted a group of cats toiling up the slope toward the cave. Shaded Moss was in the lead, with Clear Sky padding along at his shoulder. Tall Shadow, Dapple Pelt, and Rainswept Flower followed close behind. Turtle Tail brought up the rear.

"Hi," Clear Sky meowed as the group came up. "Hey, you caught a hare!"

Gray Wing gave a nod of satisfaction. "Yes, we're just taking it back."

"We're climbing up to the ridge," Clear Sky explained, sweeping his tail around to include his companions. "We want to look for the best way to get out of the mountains toward the sunrise."

"Aren't you joining us?" Turtle Tail asked, bounding up to Gray Wing's side.

Gray Wing hesitated. He was sure now about his decision to stay, but he didn't want to share it with the other cats just yet. "We're tired from hunting," he replied. "Maybe later."

Entering the cave, Gray Wing could feel how restless his Tribemates were. Some were gathered in little groups around the edges of the cavern, talking together in hushed voices. Others paced to and fro as if they were too anxious to settle. There was no sign of Stoneteller.

"Do you think they're really going to leave?" Stone Song muttered as he and his mate Hollow Tree padded past.

"I guess so," Hollow Tree responded. "Are they flea-brained? They have no idea what's out there or whether the place they're looking for even exists."

Gray Wing knew that they spoke for many of the Tribe. He wished that Stoneteller had never had her vision, or that she had never spoken of it. *Doesn't she know how it's tearing the Tribe apart?*

"But *why* can't I go?" Jagged Peak was heading for the cave entrance, only to be intercepted by Quiet Rain.

"For the last time," his mother meowed, her tail-tip twitching impatiently, "you are too little to be let out of the cave."

"It's not fair!" Jagged Peak's shoulder fur bristled as he glared at his mother.

"Come on, Jagged Peak." Snow Hare padded up, dipping her head to Quiet Rain as she approached. "I'll show you a new game. Let's see if you can catch this stone." She swiped her paw and sent a flat pebble skimming across the floor of the cave.

Jagged Peak pelted after it with an excited squeal.

"Thanks, Stone Hare," Quiet Rain murmured. "I can't let him go out while there's deep snow on the ground."

"You're welcome," the elder responded.

Gray Wing carried the remains of the hare over to his mother and dropped it at her paws. "Here, do you want some?" he asked.

Quiet Rain purred her gratitude. "That's a fine catch," she told him. "I'll take some of it."

Fluttering Bird.” Her voice quivered as she added, “She couldn’t get out of the nest this morning. But she’ll be much better after she’s had something to eat.”

Gray Wing followed his mother as she carried the hare across the cave to the sleeping hollow where Fluttering Bird was curled up.

“Are you going with Shaded Moss?” Quiet Rain asked him as she set the prey down at the edge of the hollow. “I know Clear Sky will go. . . .” She was clearly trying to speak lightly, but her words ended with a sorrowful sigh.

“I’m staying,” Gray Wing told her, touching her ear with his nose. “This is my home. I want to catch enough prey so that the rest of us can survive. Many moons ago, our ancestors left the lake and came *here*. I can’t believe that was for no reason.”

Quiet Rain rested her muzzle on the top of his head. “I’m so proud of you,” she murmured. For a few heartbeats Gray Wing felt the same sense of comfort and security as when he was a small kit suckling at his mother’s belly.

Stooping over the sleeping hollow, Quiet Rain licked Fluttering Bird’s shoulder. “Wake up, little one,” she mewed. “I’ve got some food for you.”

A sharp pang of anxiety stabbed through Gray Wing as he looked at Fluttering Bird; she hardly seemed to be breathing.

“Fluttering Bird!” Quiet Rain prodded her with one forepaw, but the kit still didn’t wake. “Gray Wing, fetch Stoneteller,” his mother said, panic in her voice.

Gray Wing sped off across the cave and plunged down the tunnel that led into the Cavern of the Pointed Stones. He had only been there once before, and he slowed as he reached the entrance, overcome by awe in spite of his urgency.

Creeping into the cave, he saw narrow beams of sunlight slanting through the hole in the rock, lighting the columns of stone that stretched upward for many tail-lengths. Pools on the ground reflected the sunlight, and the huge hollow space was filled with the sound of steadily dripping water.

At first Gray Wing couldn’t see Stoneteller. Then he spotted her sitting in the shadows, her tail wrapped around her paws and her eyes closed.

Is she asleep? he wondered as he approached.

But as he drew closer, Stoneteller opened her eyes. “Gray Wing—is something wrong?” she mewed.

“It’s Fluttering Bird,” Gray Wing explained, his heart beating fast. “She won’t wake up.”

At once Stoneteller rose to her paws. Turning to a crack in the rock, she took out a few shriveled leaves. Gray Wing caught a glimpse of her pitifully small store, and knew there would be no more healing herbs until the snow melted and warmer weather brought new growth.

He followed Stoneteller to where Fluttering Bird lay. Quiet Rain stood beside her, flexing her claws impatiently. Looking into her eyes, Gray Wing saw how desperate she was, already sick with grief for her daughter.

Stoneteller bent over the tiny kit and rested one paw on her chest to feel her breathing and her heartbeat. Chewing up one of the leaves, Stoneteller pried open the kit’s jaws and pushed the pulp onto her tongue. “Come along, little one,” she murmured. “Swallow this. It will make you feel better.”

But Fluttering Bird stayed still. She didn’t even open her eyes.

Looking up at Quiet Rain, Stoneteller whispered, “She is far, far away from us. The hunger inside her is too great. You must prepare yourself, Quiet Rain.”

Gray Wing’s mother crouched down, her claws scraping on the stone floor of the cave. “This is my fault,” she mewed. “I should have given her all my food. What was I thinking, having kits in the co-

season?”

His heart swelling with grief, Gray Wing padded over to Quiet Rain and pressed himself close to her. “It isn’t your fault,” he mewed.

“I should have—”

Stoneteller interrupted Quiet Rain with a raised paw. “Hush, Quiet Rain. Fluttering Bird might be able to hear you. Don’t let her go into the dark knowing that you’re scared and angry.”

Gray Wing could see the massive effort his mother made to calm herself. She slid into the sleeping hollow and curled herself around Fluttering Bird, giving her comforting licks. “I’m so proud of you, my only daughter,” she murmured. “You mean so much to all of us. We will never forget you.”

Misery swept over Gray Wing as he watched. His sister’s flank rose once more, and then was still. “Good-bye, Fluttering Bird,” he whispered.

Stoneteller dipped her head to Quiet Rain and padded away toward her tunnel.

Gray Wing turned back to his mother. “Do you want me to help you take Fluttering Bird outside and bury her?” he asked.

Quiet Rain curled herself more closely around her daughter’s body. “Not while her fur is still so warm,” she replied. “Please, go and fetch Jagged Peak for me.”

Gray Wing glanced around and spotted Jagged Peak at the far side of the cave, playing with some of the other kits. He raced over and beckoned his brother with a flick of his tail.

“What is it?” Jagged Peak asked, looking up from where he was wrestling with a tabby she-cat.

“Our mother wants you,” Gray Wing replied.

Jagged Peak scrambled to his paws and trotted across the cavern to the sleeping hollow. Quiet Rain spoke quietly to Jagged Peak; he stared at her, then opened his jaws in a shrill wail.

Quiet Rain stretched out her tail and pulled Jagged Peak to her. Pain stabbed through Gray Wing like a spike of icy rock as he watched her holding both her kits close, one dead and one alive, her nose buried in their fur.

He wondered if she would ever let Jagged Peak go again.

Gray Wing turned toward the cave entrance at the sound of voices, and saw Shaded Moss returning with Clear Sky and the others who had gone to look for a route away from the mountains.

“It was great!” Clear Sky shook himself, scattering melting snow everywhere. “We’ve found the path we should take.”

“It runs along the side of the valley,” Shaded Moss meowed, sounding more cautious. “It leads to a gap that should take us clear of the mountains. There’s a frozen stream at one point that we’ll have to cross, and we’ll need to be careful.”

“But it’s still the quickest route!” Turtle Tail interrupted with an enthusiastic wave of her tail.

“It looks like it,” Shaded Moss agreed, “and with any luck we’ll avoid the drifts farther down.”

While the other cats crowded around to question Shaded Moss, Gray Wing padded up and touched Clear Sky on his shoulder with his tail-tip. Clear Sky glanced around, spotting Quiet Rain in her sleeping hollow with the two kits. His eyes widened.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Fluttering Bird is dead,” Gray Wing told him.

Clear Sky paused for a heartbeat with a sharp indrawn breath, then bounded across the cave to his mother’s side. Gray Wing padded after him more slowly.

“I’m so sorry!” Clear Sky exclaimed, bending his head to touch his nose to his sister’s ear. “Fluttering Bird, we’ll miss you so much!” Straightening up, he looked down at his mother and added, “This will never happen when we reach our new home. If you join us, I’ll protect you and hunt for you.”

for the rest of my life. Please come.”

Quiet Rain shook her head. “I will never leave my daughter here alone.”

Rising from the sleeping hollow, she allowed Gray Wing and Clear Sky to pick up Fluttering Bird’s tiny, twiglike body and carry her out of the cave. The other cats fell back and formed a respectful line on either side as they headed for the entrance and along the ledge that led behind the waterfall.

Quiet Rain and Jagged Peak followed as they maneuvered Fluttering Bird’s body along the narrow path. Drops of water landed on her fur. Gray Wing winced when he realized that she would never be able to lick them off.

Climbing carefully over the icy rocks, they made their way to the plateau above the cave and set Fluttering Bird down beside the river. Gray Wing and Clear Sky scraped away small stones and froze soil to make a shallow hole, and Quiet Rain laid the tiny kit inside. She touched her nose to her daughter’s fur one last time, then stepped back while her sons covered the body with earth and large stones. For a moment all four cats stood beside the grave, their heads bowed.

Jagged Peak was the first to move, turning around to stare in amazement at the vista of mountains that stretched away on all sides. His eyes were huge and his fur bushed out; he looked tiny against the boulders.

“Have you been to all those peaks?” he asked in a hushed voice.

“Not all of them.” Clear Sky moved to stand beside him, pointing with his tail. “There’s the gap between the mountains we’ll be aiming for when we leave.”

Jagged Peak’s eyes grew even wider. “I wish I was coming too,” he meowed.

“Don’t talk nonsense, little one.” Quiet Rain padded up and laid her tail across the kit’s back. “You’ve been out long enough for your first time. Back to the cave with you.”

“But I don’t *want* to go back *inside!*” Jagged Peak protested. “There’s too much to see.”

Clear Sky gave his younger brother a friendly nudge. “You can see it another day. The mountains don’t move. Now show us how well you can climb down the rocks.”

Still grumbling, Jagged Peak followed his brother.

Gray Wing stood for a moment at the cliff’s edge, gazing out at the cold sweep of the mountain range. Rage was slowly building inside him like a storm cloud. How could such a beautiful place be so cruel? But the sharpest edge of his anger was directed at himself.

I should have caught more prey. I shouldn’t have let Fluttering Bird starve.

He became aware that Quiet Rain had come to stand beside him. “This is a cruel place,” she sighed, echoing his thoughts, “but it’s my home, for better or worse.”

“I won’t let this happen again,” Gray Wing meowed, his voice rough with grief and fury. “There must be better ways of hunting. We—”

“You have to leave,” Quiet Rain interrupted. “Jagged Peak is too small for such a journey, but you must go with Clear Sky to find a better place to live. I don’t want to have to watch your kits die, too.”

Gray Wing stared at her, astounded. “But I thought you wanted me to stay!” he exclaimed.

Quiet Rain gazed back at him steadily, her eyes full of sorrow. “I love you too much for that,” she meowed. “For my sake, go.”



CHAPTER 3



Dawn light had begun to filter through the screen of falling water, though shadows still lay deep at the sides of the cave. Gray Wing hauled himself out of his sleeping hollow and spotted Shaded Moss huddled with Clear Sky and the other cats who wanted to leave. The group was larger than before.

Their heads turned toward Gray Wing as he padded over to join them; there was surprise in their eyes.

“You’ve changed your mind?” Clear Sky asked, blinking hopefully.

Gray Wing dipped his head. “I’m thinking about it,” he responded reluctantly.

Turtle Tail came to sit by his side. “I’m so pleased you’re coming with us,” she purred, her eyes shining.

“It’s not long now before we leave,” Shaded Moss meowed, his gaze traveling over each cat in turn. “All of you should rest up and eat as much as you can.”

“Lying around while others hunt for us?” Dappled Pelt objected. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Shaded Moss flicked his tail impatiently. “It’s only for a day or two,” he pointed out. “And once we leave, the others will have enough prey to go around. But if we don’t have our full strength before we set out—”

A screech from the other side of the cave interrupted him. Gray Wing looked around to see Dewy Leaf charging toward them across the cavern. The tortoiseshell queen halted in front of Moon Shadow, her legs stiff with fury and her neck fur bristling.

“What are you doing, skulking around over here?” she demanded. “I’m going to have your kittens. You promised that you’d stay with me!”

“Uh-oh . . . trouble,” Turtle Tail breathed into Gray Wing’s ear.

Moon Shadow flinched backward. “There isn’t enough food,” he explained awkwardly. “Our kittens will be better off if there are fewer mouths to feed.”

Dewy Leaf bared her teeth in a snarl. “And who’s going to catch prey while I’m still nursing them?”

Hearing her complaints, other cats hurried over to find out what was going on.

“She has a point,” Twisted Branch meowed, glaring at Moon Shadow. “Cats with responsibilities should stay here.”

“Are you saying we’re irresponsible to leave?” Tall Shadow snapped back at him.

“Yeah.” Shattered Ice sprang to his paws to stand beside the black she-cat, his green eyes narrowed. “We’re going off into the unknown, into *danger*, to make a better home for you and the

other cats who stay here. You don't have to do anything!"

Sharp Hail thrust himself forward, his tail lashing. "No—just sit here and starve!"

In the midst of the commotion, Gray Wing noticed Bright Stream hanging back, not part of either group and not joining in the argument.

Has she really made up her mind to leave with Clear Sky? he asked himself. *She doesn't look as if she knows what she wants.* His heart ached for her, and for Fluttering Bird, and for all his Tribemates who seemed ready to fight with claws and teeth over the future.

"Enough!" The voice came from the back of the cave, not loud, but with such authority that it cut through all the wrangling. The cats fell silent, parting as Stoneteller limped into the center of the group. "I can't bear to see you squabbling like this," she continued. "My vision promised something better for those cats willing to go in search of it. But I could be wrong." She shook her head, clearly wracked with uncertainty. "Perhaps we should forget about finding somewhere else to live. . . ."

As she was speaking, Lion's Roar came up behind her and stood close to her side. Bending his head, he spoke into her ear; though his voice was low, Gray Wing managed to make out the words.

"Don't lose faith in what you saw." Addressing all the cats, he went on, "My mother told me that before she and the others left the lake, they held a vote to decide their shared future. Why don't you vote again now?" he suggested. "If most cats want us to stay here and take a chance with the rest of the cold season, then Shaded Moss won't leave. What do you think, Stoneteller?"

The old white she-cat blinked thoughtfully, then turned to Shaded Moss. "Would you accept the result of a vote?" she asked.

Shaded Moss nodded. "I don't want to go without enough cats to stand a chance of surviving the journey."

Stoneteller glanced around at the other cats. Gray Wing could see that their anger was dying down. "Gray Wing, Bright Stream," the Healer mewed, "please collect as many stones as there are cats."

"Even me?" Jagged Peak squeaked, with an excited bounce.

Quiet Rain stretched out her tail to caress her son's ear. "No, not the kits—" she began.

"Even the kits," Stoneteller interrupted gently. "Every cat will have a chance to be heard. We are still one community, friends and kin over seasons upon seasons. We must all have a part in deciding our future."

Dipping his head to Stoneteller, Gray Wing headed out of the cave with Bright Stream. They found a scatter of small stones not far from the waterfall, under an overhang, and began to roll them together into a heap.

"Quiet Rain wants me to leave," he told Bright Stream after a moment.

Bright Stream's eyes widened and her ears flicked up in surprise. "I'd have thought she would want you and Clear Sky to stay now."

Gray Wing shook his head. "She believes we stand a better chance of survival in the place that Stoneteller has seen."

Bright Stream added another stone to the pile before she responded. "Are you going to go?" she asked hesitantly.

"I don't know." Gray Wing found himself giving voice to his inward struggle. "The way Fluttering Bird died showed me how vulnerable we are here in the mountains. But . . . is it cowardly to run away?"

"No cat could think that you're a coward, Gray Wing," Bright Stream told him.

When they had collected enough stones, they carried them back into the cave, a few at a time. Shaded Moss and Tall Shadow gathered the pebbles into a pile at Stoneteller's paws, their gazes

solemn with the importance of their task.

“Now,” Stoneteller meowed, “~~every cat must take a stone. Place it on the waterfall side of the cave~~ if you think Shaded Moss and all the cats who want to go should leave the mountains, and on the inner cave wall if you think they should stay. Shaded Moss, you go first.”

Shaded Moss stepped forward and dipped his head to Stoneteller with deep respect. “I trust you with my life,” he told her. “If you have seen a better place for some of us to live, I promise I will find it.”

Taking a stone in his jaws, he carried it to the waterfall side of the cave and laid it down so close to the cascade that drops of sparkling water splashed over it.

Meanwhile the rest of the Tribe lined up for their turn to vote. Jagged Peak scraped his claws along the cave floor as if he was too excited to wait.

Lion’s Roar was the next cat to pick up a pebble, and he laid it down near the waterfall. “My old bones won’t carry me on the journey,” he rasped. “But if I were young enough, I’d leave.”

Snow Hare and Misty Water followed, both voting for the cats to stay. Clear Sky came next, in a little group with Dappled Pelt and Turtle Tail, all of them taking their stones to the waterfall side. Then Jagged Peak bounced up to the pile of stones and took one, carefully carrying it over to set it down beside his brother’s.

Quiet Rain shook her head. “My beloved son, I can’t allow you to leave. But the *older* cats should have the chance to go.” She took her stone and laid it by the waterfall beside her kits’.

Jagged Peak’s eyes sparkled rebelliously as he stomped toward the sleeping hollows, his tail high in the air.

Bright Stream was the next cat to take a stone. Without hesitation she placed it with the others beside the waterfall.

Clear Sky’s fur fluffed out with surprise as he watched her, a look of warm affection creeping into his eyes. “Thank you,” he whispered as she joined him, standing so close that their pelts were brushing.

“I did it for all our future kits,” she responded.

Gray Wing realized that his turn to vote had come. He felt a hard jolt in his belly, as if a falling rock had struck him. *I can’t put off my decision any longer.*

Looking around, he noticed afresh the jutting bones of his companions, their dull eyes, their air of exhaustion. At last he met his mother’s gaze, and saw her eyes full of pleading. He knew that she believed his future safety lay in leaving the cave.

But what about her safety? And Jagged Peak’s? And all the cats who want to stay here? They need strong hunters.

When Gray Wing took up a stone, he felt as though he were trying to move the whole mountain. But his paw steps were steady as he carried it to the inner wall and set it down.

Without looking at his mother again, Gray Wing padded back to rejoin the other cats around Stoneteller. He was in time to see Moon Shadow pick up a stone and march determinedly over to the waterfall.

Dewy Leaf padded alongside him. “Your kits will never know their father’s name!” she hissed.

Moon Shadow didn’t reply. After a heartbeat, Dewy Leaf whisked around, picked up her own stone and carried it to the inner wall.

The rest of the cats voted in silence. When the last stone had been set in place, Stoneteller examined the piles. Without looking closely, Gray Wing thought that they seemed about the same size.

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